

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

Meeting Minutes – February 5, 2021 (virtual meeting)

**Voting Members Present:** Pamela Aasen, 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, Jennifer Armstrong-Ekelmann

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

**Staff/Members of Public Present:** Amanda Gerson

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Lia Stone, SRC Chairperson, welcomed everyone, and called 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 December 4, 2020 were reviewed. A motion to accept the minutes was made by Vito DeSantis, and seconded by Alice Eaddy; all were in favor. These meeting minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

**2021 Meeting Dates:** February 5, June 4, October 1, December 3

**Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director’s Report**

- Jennifer Armstrong-Ekelmann’s term on the SRC will end in March and Gary Altman’s term is up at the end of April. Although neither were in attendance today, Dr. Davis acknowledged their years of service and extended her appreciation for their dedication, knowledge, and the impact their work had on CBVI consumers. A certificate of appreciation will be sent to both of them.
- The Corrective Action Plan (CAP) for the Federal Government: staff have been doing a fantastic job to try and hit all the quality assurance marks. Dr. Davis thanked Michelle Whitmore, Amanda Gerson, and their teams, for their efforts in making sure it has been completed, as well as their efforts in cleaning up the data.
- Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC): continues with virtual programming. Dr. Davis noted she is very happy with the feedback received from the consumers that are part of the programming. Exit interviews are going well; consumers feel the skills they are learning, and the discussions and connections, have been beneficial. At this time, it is not known when traditional programming will resume. There have been a few JKTC

graduations over the last year; they have all gone very well. Currently, there are 12 students enrolled in the program. Referrals have been increasing over the last few months.

- Business Enterprises: It has been reported that the waiver proposed for the Randolph Shepard (RS) Program has been approved by Congress; the nuances still need to be worked out; however, it is expected that each operator in the 2019 program could get up to \$11,000. Instructions are expected soon. This program has been hit very hard during the pandemic, and everyone is very appreciative of all the efforts in getting this legislation passed.
- CBVI's case management system: working on approval for a new system for approximately 2 years now. There are several assessments that a new IT system has to go through, and we finally got the approval, so that puts us in a position to go on. There's some physical assessments and other assessments that still have to happen. In terms of a rollout, Dr. Davis noted she is hopeful that it will start later this year. The new system will allow CBVI to generate the sophisticated reports that the federal government has asked for; it will give us a lot of freedom to look at data and satisfy federal mandates.
- The Department of Human Services, which is the department CBVI falls under, has focused on the COVID vaccine and increasing community awareness. They've had several webinars/phone calls where stakeholders have been invited. A hotline has been set up for people needing help and asking questions about the vaccine.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) training, as well as mask fittings, have taken place for many CBVI staff.
- The Commission is looking into a looping system at JKTC for the hearing impaired; enhancing services for deaf blind consumers. It's a direct feed to the hearing aid, resulting in noise reduction.

Vito DeSantis congratulated Dr. Davis on hearing the news that she is now President-Elect of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB).

He commented that he recently spoke to Bill Robinson, the Director of the Michigan agency; they also have a training center and have been allowed to open their center because all staff have received vaccines and they have rapid testing for consumers entering into the training Center. Obviously, each state is different.

Dr. Davis thanked Vito for sharing. She noted that a couple of other states are also in the same stage of re-opening. Each state is in a different stage with regard to vaccinations, and there are a lot of moving parts to getting back to more of what we had and how we delivered services. The Commission is being as proactive as possible, rather than reactionary; always in close discussion with the Department. Dr. Davis thanked Vito for his congratulations on her new appointment as President Elect for NCSAB; she will be bringing information back to the SRC as well.

## **Amanda Gerson – Vocational Rehabilitation Report**

- Corrective Action Plan (CAP): The last quarter's progress report was submitted, giving the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) an update on the progress made regarding the findings from our last audit. Issues with regard to fiscal and contracting remain unresolved. These are things that we need to get other people to do or permissions to update. Overall, we're in good shape, and hopeful will meet our second quarter of 90%, plus compliance for movement from application to eligibility, which was the big programmatic finding. Exceeded 90% for the last quarter and working to resolve with a second quarter compliance. Looking more at the quality of services versus just compliance.
- Working with the State Employment & Training Commission (SETC) & State Workforce Development Board where the focus is on the Department of Labor's website; updating the dashboard, which shows the performance metrics demographics, building in VR data, and explaining what measures we think are important and what would be beneficial to share with the public; i.e. our 911 reports, which are our quarterly service reports and the comparable reports that the other workforce programs have to get.
- Business Relations Unit has been very busy; had a great meeting with an international fragrance and flavor company; working with them on an interesting opportunity. Need to make sure it would meet the definition of competitive integrated employment, and we could recruit some really good candidates. Also, have been working with some dedicated folks in HR at Amazon, around accessibility, and placements have increased.
- Plans for summer programs are coming along; numbers are a little bit lower so far, but we're still reaching out to consumers to try and engage them and get them to lock in. Hearing that there is some Zoom fatigue going on and having a hard time engaging the students at this point.
- Amanda commented that she has been working with Bill Freeman, and her counterparts at DVRS (Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services), on some of the deliverables for the MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) between our two VR agencies and the Department of Education. We have a one-sheet information sheet we collaborated on, which has gone up to each of our departments for approval, about pre-employment transition services. Bill sent a first draft of a PowerPoint that we're going to be using, so that we have a common presentation tool. Amanda noted that Bill has been a fabulous partner, and thanked him for the progress made, so hopefully our local school districts will be more comfortable and proficient in understanding the way our VR programs work in NJ.
- Continue to work on getting access to the State Wage Interchange System (SWIS); a central clearinghouse of state unemployment wage data. As long as the State has signed on and they're sharing their data, then they can also put in to see if any of their consumers are employed in other states. Had a really good meeting this week with both partners; Department of Labor, who are the ones that actually put the request in through the system, and we had a really good conversation with the SWIS people yesterday. There are a lot of rules around who can access the data, how they can access the data, how to

store the data, and what it can be used for. They explained a lot, and we're hoping to be able to actually put in a request for this quarter. Amanda explained that this is one of our biggest performance metrics for the VR program, whether or not after someone is successfully employed, what are their wages and are they maintaining employment at six months out and 12 months out. This is why access to state unemployment wage data is needed. This will give us access to the vast majority of other states wage systems.

### **SRC Members' Reports**

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

The following reports were received:

#### **Katie Donnellon (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Representative):**

Amazon has opened their doors to working with people who are visually Impaired and blind.

November 2020 my consumer was hired to work in the warehouse unloading trucks. For the first 2 weeks he had a job coach assisting him until he was acclimated and independent. Since then he has received a \$50 bonus for his hard work and diligence.

A second consumer has been through several walk throughs at Amazon warehouses. Since the time of our meeting Amazon has purchased AIRA with smart phone and app. And tactile tape for direction when in warehouse for this consumer. He will be visiting the warehouse with his O&M instructor and his job coach to review techniques and job specifications. If all goes well he will be my second consumer employed with Amazon during this pandemic.

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

- Consumers are receiving services from CBVIP on the virtual basis, primarily for technology. Still a need for Mobility training during this time.
- Line senior citizens and other blame individuals encountering difficulties in obtaining a vaccine or an appointment for a vaccine. Transportation to get to far away locations are difficult.

#### **Pat McKenna (Community Rehabilitation Program Provider):**

EDGE continues virtually. As a new quarter begins, student attendance continues to pose a challenge. Staff continue to work diligently to identify new ways to maintain student interest and increase student involvement.

#### **Ronda Williams (Business & Industry Representative):**

PARATRANSIT ELIGIBILITY: Assisted over 2,600 customers with applying for paratransit eligibility through our modified application process which eliminates the need for an in-person interview.

## THE MOBILE APP

- Worked with Access Link customers, including those with visual impairments, to develop the Access Link Mobile App that has now being downloaded by more than 150 current Access Link customers who have volunteered to test it and give feedback. The app offers customers the ability to make, cancel and monitor Access Link reservations from their mobile phone.
- Public launch of the free mobile app will be in Early March from the Google Play Store and Apple App Store

**SOCIAL MEDIA:** The Access Link TWITTER account engages customers about best practices to reduce day of service disruptions, reminds them of new services like EZ-Wallet and informs them of service delays and disruptions related to weather.

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

- DVRS continues to provide full services primarily remotely and virtually for the consumers.
- An opportunity was published for vendors to become Benefit Planning Specialists working fee-for-service. Information for those interested in learning more is below:

DVRS will be recruiting vendors to provide benefits counseling using a fee for service model and taking this training is a step in that process.

The issues beneficiaries face when returning to work are complex. We at DVRS are committed to providing quality comprehensive services designed to assist consumers and families make informed decisions when deciding upon career pathways.

As we move forward in our next step toward comprehensive statewide benefits planning we are pleased to announce two upcoming trainings.

- Distance Community Work Incentives Coordinator (CWIC) and Community Partner Initial Training and Certification
- Web Course: Introduction to Social Security Disability Benefits, Work Incentives, and Employment Support Programs

Detailed information on training is below. Questions may be directed to:

[Cheryl.vail@dol.nj.gov](mailto:Cheryl.vail@dol.nj.gov); [Paulette.knarr@dol.gov](mailto:Paulette.knarr@dol.gov); [AnaLMorales@maximus.com](mailto:AnaLMorales@maximus.com)

The Work Incentives Planning & Assistance (WIPA) National Training and Data Center (NTDC) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) recently opened registration for the following classes:

- Distance Community Work Incentives Coordinator (CWIC) and Community Partner Initial Training and Certification: March 22-April 2, 2021 – Registration deadline: February 17, 2021
- Web Course: Introduction to Social Security Disability Benefits, Work Incentives, and Employment Support Programs May 10-21, 2021 Registration deadline April 23, 2021

The NTDC will deliver the Initial Training through a series of 20 webinars over 10 business days on Zoom. Two NTDC instructors will facilitate each interactive webinar and participants will engage in numerous activities and discussions throughout the series. Participants must complete reading assignments before the scheduled webinars.

Employment Network (EN) and State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency staff are highly encouraged to register as community partners and complete the training and certification process. However, staff who will provide individualized Work Incentives counseling to Social Security beneficiaries at least 16 hours per week will have priority.

Once registration closes, NTDC and Social Security will review the applications and notify staff of acceptance the following week.

Important: Prior to registering for the Initial training, community partners must complete the Introductory Web Course: Introduction to Social Security Disability Benefits, Work Incentives, and Employment Support Programs Web Course.

Read more information about the CWIC and Community Partner Initial Training on the VCU NTDC website.

- [March - April 2021 Initial Training Announcement 1-12-21.docx](#)
- [May 10 - 21 2021 Intro Web Course Announcement 1-25-21.docx](#)

<https://www.ssa.gov/work/documents/EN%20RFA%20508.pdf>

**Pamela Aasen (Parent Training & Information Center Representative):**

The 2020-2021 New Jersey Resources Directory is a comprehensive resource guide identifying the various programs and services the Department of Human Services offers to New Jersey residents, caregivers and advocates. In this guide, a family can find out more information on how to apply for food, income and employment assistance, as well as health care and much more. A caregiver can get information on support programs and services to assist them in caring for their loved ones. And individuals with disabilities and their families can get information on various services that include in-home supports, vocational rehabilitation, and education.

[https://www.thearcfamilyinstitute.org/file\\_download/inline/0389d3c2-0af5-4510-ae78-f356b7b5e562](https://www.thearcfamilyinstitute.org/file_download/inline/0389d3c2-0af5-4510-ae78-f356b7b5e562)

[https://www.thearcfamilyinstitute.org/file\\_download/inline/f1e07ae2-c8b6-461e-86f0-baa462619a0e](https://www.thearcfamilyinstitute.org/file_download/inline/f1e07ae2-c8b6-461e-86f0-baa462619a0e)

The 8th annual Statewide Network for Culture Competence Conference will be held virtually on April 26th & 27th

"Building, Bridges, Breaking Barriers & Cultivating Cultural Competency with the Diverse Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf-Blind Community"

Registration link:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/this-event-is-cancelled-building-bridges-breaking-barriers-registration-85982956337>

**Wanda Williford (Representative of an Advocacy Group):**

NJCB Bernard Zuckerman Scholarship: \$1,000 Award(s)

Open to blind and visually impaired students. Go to [njcounciloftheblind.org](http://njcounciloftheblind.org) for details

Application deadline: May 1, 2021

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

- The Career advancement demonstration grant:  
<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/07/2021-00149/applications-for-new-awards-rehabilitation-training-disability-innovation-fund-career-advancement#print>
- In talking to other states, and looking at the whole financial issue of what's occurring around the country, Vito noted that a lot of state agencies for the blind, and vr agencies in general, are having difficulty spending their money.

**Sub-Committee Reports:**

Business Engagement: Jon Goodman noted he is working on setting up a meeting.

Policy & Procedure: Pat McKenna noted no updates at this time.

Quality Assurance: Clarke King reported that committee members will be meeting with Dr. Whitmore to review the QA report she had shared.

SRC Annual Report: Amanda Gerson noted that work on the 2021 Annual Report will begin in the next couple of months.

By-Laws – Vito thanked the members of this sub-committee for all the work done to put together this original draft. SRC members had been asked to review and provide feedback. Vito reviewed the 2-3 responses he received. Essentially, they addressed a potential conflict of interest; wouldn't want to have both the chair and a vice chair having to recuse themselves from a discussion/decision that would impact their employer or advocacy organization. Another issue is having a family member of the Agency serving as an SRC member; again, a conflict of interest. Vito recommended that the document, with these questions/concerns, be forwarded to the Commission and the Department of Human Services for review. He welcomed any additional comments. A lengthy discussion ensued, with several members contributing to the discussion.

- Membership should include representation from several organizations rather than being all from one or two organizations.
- Important how inclusive and diverse the SRC membership is.
- Recommendation: look to Ethics Commission to define "family member".
- Recommendation: include some guidance with regard to the appearance of a conflict of interest (Charles Ouslander offered to send Vito an example in the VR federal regulations)

- Recommendation: language to be added with regard to members recusal from involvement in litigation against the State.
- Recommendation: language to further define the section regarding when a conflict of interest occurs due to members from the same organization – (when there might be perceived personal benefit)

Vito made a motion to update the draft to include today's agreed upon recommendations, and submit the draft to CBVI and the Department of Human Services for review. Alice Eaddy seconded the motion. All were in favor.

### **Old/New Business**

Due to the late hour, members agreed to hold off on the next agenda item, which was goals and priorities. A discussion to operationalize the SRC's 2021 goals and priorities will take place at the June meeting.

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 Ida Behreini; all were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 12 noon.

Lia thanked everyone for attending today's meeting, and for their active participation.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled for June 4, 2021.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Christine Cooper*

Christine Cooper

CBVI – Administrative Assistant