

N.J. Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired (CBVI)

State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Meeting Minutes – October 7, 2022 (virtual meeting)

Voting Members Present: Pamela Aasen, Vito DeSantis, Alice Eaddy, Clarke King, John O’Connell, Kathleen Spata, Evangelia Stone, Lauren Weishaar, Ronda Williams, Wanda Williford

Members Awaiting Appointment Present : James Good, Steve McCoy, Amanda Philp

Absent: Ida Behreini, Don Campbell, Gwen Orlowski

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

CBVI Staff: Susan Engstrom, Amanda Gerson, Selina Gooden, Pat McKenna, Deacon Truesdale

Members of Public Present: (2) ASL Interpreters – Kathy FereJohn and Craig Ridgeway, David Mistello, Liz Drennan, Elisa Cohen, Haley Carney, Susan Head

Lia Stone, SRC Chairperson, welcomed everyone, calling the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. Lia 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 minutes of the June 10, 2022 meeting 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.

Lia reminded everyone to introduce themselves as they speak throughout the meeting.

Remaining 2022 Meeting Dates: December 9 (virtual meeting)

Proposed Meeting Dates for 2023: February 3, June 9, October 6, December 1

Members also discussed adding a “rain date”, as well as virtual vs. in-person meetings in 2023. A conversation will take place at the December meeting, after some research on the Wi-Fi has been done.

Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director’s Report

The Commission is in the midst of its 2023 budget season, as is the rest of the Department of Human Services (DHS). At this time, the Commission is fiscally sound; plenty of funding to cover Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programming.

- The Agency is requesting funding for recruitment efforts. There are several retirements taking place, of some of the very seasoned and talented staff, at the Commission. In Education alone there are 10 vacancies due to retirements. With the Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) there is a double certification requirement, which makes these vacancies more difficult to fill. At this time, supervisors and current TVIs have divided up caseloads to fill the void. Vito DeSantis asked if VR has seen an uptick in retirements. Dr. Davis reported that the levels of retirements/vacancies so far for VR counselors is minimal compared to the TVIs. With regard to any impact on transition, Amanda Gerson reported that VR is on top of getting referrals from the TVIs, and there hasn’t been any real impact with the loss of staff and onboarding of new TVIs with regard to transition services.
- The Agency will also need additional funding for braille books. Science and math books are quite expensive, and continue to climb in price. A single book, on average, can cost between 25 – 37 thousand dollars.

The National Federation of the Blind’s (NFB) National Association of Blind Merchants Conference was held in Atlantic City recently. This annual conference is held for the Randolph- Sheppard (RS) operators across the United States. Dr. Davis presented, and noted that New Jersey had very good representation at this year’s conference. Many of the RS operators are not up to par in terms of the income they were bringing in prior to the pandemic; some are still making 30-50% less money. A few states, West Virginia in particular, reported a positive uptick in income. There are also a good deal of military bases and post offices that are seeing levels of income increasing. Administrators and advocates in the RS arena are stressing the need to increase micro markets, as well as create partnerships with private entities. New Jersey continues to progress, and install more micro markets. Public Relation efforts are being made to recruit, specifically younger people, as well as getting more women into the program. Lots of ideas being discussed at the Federal level. It’s a time of transition and transformation for this program, where we train and assist these entrepreneurs.

Dr. Davis will be presenting at the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Conference at the end of the month, to speak about CBVI’s Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC) program. Dr. Davis was invited by the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), the organization that helped to assess the JKTC program a while back. As a result, positive changes have been made to the program, and Dr. Davis will get the opportunity to talk more about that on a national level.

The National Council of State Agencies of the Blind (NCSAB), will also be holding their bi-annual conference in early November. Dr. Davis, the presiding president of NCSAB, is looking forward to a great conference.

CBVI is celebrating Blindness Awareness Month during the month of October. A community outreach and staff appreciation event is being planned for October 13; to be held in the Monmouth County area, at Cheesequake State Park from 10am-3pm; all are welcome. Looking to educate the community on the programs and services the Commission offers.

Dr. Davis, joined by the Department of Human Services Deputy Commissioner, Elisa Neira, will have the pleasure of speaking at an NFB conference in November.

Pat McKenna, Assistant Division Director - Vocational Rehabilitation Update:

Pat commented that a lot of great information was covered at this year's National Association of Blind Merchants Conference. He is working with Deacon Truesdale, CBVI's BENJ Manager, to look at ways to further expand and market programs at the Commission. He noted that one of the challenges is the locations that the operators/managers run their businesses in are in the State and Federal buildings, where offices were not in use during the pandemic, and now where telework is limiting business. The need to expand into the private sector is being explored.

Pat commented that it has been fantastic to watch the JKTC program go from a totally virtual format last April, to bringing on 6 consumers in May, and increasing that number throughout the summer. In developing virtual programming over the last few years, the Agency has learned what is possible. Although everything can't be done virtually, there are some things that can be done with great success. JKTC now incorporates a hybrid model to allow for virtual programming when it is appropriate, and for those consumers where a greater degree of customization and flexibility is required.

Supportive employment services are for those consumers who require more intensive and/or long term support. This might entail activities such as discussing vocational goals, developing or expanding the job search, working on resume and cover letter, assisting with the job application process, interview preparation, negotiating and discussing accommodations, and the job coaching itself. The job coaching can be difficult and frustrating at times. Working with vendors on a redesign and looking at ways to address some of the issues; providing additional support and/or possibly increasing rates. More to follow as we move forward.

Amanda Gerson, Vocational Rehabilitation Coordinator, VR Update:

Summer programming remained virtual this year. COVID restrictions prevented having the college campus experience; however, it was another amazing year! There were approximately 40 students across the College Prep and Work Skills Prep programs, which is in alignment with previous years. The Life 101 Program was also held this summer, serving approximately 10 students. This was a hybrid program; came together for a few days of community based activities. Moving forward with planning for College Prep, Work Skills Prep, and Life 101 for next summer.

Amanda reported that VR is working with Ace Academy, who is partnering with Sky's The Limit, on a series of career pathway exploration workshops for this school year. Last night was the kickoff; having students identify what their areas of interest are. Each one of the different workshops will focus on a different industry, with a blind professional in the field coming in and speaking with the students about what that career path looks like, and the education that's required to get there. The program will be capped off with its own mock interview, speed dating style event. These evening workshops are all virtual.

Also launching a series of workshops in January that will be implemented directly by CBVI counselors. There will be different topics related to pre-employment transition services offered. Topics on self-advocacy, dressing to impress, networking, finances, and preparing for college; a full range of pre-vocational soft skills, work readiness, and exploration categories.

Working out the details for another workshop with an organization called Cyber Org; they are federally funded through a grant from the Department of Homeland Security; tasked with creating a series of workshops and trainings/curriculum to help introduce young people to the world of cyber security/network security, basically everything that falls under homeland securities. They've created different things, including a couple of specific workshops that are fully accessible to students who are blind and visually impaired. Looking to do this, hopefully as an in-person workshop, over President's weekend in 2023.

Recently held a transition open house, where students and their families were invited to get an overview of what we're doing. We're going to be doing that sort of thing a little bit more regularly, just to get more information out there and have opportunities for our parents to learn more about different aspects of transition services/programs.

Also looking at revamping one session of the Work Skills Prep program to be a bit more of a career pathway, apprenticeship certification program. It is felt that there are a group of students in the middle that are not being fully served in a summer program capacity, who may not be four-year college bound, but would benefit from a certification. Should have more information by December, if not, by the February meeting.

The Business Relations Unit (BRU) has a great series of programs this year. Currently doing a mock interview, speed dating format program. 7 employers are scheduled for the event; each employer will have the opportunity to ask a consumer 1-2 standard interview questions; different across the board. There will also be an opportunity for employers to give feedback to consumers. It will be a fun, fast opportunity for consumers to get some interview experience, with a wide range of potential interviewers. Interviewers are from companies such as, Amazon, Shop Rite, PSE&G, and Hackensack Meridian Health.

Another event being planned for early November is a workshop with a Human Resources representative for a presentation on how to put your best interviewing foot forward. Also hosting a workshop on self-disclosure and advocacy, asking for accommodations. Will also be holding one of our quarterly disability mentoring events at the Cherry Hill Shop Rite.

Continue to develop our career cafes as well, which are information sessions with different employers in different fields, to talk about what the requirements are in that field, what it's like in that field; they can talk about their company, and how their company approaches the accommodation processes. Looking to do another internship cafe in the Spring, where we have employers who offer specialized or general internships, to come in and talk about those opportunities, predominantly college students.

One Stops: CBVI became signatories on all but 3 or 4 of the local workforce areas where Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) are required. Working with the Department of Labor, who have been amazing at helping us get into compliance; we are 99% there; very hopeful that we will resolve remaining issues in the very near future. We will then work on a campaign to go out and speak at all of the One Stops to facilitate reciprocal trainings, and ensure each One Stop has a designated person from our agency, so that if there is a blind or visually impaired person that comes into the One Stop that they are getting that connection. This is one of our Federal requirements. Amanda explained that we are not required to be co-located, and, logistically speaking, it doesn't make sense for us to have someone stationed at the One Stop, but to have them involved in things like the disability issues committee; to be a part of any sort of job fairs or events that happen, and to provide consultation to the One Stops is important. Everyone should have access to all appropriate workforce programs and services, so that we're not duplicating efforts. It is important to solidify and strengthen our relationships with the local workforce areas.

When asked about the financial burden with regard to the MOUs, Amanda noted that the Agency would not be expected to contribute cash monies to the local areas in the way that other workforce partners are expected to. Vito DeSantis also asked if there will be someone familiar with the assistive technology to assist individuals in navigating information at the One-Stops. Amanda noted the intention is to provide training and support to the technology; to make sure the staff there are capable of doing general orientation; will work out logistically when there is an individual who needs more support, even if it is just virtually. Amanda noted that MOU renewals are taking place now, and will continue into the spring; all of the local

areas will be redoing their MOUs; a much more in-depth negotiation as part of the MOU development process will take place.

Corrective Action Plan (CAP): the time cost allocation plan is the final finding that needs resolution; waiting for the plan to be approved by the Federal Department of Education. Continue to work with DHS and Rehabilitation Service Administration (RSA). Amanda commented that she is hoping to announce the CAP is fully resolved by the February SRC meeting. Dr. Davis acknowledged Amanda's hard work in juggling several issues regarding the CAP. She also applauded Pat, Amanda, and the entire VR team for all of their achievements with the VR program.

The EDGE Request For Proposal (RFP) was posted yesterday. Amanda commented that she hopes to have an announcement in December regarding the results of this RFP. She, again, highlighted the reasons for the RFP; it is due to the fact that the program has literally grown in size; now serving over 100 consumers and there is obviously a financial component attached to that growth. Ethically, we are obligated to put it back out for bid.

Deacon Truesdale, Business Enterprises of New Jersey (BENJ):

Deacon provided an update on the BENJ program.

- The blind managers began returning back to work at the beginning of 2022; however, due to COVID related issues some locations took a lot longer to return. Added to that, a lot of the buildings they are located in continue to be operating at a reduced capacity; a good deal of staff are teleworking and this has negatively impacted their businesses. An additional concern is that they are dealing with supply issues; various products remain hard to purchase. Working as a committee with BENJ managers to look at ways to make the program a bit more attractive to the younger clients, and improve businesses by developing micro markets (self-service locations), as well as venturing more into the private sector for business. Vito raised the issue of rent/utilities in working with the private sector.
- The State asset inventory system: The State of New Jersey implemented a system called Wasp, where every State asset over \$250 now has to go into the system. BENJ purchased a lot of equipment, and the majority of equipment has to go into this system, and be included in an internal audit.
- Rehabilitation Service Administration (RSA) visited BENJ NJ back in August for 2 days. The specialists came to provide technical assistance. The first day they met with staff, and on the second day they met with the committee of Business Enterprise managers, and also had an opportunity to visit one of our locations, one of the Justice complexes located in Trenton, which offers a full service cafeteria, a Dunkin, and also has a vending at that location.

Susan Engstrom, Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC):

Susan reported that JKTC's residential program re-opened on May 2; started with a small number of consumers, and has slowly grown; currently, there are 12 consumers in the program. In addition to the residential program, a hybrid program is also offered, for students unable to commit to living at the Center. In the hybrid program the student comes to the Center 2 days a week and they participate in virtual instruction on the other days. Both programs are going very well.

One evening class that has been added to the program is called creative expression, run by a certified therapist. The fitness program has expanded; there's an incentive to use the fitness center and exercise; going well.

COVID precautions remain in place. Students are not sharing bedrooms; they each have their own room. Trying to keep things safe. We haven't had any large spread of COVID; 2 students that did test positive, but luckily it happened during times when they weren't at the Center, and then they just remained at home until they could get clearance to return.

Excited to be able to offer loaner computer equipment to students in the hybrid program, if they don't have computer equipment. This enables them to move forward with the technology and keyboarding skills.

A pilot program has been developed; "at home week". This is to ensure retention of skills learned once the student leaves the program. So, we're having the students go home for a week and they're given different things to do, in various areas to what they've learned. We contact them throughout the week; following up to make sure they're using the skills. They also can still participate in our virtual groups during that week. So far, the pilot is running well.

The work experience is starting to pick up again, which we're really happy about. There's been some challenges, mainly due to so many people doing telework; this has really affected the work sites that are available to us right now; we've had to make adjustments; i.e. going to work 2 days a week as opposed to 4 days a week. Also, several of the employers that we work with don't have the same staff in the office that they had before the pandemic. Overall, it is working out well and the students are benefiting.

SRC Members' Reports

Members were reminded that updates (bullet points) are to be e-mailed to Christine Cooper prior to, or immediately following, each meeting and will be included in the meeting minutes.

The following update was received:

Pam Aasen - Current Open Positions at SPAN

Project: Leaders Empowered as Advocates with Dignity (LEAD Project)

Title: Part-time Community Health Worker (15 hrs/wk)

Location: Southern Region (Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, Cumberland, or Ocean counties)

Old/New Business:

Nominations and elections: Lia reported that February, 2023, will be her final meeting as an SRC member. Elections for chair and vice chair will be held at the December meeting. Nominations for both positions can be forwarded to Lia, Pat, and Amanda; no need to forward resumes. At the December meeting, prior to voting, nominees will have a few minutes to speak to everyone about their interest and qualifications.

SRC goals and priorities, which was on this agenda, will be discussed at the next meeting.

Sub-Committee Updates:

Lia stressed the importance for members to participate on one of the sub-committees. She reminded everyone that those pending appointment can still join a committee, just not chair, until their appointment is confirmed. She encouraged everyone to take part.

Ad hoc committee for the 2023 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA)

The State Rehabilitation Council's Comprehensive State Needs Assessment Committee consists of Clark King & Vito DeSantis SRC members and Pat McKenna, Assistant Director and Amanda Gerson, Director VR Services. Two meetings of the committee were convened on September 12 and October 14, 2022. At these meetings, the following were discussed and acted upon:

1. The purpose of the CSNA and the SRC's responsibilities under the regulations were identified.
2. Different vehicles of collecting information were discussed and the committee decided to utilize the same survey method used in the previous CSNA with the possibility of follow-up focus groups on each discipline.
3. Targeted groups were identified
 - a. Transition Aged Students
 - b. Individuals with the most significant disabilities
 - c. Veterans

- d. Individuals who are Deaf/Blind
 - e. SRC and Consumer Advisory Board members
 - f. CBVI Staff
 - g. Non-English-speaking individuals
4. A Request for Proposal was reviewed and approved to solicit research organizations who could administer and interpret the results of the survey.
 5. It was decided that the survey questions would be similar to those questions from the previous CSNA with the addition of questions meant to determine CBVI's "Brand" among consumers, stakeholders, and staff.

The committee will develop additional questions based upon a list of potential values. The committee will continue to correspond via e-mail to provide input into the survey and then follow-up with a Zoom call.

Business Engagement Committee: Chairperson is still needed. John O'Connell offered to work on this sub-committee.

Policy and Procedure Committee: (previously reported - Ida Behreini offered to chair this committee; Vito DeSantis and Pamela Aasen offered to assist.)

Quality Assurance Committee: Clarke King, Chairperson, noted no new updates. Members are needed for this sub-committee. (At a previous meeting Alice commented that she had offered to work on this committee; please keep her updated on any future meetings.)

SRC Annual Report Committee: (previous meeting: Katie Donnellon, Chairperson. Vito Desantis noted interest in participating; Lia was to follow up with Pam and Ida.)

Announcements/Comments/Old & New Business:

Amanda Gerson: Any members receiving an appointment letter from the Governor are asked to submit a copy to Pat or Amanda. Amanda asked Susan to follow up with Gwen to see if she received an official notification yet.

Lia commented that to see a list of current employment opportunities at the Department of Human Services (and CBVI), you can Google - NJ Department of Human Services employment opportunities, the site is readily available.

Anyone that knows of any qualified candidates, particularly Teachers of the Visually Impaired, and Orientation and Mobility Specialists, was encouraged to contact CBVI's Human Resources Department.

Adjournment

Vito DeSantis made a motion to adjourn today's meeting; Kathleen Spata seconded the motion; all were in favor. The meeting was adjourned by 12 noon.

Lia thanked everyone for their participation at today's meeting.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled December 9, 2022.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper

Christine Cooper

CBVI – Administrative Assistant