

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

Meeting Minutes – September 18, 2020 (virtual meeting)

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

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

Staff/Members of Public Present: Amanda Gerson
Vincent Elorza, Melissa Lomax, Joe Ruffalo

Rick Fox, SRC Chairperson, welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. Rick 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.

Kathleen Donnellon was welcomed to her first SRC meeting. Katie is replacing Danielle Licari-Scorzelli, and is a CBVI Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor in the Southern Regional Office.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

The meeting minutes of June 5, 2020, were reviewed. There were no amendments, corrections, or additions recommended. A motion to accept the minutes was made by Gary Altman, and seconded by Alice Eaddy; all were in favor. These meeting minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

The meeting minutes of August 7, 2020, were reviewed. There were no amendments, corrections, or additions recommended. A motion to accept the minutes was made by Pat McKenna, and seconded by Pam Aasen; all were in favor. These meeting minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC

Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director’s Report:

CBVI continues to deliver services remotely. Everyone is actively working from home using telephonic services or video conferencing to provide services. There are some services that are definitely more challenging to provide in a virtual environment, inclusive of Activities of Daily Living (ADL) skills training. Recently, Orientation & Mobility (O&M) staff went through mask fitting and training, in order to assess and serve emergency cases where consumers are in need of O&M services. Most of this training is being done outdoors.

The 110th CBVI anniversary theme is #CBVIStrong2020. A virtual celebratory event has been planned and will be held on October 2 via Zoom; time to be determined. (Addendum: 3-4:30pm Use this link to instantly join Zoom meeting: <https://zoom.us/j/96238188369?from=msft> Dial-in Phone Access: 1-646-558-8656 Meeting ID: 962 3818 8369). A virtual scrapbook is also being prepared to commemorate the anniversary. Members were encouraged to submit any historical memorabilia, photos, or reflections of past and present staff and consumers to Pamela.Gaston@dhs.nj.gov

Business Enterprises NJ (BENJ): This is one of the programs that falls under the VR grants. At this time, the majority of business sites are still closed; seeing some county locations reopen with limited employees and schedules. As previously reported, the Randolph Shepherd (RS) operators in this program are still not seeing a lot of profit. No additional news on the waiver posed to Congress; hoping that comes through, so money will be available. Continue to provide as much support to the RS operators as possible.

The Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC): Staff continue to do a great job with virtual training. Obviously, everyone has had to make a huge adjustment; however, consumer feedback has been positive. A virtual graduation was held over the summer; attended by students, staff, and parents. The students spoke briefly about what they learned in the program, and certificates were distributed. Currently, there are 13 students in the JKTC program. Additional group instruction has been added, at different timeframes, to accommodate the needs of students. Also resumed the Adjustment to Vision Loss groups with Dr. Springer; he also is returning to provide individual psychological assessments. Dr. Ferdinand is also assisting. Another great addition, Marissa Giuliano, a certified Art Therapist, is also now a part of the JKTC instruction staff. The students continue to gain knowledge and skills through virtual instructions; however, as previously noted there are some gaps, particularly in the area of ADL and mobility; urgent cases are being addressed. Overall, continue to be very creative. In answering a question raised by Rick, Dr. Davis noted that an opportunity will be created for those that missed ADL training during this remote training period.

Although Congress has not been able to agree on legislation at this point, there have been attempts to include a waiver for the 15% set aside for Pre-Employment Transition Services. Vito questioned whether or not this would affect CBVI's ability to meet the needs of adult consumers. In his work with WINTAC he has heard from various VR agencies that potential shortages of state funding for match will cause a problem in the ability to provide services. Dr. Davis and Amanda concurred that they did not believe it would be an issue for CBVI. Amanda commented that she felt confident of being able to expand, and spend the money that wasn't spent last year. Vito asked John Tkacz whether or not this would affect DVRS funds, since they receive combined Federal and State funds also. John Tkacz wasn't aware of a problem, but offered to look into the issue.

Lia Stone asked if there were any plans to replace staff members who had left JKTC under the freeze. Dr. Davis commented that at this time there are no plans; pointing out that the process is dictated by Civil Service rules, and also accounts that are affected by the State Budget.

Rick thanked Dr. Davis and the Commission staff for being so creative and innovative during this difficult time.

Amanda Gerson – Vocational Rehabilitation Report:

Work continues on updating the VR policy handbook and procedures. Currently finishing the documentation policy. Hope to have it completed within the next week and provide a training to counselors at the end of the month.

Corrective Action Plan (CAP): CBVI's service codes needed to be updated; there were an abundance of duplicated and unclear codes. The amount of codes available to counselors has been reduced (approximately 300 down to 100), outlining the different Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) VR service categories, as well as the individual service codes that are to be used and the requirements for each of those services to be provided. Finalizing the catalog, and will be doing training at the end of the month.

Amanda thanked everyone who helped out with the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA). The data collection, interviews, and focus groups have all been completed. By the end of the month expect to have the CSNA summary report completed for RSA; will share with the SRC as well.

Amanda reminded everyone the Annual SRC Report needs to be submitted to both the Governor's office and RSA before the end of the calendar year. She will be reaching out to sub-committee members by early October regarding the interviews and write-ups for the success stories. CBVI will do the other write-ups and data analysis that's required for this report.

CBVI & DVRS are working with the State Employment and Training Commission's (SETC) Performance Committee. Focus right now is adding VR data to the wheel with dashboards. Anticipate the first round of data to be largely descriptive, and then just like all the other programs, will work towards providing more and more information. This information is largely going to be from the 911 data (quarterly report), which is part of the requirements under the law and to communicate to the public the great work the VR program is doing. Hopefully, reflecting both cumulative for the entire VR programs, CBVI and DVRS numbers combined, as well as allowing individuals to see the data for each agency separately.

Amanda provided a follow up to a question raised at the last meeting regarding the VR outcome numbers. Looking at the numbers from July 2019 to June 2020, there were 174 successful closures and competitive integrated employment with an approximate employment rate of 41.5%. That means that of all individuals who received services under an individualized plan for employment, 174/41.5% achieved competitive integrated employment at closure.

CBVI's Business Relations Unit continues to do great work: 1) Working on activities to celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month. 2) Although the Port Authority is under a hiring freeze, they are still partnering and working with VR agencies to identify potential candidates and talk about their organization in anticipation of hiring. 3) Three

individuals obtained employment with Amazon recently. 4) Working with two other companies, Maximus and Accessible Pharmacy, sending them candidates for employment. Positions range from customer service, quality assurance, and supervision. 5) Providing additional support to consumers, particularly as it pertains to using Zoom. Seeing a big shift with virtual work, telecommuting, virtual interviews and virtual job fairs. Ida Behreini offered assistance with mentoring any of the job candidates; Amanda thanked her for the offer.

SRC Chairperson Election:

Rick reminded everyone that today would be his last meeting; therefore, an election for the next SRC Chairperson would be held at this time. He reviewed the role and responsibilities of the chairperson. He asked each of the candidates to take a few minutes to share their experience and a little bit about themselves.

Vito, who was the Executive Director at CBVI from 2002-2013, shared that he is also a veteran; serving for 11 years before he began to lose his sight. Although it is not a requirement to have a veteran on the SRC, having that perspective, and potential partnerships with the VA, he felt was an important element he brings to the Council. Currently, he is a technical assistant on the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) compliance across the country, as a member of the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC) and Institute on Community Inclusion (ICI). This offers a perspective to the SRC of what's happening nationally; the trends and opportunities available and occurring across the country in the world of vocational rehabilitation and transition. Vito pointed out the value of providing these perspectives, what CBVI has done in the past as well as looking to the future. He thanked everyone for listening, and shared a quote from a CBVI staff, "You can't know where you're going, until you've looked at where you've been."

Jonathan Goodman thanked everyone for considering him as the next SRC Chairperson. He noted that he has been on the Council for four years now and has a good understanding of how things operate. He was a mentor for CBVI's Employment, Development, Guidance, and Engagement (EDGE) program for almost five years, giving him the insight as to what the students and parents expect. Given his experience in the banking industry, he also knows how businesses operate and organizations are run.

Lia noted she has been the vice-chairperson for the SRC since 2019, and coming up on the end of her first term on the SRC. She works full-time for the EDGE program during the week, and on the weekends is a contact tracer. She is deeply tied to the blindness community in NJ through her work with EDGE as well as her involvement in the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). She views her role on the SRC as a voice for the people who do not have a seat at the table. She commented that she looks forward to continuing to work with the SRC, either as a chair or not, to continue to help advise CBVI to work toward increasing accountability and transparency, so that all consumers get everything they need from the agency.

Amanda provided instruction on the voting process. If not voting through their computer, members were invited to e-mail their vote to Amanda. This vote was for members of the SRC only. Members of the public or staff (Amanda), ex-officio members (Dr. Davis and John Tkacz), and pending appointments (Bill Freeman, Charles Ouslander, and Katie Donnellon) were not permitted to vote.

Following the launch of the poll (vote), Amanda received e-mail votes from Jonathan, Alice, and Pat. She tallied up the votes: Lia (6), Jonathan (4), Vito (2).

Rick congratulated Lia on being voted the next SRC Chairperson. He thanked each of the candidates for participating, and for their incredible value to the SRC. Lia thanked everyone and noted she appreciated the vote of confidence, and was looking forward to continuing to do the work of the SRC.

Rick commented that he has been greatly enriched by the opportunity to work with everyone on the SRC and the Commission. He wished the SRC well and offered his assistance in the future, if needed. Everyone thanked Rick for his service and leadership on the SRC. Dr. Davis congratulated Lia on being voted the next SRC Chairperson. On behalf of CBVI, Dr. Davis thanked Rick for his service, and noted she was grateful for having had worked with him during his tenure as both a member and the chairperson of the SRC. She was confident that his commitment to advocacy will keep him connected to CBVI in a remarkable way. Dr. Davis presented a certificate of appreciation to Rick, reading the inscription – “In honor of the dedicated service and commitment to improving the quality of life for New Jersey residents who are blind, deaf blind and visually impaired, we thank you for your outstanding efforts to promote the advancement of opportunities for the highest level of personal independence, community integration, and employment.” Rick received an e-mail copy of the certificate, and the original will be forwarded to him in the mail. Rick thanked Dr. Davis, noting it’s been a privilege and an honor to serve and get to know everyone on the Council.

Sub-committees:

Business Engagement: Jonathan noted nothing new to report. He will be organizing a meeting with the group in the near future.

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

Quality Assurance: Rick noted that Kris Tucker’s term on the SRC had expired, and a new chairperson is needed for this sub-committee; he asked for a volunteer from the remaining members of this sub-committee. Clarke King offered to take on the role. Rick thanked Clarke, and offered to give him a call following the meeting with some QA ideas. Michelle Whitmore is CBVI’s QA Coordinator; Amanda will forward her contact information to Clarke as well.

New Business:

When a member of the public asked if the vice-chair role would remain vacant, Rick opened up the floor to members for a motion to be made to continue with the practice and nominate a vice-chair at this meeting. A discussion ensued. A question/suggestion was raised of having the

person that got the second amount of votes for chairperson to be the vice-chair. Rick commented that a motion could be made in that regard. It was also pointed out that the Council was not required to have a vice-chair; the only requirement is for a chairperson. Several members thought it was a good idea to have a vice-chair in the event the chairperson is unable to attend a meeting. A suggestion was also made that they could simply have a volunteer cover the chairperson at a meeting if needed; this suggestion was made so as not to go through the nominating procedure again.

A motion was made by Pat McKenna that the SRC have a vice chair, to be elected via nominations, and then a vote. William Robinson and Ida Behreini both seconded the motion. Pat shared his thoughts on his motion. He pointed out the importance of these meetings, and it appears to him that a lot goes into the planning and chairing. To have someone available and be part of that process is a sensible precaution, and also an opportunity to start building some of that experience or knowledge with the system to transition into that role, if that's what the SRC at that time chooses to vote into being.

Hearing no other discussion, Rick asked, if all were in favor of this motion; everyone was in agreement; there were none opposed.

Lia Stone nominated Ida Behreini. Alice Eaddy nominated Kathleen Spata. Both accepted their nomination. Jonathan Goodman nominated himself. Election for vice-chair will take place at the next meeting.

Announcements:

Alice shared with everyone that she will be participating as a contestant in the Vision Foundation Talent Show that is coming up. They are posting on-line access to participate and vote. Amanda will send out the notice regarding this event. Everyone wished Alice the best of luck!

Adjournment

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

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

The next SRC meeting is scheduled for October 23, 2020.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper
CBVI – Administrative Assistant