

N.J. Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired (CBVI)
State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Meeting Minutes – May 1, 2020
Go-To-Meeting

Voting Members Present: Pamela Aasen, Gary Altman, Jennifer Armstrong-Ekelmann, Ida Behreini, Alice Eaddy, Rick Fox, Bill Freeman, Jonathan Goodman, Clarke King, Pat McKenna, William Robinson, Kathleen Spata, Evangelia Stone, Kris Tucker, John Tkacz

Present (pending appointment): Vito DeSantis

Ex Officio Present: Bernice Davis, Amanda Gerson

The meeting was called to order at 9:30 a.m. by Rick Fox, Chairperson.

Everyone introduced themselves, mentioning one thing that has helped them stay positive during these unique times.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

The meeting minutes of February 7, 2020, were reviewed. John Tkacz noted a few minor (spelling) corrections to be made. Gary Altman made a motion to accept the minutes; Alice Eaddy seconded; all were in favor. Once the minor corrections are made, these minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director’s Report

- Bernice noted that she has been meeting with her Executive Management Team on a weekly basis to keep a pulse on any situations arising in regard to Commission services and consumer issues during the pandemic.
- A plethora of resources via the live listserv continue to be disseminated. Staff are kept updated with all resources, particularly around healthcare and food. Many consumers have had issues with just trying to order food and have it delivered. We've also done some cross division support around food delivery for consumers. VR counselors and instructors are reaching out just to let consumers know the State is not closed.
- During the pandemic, where possible, programs have been moved to a remote platform.
- Positive feedback from VR consumers and families; very happy with the remote Assistive Technology program.
- Currently, no VR programming is taking place at the Joseph Kohn Training Center. However, staff continue to check in with students regarding skill building. Staff also continue work on the strategic plan. Sue Engstrom, Acting Manager, is working on the creation of a virtual curriculum for the VR program.

- The Business Enterprises of NJ (BENJ) Program has been hit hard with this crisis; a lot of sites closed. A meeting was held to listen to the operators and connect with them, to make sure they're aware of all the resources that are available. Nicky Gacos has been very generous with his time, educating people about the law, small business loans, and just answering questions.
- Unemployment application process: All divisions have been asked to assist consumers in working with the Department of Labor to expedite benefits.
- CBVI's VR summer program will be moved to a virtual platform. The College of NJ (TCNJ) campus will not be available for summer programming.
- continue to move on, trying to get our electronic case management system updated.

Amanda Gerson – Vocational Rehabilitation Report:

- When the work from home transition first began, Amanda noted she had already been planning for the potentiality, and had put together a PowerPoint presentation on working from home; guidance, suggestions, workarounds, as to how to continue to be productive and maintain day to day work.
- Since most staff, particularly direct service staff, have laptops and cell phones, the transition was a bit easier. However, there have been some challenges, including the case management system and getting signatures, getting invoices and reports from vendors who may have been faxing or mailing them, etc.
- Amanda compiled a list of professional development resources for staff. Huge shout out to the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC); with permission from Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) they compiled resources for State VR agencies and partners on COVID-19 and how to continue to do VR work during this time; hosting phenomenal webinars. Counselors have been using the resources, and Amanda has also been sharing these with our Pre-ETS and service partners.
- Amanda provided a webinar training for staff on CBVI's case management system.
- Working on policies and procedures, particularly the ones that relate to our corrective action plan. Developing training goals. Expected to have some policies for SRC review in the near future.
- Quarterly Correction Action Plan (CAP) was submitted on 4/30; to report on the progress we've made since January 1, 2020. Successfully completed two corrective action items. One was sharing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) we have with Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) and Department of Education (DOE) for our pre-ETS pre-employment transition services. The other corrective action item that we were able to mark as completed was the completion of a policy on fee schedule and rate setting. Amanda reviewed the status of the remaining action items. Vito suggested a contact, Bill Robinson – Michigan, as they also have an agreement with workforce development that actually deals with one of the same issues CBVI is working on; might be a good model. Vito comment that he thinks it also measures services to individuals who are blind and visually impaired via zip code. Vito offered to also check with Lisa.

- Summer program plans coming along well. Working closely with TCNJ on virtual programming. A notice was sent out to all the students/families who are slotted to participate in the Work Skills Prep and College Prep programs, to see if they were still interested in participating, and in a virtual program. We've gotten a 75% response rate so far; all but one of them said that they were definitely still interested in the virtual program. Overwhelmingly, students indicated they want to do a combination of a self-paced and live kind of Zoom calls; things like that. Goals are all still the same for the programs, just the implementation that we're doing is different; working to be creative. Still working on fully transitioning the curriculum; more information to come.
- EDGE has been doing a great job shifting to a virtual platform as well, while continuing with the same goals.
- Working on plans for converting Life 101 program as well. This program begins at the end of July.
- Comprehensive Needs Assessment: focus groups and surveys were just about ready to be implemented when the stay-at-home orders went into effect in NJ. Need to decide if we are going to do virtually now. More information to follow on this area.
- Business Relations Unit (BRU): Staff are focused on more research and planning; identifying additional major companies that are disabilities specific, have internship opportunities, or targeted hiring opportunities. They're also going to be doing outreach to chambers of commerce, local one-stops; looking for disability issues committees to partner. Also looking for a closer relationship with the business reps in each of the local areas, from the labor side of things. Reaching out to the community and rehab providers, who are doing job development/placement, to make sure they're aware of CBVI's BRU. Vito suggested that consideration be given to do a deeper dive into Vermont's progressive employment model. Vermont's VR Agency came up with a system where regardless of what their individual abilities are or their, "readiness to employment", there are some activities that go on with the businesses that could have been just a visit to the work area - all the way to an immediate internship program. It's designed for folks who have major barriers, but it has some application for most consumers.
- Amanda commented that one of the big conversations at the State level, and with RSA, is whether or not there's going to be any flexibility around some of our requirements; i.e. reporting, match requirements, spending, carryover of unspent money as some services are suspended and/or decreased at this time. RSA, unfortunately, doesn't have the authority to grant waivers to a lot of these things. However, the advocacy has been done by the Department of Education and the Secretary of Education; a report was sent to Congress highlighting the issues. Members discussed the importance of advocating on these issues. A sample letter that the national organizations are utilizing will be forwarded to the SRC members and Rick encouraged everyone to write to their congress people, reminding them that they need to act on the requests. Vito noted that consumer groups are also free to write letters.

- Amanda thanked Kathleen for her assistance with the resource sheet; it's a guide for healthcare professionals working with individuals who are blind, deaf-blind, or visually impaired. Anticipate distribution shortly. Amanda will forward a copy to the SRC.
- Support Service Provider (SSP) Program: in-person supports had to be suspended, but we are making available, where appropriate and relevant, to allow SSP to provide remote support or do things virtually on behalf of consumers. Kathleen approximated 20-30 requests for virtual SSP for things like food delivery, distance communication, essential type activities. Also supplying community resources.
- I Can Connect (ICC), which does telecommunication for deaf-blind individuals, doing some remote instruction for our ICC consumers; also resumed some remote training. New assessments have obviously, been stopped. Looking at assessments that were completed to see if we have any equipment that we can order and deliver safely.

Gary commented that the SETC was starting to receive comments back from the DOL on the state plans; keep an eye out for any feedback from RSA or from the SETC directly.

Old or New Business/Announcements/Comments:

Members discussed the suggestion of sending a letter to the Governor to address their support of the VR program, to recommend no cuts to the State budget. On a motion made and seconded, Rick will draft a letter for the committee's review.

Ida asked that her email address be updated; meeting notice was sent to her work email

Pam shared that both her sons receive CBVI services and things have gone on seamlessly during this time. Her one son has been meeting virtually with his vocational counselor and the other one continues with his braille lessons. CBVI has provided them iPads. They can access everything with Zoom and Google Classroom.

Members discussed accessibility issues with Go-To-Meeting. Amanda noted that "Teams" is another the State can use; it's a part of the Microsoft Office Suite. Will explore that platform.

Members discussed the various meeting platforms for the sub-committees to utilize if they need to meet. Amanda suggested that if anyone wants to create an unpaid Zoom account as a platform, the first 40 minutes of use are free. Depending on the time, Amanda offered to facilitate, or also provide the number of a conference line they could use. Rick noted that any sub-committees who want to meet should get in touch with Amanda for a conference line number/access code, and let him know of any meetings taking place.

Members discussed various ways to assist the Commission during these unprecedented times. Sharing ideas on best practices, problem-solving, discussing what works/doesn't work.

Contacting and/or communicating on-line with other associations to see what's going on was discussed; the "SRC Relations Committee" will work on this. Amanda noted that if anyone comes across any other resources they think would be helpful to share with the general public, we are happy to share those that are being put out by other entities; we have a general disclaimer that we put out that says we're sharing this as a courtesy.; and we definitely don't want to re-invent the wheel when other great resources are being created.

Rick mentioned that there are approximately 20 virtual events that various NFP affiliates are hosting each week. If anyone wants to get on the list to get those events, they just have to e-mail (NFB.org) and make a request to be put on the list.

Kris Tucker provided an update on Access Link. Since March 16 Access Link has been able to process applications through a modified process, offering customers the ability to go to their website and click on a link to be connected to staff. Also have the ability to e-mail customers an application for Access Link. If customers need assistance, we are able to call the customer on the phone and fill out the application for them and process it that way. Changes to conform with the Governor's mandates: asking that customers only travel for essential purposes; also had to reduce the capacity on our vehicles to be in support of social distancing regulations. We have a very robust cleaning and sanitizing procedure for vehicles and our facilities; all drivers are required to wear masks while they are working. Drivers are instructed to limit contact where possible; however, we are able to look at customer needs on an individual basis, but trying to make sure drivers remain safe. Encouraging customers to bring along someone to help them out if possible. Operating on a reduced schedule at this time.

Adjournment

Rick thanked everyone for attending today's meeting. Jonathan Goodman made a motion to adjourn; William Robinson seconded; all were in favor; the meeting was adjourned.

The next SRC (virtual) meeting is scheduled for June 5, 2020.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper, CBVI – Administrative Assistant