

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

Meeting Minutes – December 4, 2020 (virtual meeting)

Voting Members Present: Pamela Aasen, Jennifer Armstrong-Ekelmann, Ida Behreini, Vito DeSantis, Alice Eaddy, Jonathan Goodman, Clarke King, Pat McKenna, William Robinson, Kathleen Spata, Evangelia Stone

Members Awaiting Appointment: Bill Freeman, Charles Ouslander, Wanda Williford, Ronda Williams

Absent: Gary Altman

Ex Officio Present: Bernice Davis, Kathleen Donnellon, John Tkacz

Staff/Members of Public Present: Amanda Gerson, John O’Connell

Lia Stone, SRC Chairperson, welcomed members, new members, and today’s guest, calling the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. She announced the meeting was being held in compliance with Section 105 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act 1973 as amended; also in compliance with the New Jersey Open Public Meeting Act, NJSA 10:4-6.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

The meeting minutes of October 23, 2020, were reviewed. John Tkacz noted that the notation of Donald Campbell being Director at the Atlantic Center for “40” years was incorrect; should be “4” years. The minutes will be corrected. A motion to accept the amended minutes was made by Vito DeSantis, and seconded by Pamela Aasen; all were in favor. These meeting minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

Introductions

Ronda Williams introduced herself. Ronda has been with New Jersey Transit for 21 years, working the majority of her career with Access Link; She is the Supervisor of Operations. Ronda commented that she is excited about this new experience of being a member of CBVI’s State Rehabilitation Council.

Wanda Williford introduced herself. Wanda is the current President of the New Jersey Council of the Blind and Vice President of the Mercer County Association of the Blind. Formerly, she was an insurance professional for 25 years. She noted that she is very excited to start this new adventure, getting to know everyone and participate on the Council.

John O’Connell introduced himself as a member of the public. John was invited to today’s meeting as he had put in an application to be a member of the SRC, representing blind veterans.

2021 Meeting Dates

Proposed meeting dates for 2021: February 5, June 4, October 1, December 3

Pat McKenna made a motion to approve these dates; Kathleen Spata seconded the motion; all were in favor. Until further notice, all meetings will be held virtually.

Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director’s Report

- Most of the Commission's services continue to be provided on a virtual platform. VR counselors continue to provide services and support to consumers via teleconference and video. The JKTC program continues to be successful; meeting on a virtual basis. Currently, there are 17 students in the program; a graduation is taking place today for 3 graduates. Staff have also been working on outreach. They recently provided a presentation to medical school students on best practices when working with visually impaired, blind, and deaf blind individuals, as they interact with the medical profession. There were rave reviews about this panel discussion; the students were very grateful for the information shared. CBVI’s guide for health care workers was also disseminated. Anyone on the SRC in need of a copy of this guide was invited to e-mail Dr. Davis. JKTC also held a presentation focused on work incentives that exist for those receiving SS benefits and ready to pursue employment; they were encouraged to make individual appointments to discuss work incentives in greater detail. Also, JKTC now has a rehabilitation counselor working with the program; she's been a great asset.
- A few Randolph Sheppard (RS) sites are now open, and a couple pending, in federal and state facilities. The Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) had a call with all of the Business Enterprise managers regarding the current state of RS and the impact COVID has had on the program. No update in terms of legislation. The RS program is trying to get monies that could be utilized for start-up costs.
- The Business Relations Unit (BRU) is doing great work. They've been very creative and innovative, working with employers and connecting with VR counselors.
- Quality Assurance, Dr. Michelle Whitmore, and Amanda have done a fabulous job in terms of guiding our VR program with improving performance and data, which was a huge area of focus with the RSA audit. Very happy with the work administrators and VR counselors are doing; everyone's really taking the time to improve our data.
- The Deaf Blind Unit – Amanda and Joy are working on bringing on an additional staff to cover services. Anyone aware of an ASL interpreter, interested in joining the Commission’s team, was asked to send an e-mail to Amanda.

Amanda Gerson – Vocational Rehabilitation Report

- Making progress collaboratively with Dr. Whitmore in our quality assurance processes. Amanda thanked the SRC Policy Committee for their review of several policies over the last few months. About halfway through the whole process and looking forward to having a comprehensive training recorded, as well as a comprehensive VR procedure handbook. Priority has been our Corrective Action Plan (CAP), which resulted from monitoring in 2018. Well on our way to compliance for this quarter to meet a 90%

compliance with eligibility determination and under 60 days. Our goal and CAP list we will have two consecutive quarters this quarter and next. The counselors, supervisors, and managers have been doing a great job. Look forward to focusing our attention in the new year on bringing compliance up now with time to develop an IP; there's been challenges related to the pandemic.

- The CAP continues to go well; submitted our quarterly update at the end of October, and making really good progress on meeting our corrective action requirements. Most of the things we are still working on are things that require us to work outside of our department, which takes a little more time.
- Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA): With the assistance of some of the SRC members, a number of assessment activities were completed to look at the quality satisfaction of services, and the different areas that need to improve in identifying individuals or groups that may be under-served. The completed CSNA report was submitted to RSA last month. There's a number of recommendations that were made, which will be shared with the SRC for discussion at the next meeting. Amanda briefly reviewed some of the highlights. As a result of the Request for Information (RFI), to invite feedback on our employment services, everything from pre-placement job development services, to placement and job coaching trial work experiences, and work based learning; six or seven of our vendors responded and provided great, consistent feedback. Will be moving forward with putting together a Request for Proposals (RFP) to solicit a smaller group of vendors and define our processes, creating a new support employment handbook that both staff and vendors have access to, so that we are all on the same page and make sure we're providing the best possible services to our consumers. It will include the full range of services that we're able to provide, that we would contract out to a vendor; everything from either pre-placement, discovery planning, goal setting, all the way through placement and job coaching, including defining the process further for our support employment consumers.
- A virtual open-house was recently held for the Work Skills Prep and College Prep programs that are held at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ). There were approximately 50 students interested in attending these programs next summer. Planning for both virtual and hybrid programs. Regardless of whether or not we offer a residential program this year, we do anticipate a virtual program as well. We found that it was very beneficial for several students who are not able to participate in a residential program due to physical needs, or not ready to make that step into coming to a residential program for two weeks. Looking forward to another great year. In January, will start preparing for our Life 101 Program, coordinated by JKTC. Also looking at other additional services we can bring on board.

- The BRU continues to work with our partners. The Port Authority, which usually hosts an annual disability mentoring day, held an information session and interview workshop with our consumers this year. A mock interview with 6 of our consumers and counselors took place. The BRU is also having increased success working with Amazon. 2 consumers are scheduled to start working at one of the Amazon centers in south Jersey. Also had a great meeting with an Amazon representative from their Disability and Inclusion office, to increase opportunities in the central Jersey region, including 1-2 opportunities through Whole Foods.

Katie Donnellon commented that she worked with the client and BRU that obtained the position with Amazon. She noted that it's been a wonderful success. He's a husband and father with 2 small children, and is making \$17/hr. working over-time. He is so happy and proud of himself – he wants to work there for years to come! Amanda suggested that Katie submit a write-up for the next SRC annual report.

SRC Members' Reports

The SRC members resumed the practice of giving brief reports about the seats they represent. Everyone was reminded to send bullet report to Christine Cooper, prior to each meeting, for inclusion in the minutes.

Pamela Aasen (Parent Training & Information Center Representative):

State Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) is part of a cultural competence conference being planned for April, which will involve the deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf blind communities.

Charles Ouslander (Client Assistance Program Representative):

Disability Rights, New Jersey - some re-organization in the office; a number of new personnel; shift in terms of who will be handling different assignments; new supervisor, sits on the Board for DVRS. Amanda noted she'd welcome an introduction from Charles.

Katie Donnellon (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Representative):

- VR Counselors continue to work remotely due to COVID-19. All consumers are contacted monthly, depending on need. Some consumers are actively pursuing goal achievement, while others feel more comfortable waiting until the pandemic has passed. Counselors have been trained to accurately and consistently collect documentation and information required for individual to receive services.
- VR on high alert for those who have been affected by COVID-19. Information on food pantry's, utility and rent assistance, along with free COVID-19 testing have been disseminated for those in need.
- Training that has taken place for counselors include: application; eligibility determination worksheet; Individual Plan for Employment (IPE); federal reporting forms; updated CBVI service catalogue, which included service authorizations and service codes; case note documentation; financial needs survey; transition services.

Kathleen Spata (Community Rehabilitation Program Provider):

- Support Service Provider (SSP) Program update: Hosted an info session recently, for both consumers and SSPs, to reiterate we are continuing to provide assistive support through assistive technology, and explaining what is available. Some consumers have successfully used SSP services to conduct on-line courses; facilitate accomplishing assignments; many consumers have been utilizing an SSP to make revisions on their career goals or resumes. Wanted to make sure our consumers and SSPs know how the program is operating at this time.
- A community chat is scheduled for today – this is an opportunity for SSPs to come together to ask questions and get down to the mechanics of facilitating remote service.

Pat McKenna (Community Rehabilitation Program Provider):

Family Resource Network update: FRN maintains a number of different programs, for a number of different populations, for the Commission. Many of those programs are remote at this time; some have a degree of in-person contact. The Employment, Development, Guidance, and Engagement (EDGE) program has become very familiar and comfortable with utilizing Zoom, presenting all content to the students in a virtual capacity at this time.

Jon Goodman (Business & Industry Representative):

Since National Disability Employment Awareness Month (October), in the world of banking opportunities, Jon has noticed a big push for anyone interested in information. He noted that if there's something he can help with, or facilitate an introduction on, he is always willing to assist.

Ronda Williams (Business & Industry Representative):

NJ Transit update: continues to focus on engaging, informing, and improving customer experience.

- Have enhanced the paratransit eligibility process for Access Link by offering customers application options by email or phone.
- Also set up all telephone responsive staff for remote work.
- Enhanced cleaning and sanitation protocols for vehicle and facilities.
- Following CDC guidelines regarding face covering; also exploring clear face coverage options for drivers to help improve communication with customers.
- Created a Twitter account, enhanced this link online for customers so they can now receive operational announcements and notifications.
- Also started another program to explore the customer experience and use the data to improve services.
- Reduced Fare cards being distributed to all certified Access Link customers. This helps to offset the cost of traveling by bus, train and light rail. Anyone that has not received the card can call the 800# to speak to someone in the certification department to give their updated mailing information. Any inquiries regarding the Reduced Fare Card would need to speak directly to NJ Transit Reduced Fare Card Department.
- Customer concerns/inquiries for Access Link can call the 800# and speak to someone in the Customer Service Department.

William Robinson (Business & Industry Representative):

The National Association of Blind Merchants has put together a training to take place January 7, 14, 21, 28 & February, involving RS and leadership skills. It's going to be very helpful for managers throughout the country; a lot of useful information and tools to help them as we turn the page and move forward into 2021.

Jennifer Armstrong-Ekelmann (Business & Industry Representative):

The food service industry continues to work on improving customer and employee safety; preparing for re-openings; following all CDC guidelines. Working out plans, changing things from self-serve. Jennifer noted that classes at TCNJ are scheduled to begin as of February 1; have been working hand-in-hand to make sure that everyone is following the same procedures and protocols for that re-opening.

Lia Stone (Current or former VR applicant or recipient):

Lia shared that in addition to her position with the EDGE program, she also began working as a contact tracer for COVID. Being the only blind person (JAWS user) hired in the State has been a challenge in making the portal for contact tracing more accessible. She would like to see more blind people hired for this role as contact tracers are needed, especially those who speak other languages or have a background in health or social sciences. Lia commented that she thinks it's important, from a blindness philosophy perspective, to show that a blind person can contribute to the fight against COVID, just like everyone else. It has been very interesting and rewarding work and she encouraged those who know someone looking for work, and is a strong JAWS user, to apply. Amanda noted she shared this information with the BRU to help facilitate matching CBVI consumer, who would be a good fit, with the contact tracing opportunities.

Clarke King (Current or former VR applicant or recipient):

Clarke noted that he was a consumer of CBVI services and is a co-facilitator of a peer support group. Speaking from his own experience, as well as what he has heard from peers who currently receive services, he prefers and the majority are also pleased, with remote services; acknowledging that it obviously depends on your skill level with technology. Clarke commented that he thinks remote services should be offered as an option, along with in-home training, even after the pandemic is over. He commented that the one service that is missed during this time is orientation and mobility; cane skills diminish with the lack of this in-person instruction.

Alice Eaddy (Current or former VR applicant or recipient):

Alice noted that she is a member of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB); President of the Deaf Blind Division. She recently did a podcast with NFB; she'll share the transcript with everyone. Captions are available in English and Spanish; have also been working on different kinds of captioning platforms.

Bill Freeman (State Education Agency Representative):

- A resource brochure about alternatives to guardianship has been created and placed on the NJDOE website:
<https://www.nj.gov/education/specialed/transition/GuardianshipBrochure2.pdf>

- This past summer the annual post-school outcome study was conducted with about 20% of all NJ school districts to learn what has happened since exiting high school in 2019 to former students with disabilities. Results are to be submitted to the USDOE as part of the required annual report.
- The Parent Survey is currently under way with about 20% of all NJ school districts to learn about the experiences (in the 2019-2020 school year) of parents of students with disabilities in pre-school through high school.

Ida Behreini (Advocacy Group: Representative of a Disability):

- Regarding her personal contact with students, Ida noted the majority are learning on a remote basis; it is a struggle in terms of getting course materials accessible and working things out with their professors; she keeps encouraging them to hang in there.
- The company Ida works for hired another blind developer. She is very excited and is planning to meet with him in a few weeks to make sure he's doing well in the company. Amanda thanked Ida for her advocacy, and being an awesome ambassador.

Vito DeSantis (Representative of an Individual who is Blind):

- Referred the SRC to the Rehabilitation Services Administration website for general information regarding Vocational Rehabilitation: rsa.ed.gov
- Noted a proposed legislation (S995) going to a floor vote on December 7; this legislation might impact how VR agencies look at people with multiple disabilities who might be employed in some of our corporations. Specifically, it appears to contradict the federal mandates outlined in WIOA CFR 361 Section 511.

Dr. Davis noted she and the Director at DVRS have a meeting scheduled with RSA and some of the national VR agencies regarding this issue, as some of what's in the proposal appears to be in direct conflict with WIOA; the biggest one for CBVI is that there will be a presumption that various employment programs can actually meet the competitive integrative employment, and there can be no presumption; there does have to be an assessment of each of the programs. Information to be shared as it becomes available.

John Tkacz (Representative for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services):

John reviewed DVRS's mission, which is to enable eligible individuals with disabilities to achieve competitive employment outcomes, consistent with their strengths, priorities, needs abilities and capabilities. (Sister agency to CBVI). DVRS has 18 offices, one in each county; One-Stop building services include pre-employment training, continuing education, job readiness, job placement, job stabilization, assistive technology, vehicle modification, and home modification; some services, like job coaching, are without cost; others have eligibility criteria. Currently, the counselors have been working remotely, going into the office on alternate days, but not meeting with consumers face-to-face, except in certain situations where the disability indicates.

Sub-Committees:

Business Engagement: nothing new to report; Jon Goodman working on setting up a meeting.

Policy & Procedure: Pat McKenna noted there were no policies at this time to review. The last policy reviewed was a policy on documentation; he commented that the review was very enlightening; the amount of forms and what needs to be reported on is impressive. He thanked Ida for her assistance in the review. Amanda noted she will also check on an IPE policy she thought she had forwarded to Pat for the committee's next review.

Quality Assurance: Clarke King reported that the committee had received QA reports he had been waiting for, and will schedule a meeting.

SRC Annual Report: Amanda reported she has all of the edited sections back from CBVI's managers, coordinators, and program managers on the different programs that are summarized in the report, and she has the data regarding outcomes and clients served. Will need to add in the SRC's goals and priorities, as well as cover/greeting letters from both Dr. Davis and Lia. Also need to complete the success stories, but otherwise looking great. Hope to have a final version for review and editing by December 11.

Vito reported on the status of the ad-hoc committee that was set-up to formulate SRC By-Laws. This committee includes Lia, Alice, Vito, and CBVI staff, Lou Mancuso and Dr. Whitmore. The goal was to review the by-laws of other councils and put together points needed for this SRC. Vito noted that 90% of the by-laws are driven by federal regulations as to makeup, functions, and responsibilities. In the course of two meetings this committee decided the areas to be addressed and formulated a draft. Vito explained that at the end of the draft all of the federal regulations and references are noted. He highlighted areas of the draft. Amanda will forward this draft to the entire Council for their review (approximately 10 pages). Any questions or suggestions for improvement were encouraged. Lia added that she would like to have a discussion and vote on the SRC By-Laws at the February meeting. She encouraged everyone to reach out to the members of the committee with any questions or concerns they have over the next two months. Dr. Davis expressed her appreciation for the amount of work and dedication that was put into completing this draft.

New Business

SRC goals and priorities for 2021 were discussed. In the past, the Council has taken a look at the most pressing priorities they would like to assist the agency in improving on. Amanda reviewed some of the goals of the past. Following a lengthy discussion, a motion was made by Alice Eaddy to approve the following goals/priorities for 2021; the motion was seconded by Ida Behreini; all were in favor. The goals, as they appear in the SRC Annual Report, are as follows:

2021 SRC Goals & Priorities

- The SRC will meet four times in Federal Fiscal Year 2021, complying with COVID-19 Health and Safety Guidelines, as well as continue ongoing support to foster the goals of CBVI and its excellent services to the consumer population.

- The SRC Chair and membership will assist CBVI in moving toward recovery, reopening, and resumption, aiming to preserve the innovation and creativity that arose with virtual and remote services, when appropriate.
- The SRC will work with CBVI to strengthen the Business Relations Unit, to increase business partnerships, with an additional focus on mid- and high-level employment opportunities for individuals with college degrees and significant work experience.
- The SRC will contribute to CBVI's quality assurance endeavors by developing activities to review CBVI's performance and successes, compared to agency's past performance, as well as to VR agencies nationally.
- The SRC will help CBVI navigate potential fiscal challenges in 2021 resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The SRC will increase outreach and partnership with other NJ councils and agencies, including: Centers for Independent Living, Mental Health agencies, the Veteran's Administration, and agencies serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- SRC members will continue to participate, as appropriate, in public forums and agency programs for the benefit of consumers.

Amanda reviewed membership status.

Nominees awaiting appointment: 1) Ronda Williams from NJ Transit will fill the vacancy for Business & Industry 2) Don Campbell from the Atlantic Center for Independent Living will fill the State Independent Living Council (SILC) vacancy 3) Wanda Williford, President of the New Jersey Council of the Blind will fill the vacancy to represent an advocacy group.

Second term expiring: 1) Gary Altman (4/29/21) representative of the State Employment & Training Commission; 2) Jennifer Armstrong (3/17/21); representative of Business & Industry.

First term expiring on 3/17/21: Pam Aasen, Clarke King, and Ida Behreini. If interested in serving a second term, these members were asked to send a note expressing their interest, along with an updated resume, to Lia, Amanda, and Christine Cooper.

Amanda noted that SRC members are welcome to forward recommendations for the upcoming Business & Industry vacancy; particular attention to individuals who are blind and visually impaired. One of the regulatory requirements of the SRC is that 51% of membership, not counting ex officio members, needs to be comprised of individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or deaf blind.

Adjournment

Alice Eaddy made a motion to adjourn the meeting; the motion was seconded by Vito DeSantis; all were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 12 noon.

Lia thanked everyone for attending today's meeting, and for their active participation. She wished everyone a healthy and enjoyable holiday season.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled for February 5, 2021.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper

Christine Cooper

CBVI – Administrative Assistant