

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

Meeting Minutes – August 7, 2020 (virtual meeting)

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

**Absent:** Gary Altman, Bill Freeman, Charles Ouslander, Kris Tucker

**Ex Officio Present:** Dr. Bernice Davis, John Tkacz

**CBVI Staff:** Amanda Gerson, Michelle Whitmore

**Members of the Public in Attendance:** Krystle Allen, Vincent Elorza, Carly Fredericks, Valerie Frink, Anthony Lanzilotti, David Mostello, Brianna Murphy, Kelly Reymann, Joe Ruffalo, Jocelyn Santiago, Kimmy Ventarola

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The meeting was called to order at 9:30 a.m. by Rick Fox, Chairperson. Rick welcomed everyone, and announced that 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. He explained that the SRC plays an advisory and partnership role to the Vocational Rehabilitation program at CBVI.

As roll call was taken each of the members identified who they represent; members of the public were asked to do the same. Rick explained that the role of the public at this meeting was to observe. He noted that the SRC is not a body that's required to have a question and answer period, or public participation. He invited members of the public that any comments or feedback they would like to share, they could e-mail him at: [Richardfox1@comcast.net](mailto:Richardfox1@comcast.net) Amanda Gerson noted that she would put her e-mail address in the chat box; she also encouraged feedback be e-mailed to Rick Fox, as Chairperson of the SRC.

**Approval of Meeting Minutes**

The meeting minutes of June 5, 2020, were reviewed. Hearing no amendments, corrections, or additions recommended, Rick noted the minutes were accepted unanimously and will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

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

- Working in line to administer safe delivery of services by following direction from the Department of Health and CDC, virtual programming continues. Most staff continue to work from home; this is expected to continue through the remainder of 2020. All Commission offices remain open for business.
- VR counselors continue to reach out to all consumers in order to continue programs, as well as support consumers in any employment related issues.
- Dictated by the NJ budget, during the month of July, mandatory furloughs (up to 12 days) were completed by staff (CWA).
- Work continues on the Corrective Action Plan (CAP). Dr. Davis explained that the Commission’s Vocational Rehabilitation grant comes from the federal government, and there are certain mandates that need to be met to make sure the grant is delivered in the best way possible. Overall, CBVI did very well with the last audit (2018) and are working diligently on the CAP to outline progress. Also have a quarterly VR report to submit, and that is going very well too.
- BENJ (Business Enterprises NJ): There are some sites open in county buildings, and also a few on federal sites. Looking forward to more openings for these blind entrepreneurs. Vito DeSantis commented that as of about a week ago there was no waiver in either side of the House of Congress bills to utilize VR dollars to bail out or provide stimulus money for the managers in the Randolph Shepherd (RS) program. He explained this would allow VR dollars to essentially make up for the losses the operators have experienced during the shutdown. Dr. Davis noted that the community is very optimistic in terms of receiving a waiver for RS, but there is no update reported at this time. Many of the RS operators are certainly looking forward to some assistance with additional startup costs and operational needs.
- JKTC (Joseph Kohn Training Center): Rick asked about the number of clients and services being delivered at the Training Center. Dr. Davis reported that this VR program is up and running, utilizing a video-call conferencing platform. There are approximately 12 students right now, and referrals continue to come in. Two more programs will be introduced in the near future. The JKTC staff are to be commended for their creativity, and looking out for fatigue among the students in light of all the video conferencing going on. Feedback from consumers has been very positive.

Rick thanked Dr. Davis for her report.

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

Summer programs update: Successfully completed the College Prep Experience Program and two sessions of the Work Skills Prep Program during the month of July. There were a full group of students in each program. Kudos to our partners at TCNJ; they did a great job. Students were engaged, despite it being a Zoom platform. Amanda commented that she received great feedback from staff, students, and parents. There were a lot of great ideas and activities, and a platform was created for potentially offering the program virtually in the future for those students that aren't able to come to campus for a variety of reasons. Today is the graduation for the Life 101 Program and that also has had great feedback. Enrollment was a bit lower this year; seven students participated. It is thought this may be due to Zoom fatigue.

Pre-placement job development services: Most continue their job search virtually with our community rehab providers, as long as the consumer, provider, and counselor all agreed it is a good fit. There are some consumers who opted not to continue and put services on pause while in a virtual status; it doesn't work for everybody. Job coaching is starting to resume on a limited basis for those that are returning to in-person work and need the support. Job coaching is also being provided virtually.

Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA): All focus groups were implemented. Thank you again to all SRC members who assisted in co-facilitating in these groups. The feedback received was really valuable. Will be analyzing both the feedback, as well as the results from a recent survey that was completed. Also did some informational interviews with some of the one-stops and some of our business partners. Will also analyze our VR data (911 Report). Will crunch some of that data to look at the demographics of those that we serve to help identify any underserved populations. Finally, one of our goals has been to publish a Request For Information (RFI) regarding supported employment and other employment related services. The RFI is currently up on the Department of Human Services (DHS) website, inviting both providers of those services, as well as stakeholders to respond. The goal is to reformulate our employment services program, providing the best services, structured in a way to benefit consumers. Amanda commented that she looks forward to getting the responses back and incorporating into the CSNA. Information from the CSNA will be used to develop and publish a Request For Proposal to create a closer relationship and improve services for our consumers.

Corrective Action Plan (CAP): Amanda reported that much progress has been made with the assistance of Michelle Whitmore, CBVI's Quality Assurance Coordinator, and the CBVI managers. She also acknowledged the SRC sub-committee for their policy reviews. A number of policies have been updated: one on eligibility and the other on college services. Have also been working on quality assurance, internal controls, and data integrity monitoring; as well as follow up on timeliness and status of reports. Getting a lot of really good data and have been

able to identify some of the barriers for meeting consistently to the level that the federal government expects. Also made some changes to our case management system, which will allow us to appropriately allocate costs and time. Another part of the CAP we've been working on is our Fiscal Unit interacting with Treasury. Ed Szajdecki, CBVI's Chief of Fiscal, has been working to get information and everything up-to-date. Amanda commented that despite some of the challenges the agency is facing right now, we are really making great progress. Did request extensions on some of our findings, however, that was to be expected. We've communicated with RSA what's been going on over the past couple of months and they've been understanding and flexible. The last quarterly report was submitted on the 31<sup>st</sup>. Final edits were made to the NJ Combined State Plan. In collaboration with our partners at the State Employment & Training Commission, we were able to make those updates and get it submitted to RSA by the deadline; our plan is complete for our quarterly federal reporting. For the RSA 911 report there were some changes made; mainly elimination of unnecessary or duplicative fields or clarification, to better match the information RSA intended to collect. Thankfully, our case management system has given us the ability to have more targeted and fewer fields.

The RSA annual report will be due at the end of September; this report is submitted jointly with the Division (DVRS), looking at our annual performance with regard to rehabilitation services; it combines some key performance measures across the entire VR program.

WINTAC (Technical Assistance Center) targeted training opportunity: CBVI's VR staff has been given the opportunity to participate in an on-line course series geared towards understanding the history and implementation of the Vocational Rehabilitation program, as well as the key points of the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA), which is our authorizing Legislation. A number of staff have complete this training so far; feedback has been great. We will continue to have access to it, including any new staff that come on-board.

Business Relations Unit: staff working with key partners right now. Maximus, a federal contractor, offers a range of work from home positions. Working with them to identify opportunities that might be good fits for our consumers. Also, Amazon is expanding in NJ, as well as their supports for individuals with disabilities. Now that we have the option for in-person job coaching, and return to providing in-person services on a limited basis, we anticipate being able to move forward.

State Wage Interchange System (SWIS): One of the major changes that went into effect with the WIOA was that we need to follow consumers after their case is closed for 1 year, to verify employment and wage information. We have a data sharing agreement with New Jersey's Unemployment Insurance to get the wage information; however, that information is restricted to only those who are employed in NJ. The federal government established SWIS, which allows states to share wage data with other states. In order to access that data, the state has to sign on to share their data.

Thankfully, the Department of Labor, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services has been working with us to get us added and have access to this list, so that any consumer who is employed out of state we will also have access to their data, to be able to accurately and easily report required information to the federal government. Thank you to Dr. Davis; it looks like we should have access to that information very soon. Vito pointed out that this also has an impact on Social Security reimbursement. Amanda agreed, and noted this has been a definite bonus to our ability to collect information and accurately report successes.

Order of Selection Plan: Amanda noted that a meeting with a federal technical assistance center had to be postponed, but will be rescheduled soon to discuss establishing an Order of Selection Plan. At this point, hopeful to be able to maintain the State match for our federal VR program.

Transition Services: Amanda noted that WINTAC has been amazing at providing resources. They have compiled a large range of virtual transition activities, assessments, and resources. A back to school meeting with transition counselors will be held next week to develop a workbook of activities that can be done virtually with students. Will continue to virtually attend IEP meetings. Also exploring other options to maintain remote activities. Will continue to build our capacity to provide transition services to the students.

Vito asked about the data around closures. Amanda noted that she recently looked at closure data for the past 18 months and it was down a bit, but not as low as one might expect. She will pull closure data and report at the next meeting.

Kathleen Spata reported on the Deaf Blind Unit guest line services that have been occurring since the quarantine began. The SSP program, which provides support services (remotely at this time), has served 10 clients/192 hours thus far. Remote services are provided for things like food shopping and refilling prescriptions on-line. Amanda thanked Kathleen, pointing out that she has done a great job in helping navigate and work with our deaf blind consumers. The numbers continue to go up, as we continue to let consumers know of this option.

Rick thanked Amanda for her report.

### **Sub-Committee updates:**

Policy and Procedure: Pat McKenna reported that this committee recently received and looked over the college services handbook policy. He thanked Ida for her review, and noted that the material looked pretty solid. Suggestions were sent back to Amanda.

Business Relations: Jonathan Goodman noted nothing new to report. Conference call will be scheduled soon.

Quality Assurance: No update provided.

**Announcements/Comments/Old or New Business:**

Rick reminded everyone that his term on the SRC expires on September 26, and nominations for a new chairperson will be held at this time. Nominations: 1) Vito DeSantis nominated himself; seconded by Jennifer Armstrong-Ekelmann. 2) Jonathan Goodman nominated himself; seconded by Alice Eddy. 3) Evangelia Stone nominated herself; seconded by Pat McKenna. Rick encouraged members to reflect and speak to the nominees, and be prepared for a vote at the next meeting. Clarke suggested the nominees provide some type of bio or background information on themselves to help in this process. After discussion of other suggestions, Rick asked each of the nominees to be prepared to address the members (up to 2 minutes) on September 18, with voting to follow.

Rick advised everyone on 2 legislative bills: Sandy's Law, sponsored by a NJ House member named Christopher Smith, # HR 4686; it requires rideshare services, such as Uber and Lyft, to include improved security features on their apps. Also includes language that mandates accessibility for blind users. Rick noted that NFB is calling senators to request this Bill be approved in the Senate; was transferred from the House of Representatives. The other Bill of concern is Senate Bill S.4317, which is the Safe to Work Act; this is the Senate version of the new COVID-19 relief package. In this legislation there is language which would ultimately weaken the Americans with Disabilities Act; it would exempt employers, owners, and operators of public accommodations from facing penalties if they put accessibility barriers in place that attempt to reduce the spread of COVID-19; these protections would remain in effect until October 1, 2024. Rick offered to send information on both these bills to Amanda, for SRC distribution, for any action they wish to take. Amanda noted that she also receives a list of State bills that are up and pertain to disabilities; she'd be happy to forward that information to the SRC as well.

Members discussed the importance of Zoom training. NFB, American Printing House, and Hadley School were all noted to have helpful information on their websites. Pat commented on EDGE's Zoom 101 program. Amanda noted that she will be looking to CBVI's assistive technology staff to see if a Zoom workshop can be organized. Alice commented that Zoom is not innately accessible for deaf blind consumers. Amanda noted the Agency is aware that no technology solution is going to work for everyone, and that's the reason for individual assessment and training, to help identify what the barriers are and make recommendations for training. Individualized approach is key; identifying which service and which resources are going to be appropriate, as opposed to blanket training and workshops. Another reference suggested was: [Mosen.org/zoom](https://mosen.org/zoom) – which is a guide (audiobook) to Zoom Cloud meetings from a blindness perspective.

## **Adjournment**

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

Vito DeSantis made a motion to adjourn the meeting; the motion was seconded by Evangelia Stone; all were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled for September 18, 2020.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper  
CBVI – Administrative Assistant