**N.J. Commission for the Blind &Visually Impaired**

**State Rehabilitation Council**

Meeting Minutes – February 5, 2016

Joseph Kohn Training Center - 130 Livingston Avenue - New Brunswick, NJ

**Voting Members Present:** Jennifer Armstrong, Rick Fox, Susan Head, Zoraida Krell, Fran Leibner, Titus Massey, Kelly Reymann, Fr. Jim Warnke

**Voting Members Absent:** Kirk Lew, Dawn Monaco, Kris Tucker

**Ex Officio Present:** Dan Frye, Danielle Licari-Scorzelli

**Staff/Members of Public Present:** Robert Paige, John Walsh, Dan Faccinhi

The meeting was called to order at 9:30 a.m., Fr. Jim Warnke, Chairperson, welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending. He announced that the meeting was being held in compliance with Section 105 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act 1973, as amended. It is also in compliance with the New Jersey Open Public Meeting Act, NJSA 10:4-6.

After giving members a few minutes to review the December 4, 2015, Minutes, and hearing no corrections or additions, a motion to approve these Minutes was requested by Fr. Jim. On a motion made by Fran Leibner and seconded by Kelly Reymann; the Minutes were accepted as received.

Dan welcomed Dan Faccinhi, who is a member of the Elected Committee of Blind Managers and a member of the public for purposes of today’s meeting.

Members were given a tour of JKTC. Everyone agreed that the staff were very friendly and inspiring; they seemed excited about their roles at the Center. Danielle commented that she is noticing a big change in the clients; they are really enjoying themselves, and the program is more vocational focused. Kelly commented that Del’s enthusiasm is contagious; positive environment to be in; consumers excited.

**Federal and State Update**

Dan commented that the State Employment and Training Commission (SETC) on which he sits, on behalf of Acting Commissioner Beth Connelly, is the entity responsible for approving NJ’s combined State Plan under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). He explained that he is on that Board to make sure Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), in terms of blindness, is represented in the dialogue the SETC has. One of the objectives of the SETC was to identify a new entity that can give it advice and policy guidance on disability matters. Since Title IV of WIOA is all VR, inevitably if the SETC is administering WIOA the way it should be, disability will occasionally arise. The SETC reached out to the SRCs of both CBVI and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) to ask both bodies to serve as council on matters related to disability policy; a resolution acknowledging both councils as such was adopted at their January meeting. Fr. Jim and Peggy Englebert, SRC Chairperson for DVRS, were there to observe the vote and to offer initial introductions. Fr. Jim made a point, as he was being invited to undertake this role on behalf of the SRC, to ensure that the exchange and relationship would be reciprocal and not simply the SRC offering advice when it was solicited. So the SETC has acknowledged this Council, and that of DVRS, to serve as a policy conduit on matters of disability.

Dan reported that he and John have been actively engaged in making sure CBVI is fairly represented in the State Plan (300 plus page document), which covers all aspects of WIOA. The combined State Plan for NJ should be out for public comment within the next week or two. The CBVI portion of the combined State Plan is current and reflects the strategic direction of our organization; it outlines what we promise to try and achieve over the next 4 yrs. We were invited to be part of the exercise because CBVI is in the Department of Human Services (DHS), and most other WIOA related things are not. Dan commented that he was a little nervous that we might find ourselves dis-enfranchised, but with a little bit of advocacy we were graciously included in all aspects and given an opportunity to give CBVI related language for inclusion in the State Plan. The SETC will vote to approve the State Plan on March 29; it was initially going to vote on February 16, but that was delayed. The Secretaries of Education and Labor have moved the deadline to receive the State Plan to April 1. The State Plan generally outlines our strategic direction, as well as some specifics of what CBVI will do across the WIOA community to be of help, including providing training on blindness and vision impairment, and deaf blindness to the broader one-stop services that exist in the job network in the State. While we will not co-locate because of our numbers, we will certainly adopt measures to bridge and build a stronger relationship with the broader workforce community. Dan reported that he was 1 of 14 in a gubernatorial delegation to attend the WIOA National Convening, which occurred in Washington, DC. Dan noted there was a significant spirit and optimism in the room that this cross-disciplined approach to insuring that America has a vibrant and robust employment system does work. Although sometimes inspiration can simply be generated by a gathering of mutually enthusiastic people, he left feeling hopeful that WIOA would offer advantages. There will be challenges because there are commonalities that some of our partners and VR do not share, but he is looking for the advantages because that’s the way to move forward.

The Commission has been deeply immersed in reviewing and modifying our education policy. We have been working diligently to review the NJ Administrative Code 10:92, which governs Education policy; we are excited to have made some substantial changes. That language is now at the DHS and will soon be with the governor. Presumably after that, it will be published in the NJ Federal register for comment. Dan noted that he is not authorized to talk about what’s in the rule until it is public, so simply know we have devoted a lot of time to revising, modernizing, and rendering more accurate information of what we will do in blindness education. We have made substantial changes to the structure of our blindness education component within the Commission; it is now a statewide unit, led by newly appointed Director of Blindness Education, Eva Scott. Ms. Scott is scheduled to attend an upcoming SRC meeting. In addition to dealing with 10:92, she is being tasked with reviewing internal policies and making sure they are in good shape. All of this will be reviewed by the Education Reform Taskforce (ERT). This Taskforce consists of parents, staff, teachers, supervisors, managers, reps from the academic community in Special Ed, and the like. Very diverse group of people that have informed the development of 10:92 and continue to work with us to move our education practices in a forward direction.

The Students Hands-on Alternatives Reinforcement Project (SHARP), summer program to infuse blindness skills to children in grades 1-8, is in preparation for its second summer. Changes to the program have been made this year to improve upon what was done last year. Last summer we served 59 students; this year there will be room for 90 students. We try to provide instruction in braille, travel, reading, and using all alternatives that help blind or vision impaired people succeed in the context of living and recreation. One of the changes being made this year, instead of having all the students participating in a 4-week program there will be 2 sessions, 3 weeks long, for children in grades 1-4 and then grades 5-8; so there is more age appropriateness, smaller range. Because the program is going to be shorter in length we are going to limit the number of students to come so we can provide a more intensive experience. Rick asked if transportation will be provided. Dan commented that he made a decision to rent vans/cars, and to assign and hire summer driving staff for this purpose, so any student who wishes to participate is picked up at home, or a mutually convenient stop where 2-3 students can be picked up at once. Fr. Jim commented that it always pleases him when he hears anyone running a program tries to improve it the following year. Zoraida pointed out this program offers a first step of independence; so great.

Dan reported that the Coordinator of Independent Living (IL) and Clinical Services at CBVI, Liz DeShields, with the support of an intern from DHS, is working diligently on preparing a new draft of NJAC 10:93, which governs our IL program. Dan noted, prior to his arrival at CBVI, that rule was permitted to simply lapse; this was unfortunate because now we have to create it as though it were new. We have continued to function under the existing rules, and the programs have continued to be effective, but he wants to make sure 10:93 is back on the books and is modified and amended to be consistent with the new federal rules that govern IL and ILOB (Independent Living Older Blind). The IL program was moved from Education to Dept. of Health and Human Services; Independent Older Blind program retains its place at the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in DOE. Expect to have 10:93 to share with the SRC in the spring; perhaps a policy subcommittee will be given an opportunity to look at it.

Rick asked how the 10:93 program is funded. Dan explained that we do receive federal dollars for the ILOB program. IL receives money at the state level, which is not governed by the federal government at all. We use that for provision of O&M and other blindness related services for people who are not seeking employment, but who do require skill sets in order to function. Finally, we receive a very small portion of an IL grant that is federally funded and is shared with us and DVRS. That is money that is largely governed by the IL program that creates the IL centers; we are invited to use those dollars for programs consistent with IL movement.

Similarly, 10:97, which governs the Randolph Sheppard Program, expires in December, 2016. Again, in order to have it go through all of the public processes and get approval from our federal partners, we need a new draft of that by July/August. Dan commented that he will be meeting with the elected Committee of Blind Managers and the Randolph Sheppard staff, newly managed by Deacon Truesdale. 10:97 will be shared with SRC prior to moving it forward.

Dan reported that the Agency is making strategic hiring a priority. We are about halfway through with hiring the members of our new Welcome & Evaluation (WE) team, which will be the triage team that will receive inquiries from all consumers for all services provided by the Commission to ensure a measure of uniformity that everyone gets when they first interact with the Commission. The WE team will then determine where to refer people for services. Similarly, we are going to be hiring or reassigning several of our seasoned VR counselors to be business relation specialists in a Business Relations Unit we are establishing to cultivate a stronger relationship with the business community that ultimately promises to ensure more employment opportunities. WIOA requires that we start to identify more closely with business, and the adoption and development of a business relations unit is going to be responsive to that legislative directive. Dan noted that yesterday we had a visit from reps from the Institute on Community Inclusion ICI) at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. We won a grant as one of 11 VR agencies across the country to get intensive technical support from ICI, to help us develop the protocols and internal infrastructure for creating this business relations unit. Hope to have this Unit up and operational by early May.

In terms of hiring, Amanda Gerson, who served as the Supervisor of our Technology Services Specialists, has been promoted to Coordinator of VR and Transition Services. This will free John Walsh up to play a broader second administrative role at my direction. We will be backfilling her TSS supervisory role. We are also hiring a day to day supervisor for the Meyer Center.

Once those people are put into place, the Commission’s leadership team will have been refashioned and ready to go.

We will backfill any changes to direct line staff that may result from promotions that are imminent, so that we are as fully staffed as a state agency can be in the environment in which we operate.

**VR Unit Report**

John commented that under WIOA we have to look at the business community as a secondary customer of the Agency. Counselors currently interact with the business community; however, it’s not a coordinated effort. Each individual counselor has a particular different style of how they engage with employers and the business community. One of the first objectives of the new Business Relations Unit will be to have a coordinated method of how we do this type of business engagement. The VR counselors who will be working in this unit will no longer have a caseload; their caseload will be the business community, as well as interfacing with our counselors and consumers to be that bridge to provide services to employers around accessibility issues; around general disability issues; about retaining folks in their workforce that may have a disability, and getting them connected to the proper resources. Even if we’re not the place to give them the service, we certainly want to make sure that we work collaboratively with our sister agency DVRS to make sure we are addressing what the business community concerns are. We know we are experts on assistive technology at the Commission, and we could certainly help them give them value added additions to their business; even just looking at their website; how’s their portal to the community; is it accessible to a community that they may have been neglecting, which may improve their bottom line. Ultimately, the second piece is to improve our employment outcomes so we have more options for our consumers around quality jobs. Part of our mission in working with the ICI was setting up the performance metrics to move the Business Relations Unit forward. The first thing we are looking at is does the job offer an opportunity for a career pathway; does it have opportunity for advancement in a particular job. We’d also like to see that folks are working 32 hrs. or more in a job, and we looked at a baseline wage of about $15/hour; we would also like to see more of our employment outcomes have benefits associated with them. We are going to finalize those performance metrics and others. We are also looking at what are the variety of jobs we’ll be getting for individuals; does it really represent the full diversity of the workforce. ICI is expected to use their resources to get us some evidence based practices from other States that are a little bit more advanced than us in performing business relations duties.

John reported that Work Skills Prep, another summer program, is entering its 11th year. We want to give those alumni of the program additional supports so they are able to find jobs when they get out of HS. Kelly has devised a model around what we’re calling the WSP alumni program, developing a cadre of job developers throughout the State that are basically using staff that have been part of the summer program. Every year when we look at the list of employers it keeps growing, so we want to also capitalize on that. We want to connect people in communities where the student is, and they may have some natural networking opportunities they can capitalize on, but we want to be able to get that information back to some type of a centralized database to know who we are talking with. John reported that the Agency is looking at a software program called Salesforce, which is all about the sales call, how you engage someone at a particular business, and how you track that information. A demonstration with a salesperson from Salesforce, to show us the capabilities of the software has been arranged. Jennifer commented that the company she works for uses Salesforce. She noted that it is very user friendly; brings you through the whole sales process; all about initiating information and maintaining information. John noted that many VR agencies across the country are looking and have used Salesforce. Rob commented that he thinks you need a license for it; so depending on how many users you utilize, each will need a license that is renewable every year; so there will be a cost. John commented that’s something that could be a point of collaboration between our 2 departments; we know DVRS is also another part of those 11 states that applied for the ICI grant and are working on a Business Relations Unit as well.

John noted that we very much want to make sure our consumers are part of the national employment team this year, which is operated by the Council of State Administrators and Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR). They have a national database called the Talent Acquisition Portal (TAP). Kathy West Evans runs that initiative and has started to develop relationships with various large corporations throughout the country. They have expressed the desire to include our consumers as part of their talent pool. TAP is a way to maintain a database to connect employers that are hiring, and for us to upload resumes of eligible consumers; try and make matches between the jobs. We are hoping, by using the talent acquisition portal, that we can now expand our scope to a national scope. We also want to make sure we have discussions with the Office of VR in Pennsylvania; they have a very active business relations unit; there may be some cross fertilization there. Certainly we’d want to have discussions with NY and possibly Delaware to see if we could have some type of regional business relations collaborative. One of the key points of the national employment team was that VR is a single brand; it provides certain services – for the employer it doesn’t matter if its PA, NJ, or NY; its really about getting qualified people to fill a job or business need. John noted that this will be an exciting project over the next year; having the assistance of ICI, who will take us through this period and connect us with really effective programs. We hope to have a pretty robust Business Relations Unit by the end of the year.

Titus asked if the VR positions used to form the unit will be backfilled, or will the workload be absorbed. John noted that these positions will be backfilled; we actually had to bring on additional VR positions as the staff moving into the Business Relations Unit are maintaining their title, they will just have a different role. John noted that we’ve also done statewide and regional posting for additional VR counselors and had a good response.

Kelly commented that she would be happy to initiate a subcommittee to work on advising the Business Relations Unit. Jennifer, Danielle, and Zoraida noted their interest in serving on this subcommittee as well. The Chair entertained a motion to establish such a subcommittee under the chairmanship of Kelly Reymann. Rick Fox so moved; seconded by Zoraida Krell. Everyone was in favor of developing this subcommittee. John commented that he would appreciate the assistance as we put this Unit together.

**Strategic Plan**

John updated members on the status of the Strategic Plan. He reminded everyone that the Plan revolves around 6 core initiatives: 1) service delivery redesign 2) education reform 3) improving our employment outcomes 4) improving communications both internally within the agency and externally with the public 5) developing our Human Resources and Staff Development components 6) developing external partnerships.

Service Deliver Redesign: we want to bring on a Welcome & Evaluation (WE) team as the first point of contact. We are on our way to staffing it fully with seasoned and new staff; they will be infused throughout the service centers. The Business Relations Unit was another piece of the redesign. Also want all counselors to be trained on customized employment techniques and we are having our last training in March, which focuses on employer engagement.

Education Reform: biggest objective was reforming our Administrative Code, which is now going to translate into reforming our policies & procedures. Getting teachers more engaged in IEP meetings; teaching them about writing objectives; what the law says and IDEA; what is their role in the IEP. We’ve already had training with someone from Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN). Eva has been doing small sessions with individual TVIs.

Employment: we are looking to develop a career exploration center out of the Newark office. We are setting up 4 computer work stations; a career lab, to help consumers identify where their interests are. We will set up resume workshops, as well as other type of activities that are very focused on getting consumers to engage in more employment opportunities. If this model is successful, we’ll try to replicate it in our other service centers.

Communications: we have a sub group - Kelly Reymann is involved with that as well. We want to develop a new Agency portfolio that highlights all the good work we do. The group has developed a first draft that our PR staff at the Commission will look at; potentially have it go through DHS for review; hoping to have some new marketing materials.

Human Resources: there’s been a lot of reform about how we hire new staff. All final hiring decisions must come through Dan. We’ve also become stricter about methods of interviews; always use committees, not just one person. We also have a set line of questions and a scoring system to assure there is an equitable way of hiring. Also, HR staff screen all candidates to make sure we are getting the most qualified. Also looking to make improvements in Staff Development. Going to have to be creative; not a lot of money in this budget. Hope to have more training. We are using E learning; opportunities come up for various webinars - some for free; offered on a national basis; some nominal charge. Looking to develop a supervisory forum for line supervisors working together to be more effective as supervisors. Dan noted that the 2nd CBVI statewide staff development seminar will be held sometime in the Fall; all 300 staff will be invited; key noted by a nationally acknowledged speaker. This will be an opportunity for the Commission as a single entity to know one another and develop some gelled culture.

External partnerships: points of collaboration in various endeavors. We will end our transportation contract at the end of August and we got the word out we were looking to redo. We found the DHS is working with Treasury to develop a new Request For Proposal (RFP) for a logistics company that would arrange with different transportation vendors instead of specific contracts with 1-2 vendors; we will contract with the logistics provider and they will contract with transportation companies. We are hopeful this will give us a much larger array of transportation providers and it is a Department wide contract, so it gives us more of a scale as well. We were able to get Commission specific language into the RFP; hopefully by June we will identify a new logistics coordinator agency to do our transportation.

Rick proposed that a member of the Public Relations Department at the Commission report to an upcoming SRC meeting to engage in conversation about how their work might be enhanced and supported. It was decided this will be set up for the Fall of this year. In the meantime anyone with ideas was asked to forward them to Dan.

**Subcommittee Reports**

Resource Committee: Danielle reported on an additional resource she found called “Travel Eyes”. It’s based in the UK and arranges travel tours; blind travelers are paired up with a sighted traveler, who gets ½ off on their tour.

John asked for Danielle to send him a first draft of the resource guide so we can start to organize it. The ultimate goal is to post on intranet; helpful tool to get out there.

Evaluations: Rick noted that this committee has not met since the last meeting; nothing to report.

SRC Annual Report Committee: John reported that a copy of the annual report was given to RSA by Dec 31; the next piece is to create a glossy version with pictures; we distribute to the community as a public relations tool. We are ahead of schedule this year; we now we have a second draft to review; hoping to be able to send out a version to the SRC before we send to the printers. Hopefully will get it printed by early March.

**New Business**

SRC to develop several additional subcommittees. One would be a policy subcommittee, which every SRC should have, that can help review policy. The subcommittee would have 2 or 3 members to thoroughly review a policy and make a recommendation to the SRC. Fr. Jim offered to serve as Chairperson; Susan Head and Rob Paige offered to also serve on this sub-committee.

John noted that this committee would be critical in relation to the role out of WIOA. We will have to undertake revising Administrative Code that oversees VR. John noted that he will get those materials (10:95 & 10:97) to Fr. Jim, who will then communicate by phone or email with this sub-committee about how to divide up the labor. Fr. Jim asked that these documents be sent to him in Word as it is easier to read.

**Presentations**

Certificates of appreciation were presented to Dorothy Doran and Titus Massey for their service on the SRC. Titus is leaving after 2 terms; his significant contribution was recognized.

**Announcements**

Fran Leibner reviewed several administrative and personnel changes within the Department of Education. Perkie Cannon has left State service; she will be replaced; she was formerly a Special Education consultant (and TVI) at DOE. Susan Martz is now the Chief Learning Supports and Specialized Services Officer/Assistant Commissioner. Peggy McDonald is now the Acting Deputy Chief Learning Supports and Specialized Services Officer. John Worthington is now the Acting Director of the Office of Special Education Programs. Anyone with any questions about these changes was invited to e-mail Fran and she offered to find out how to direct their question.

**Adjournment:**

A motion was made by Rick Fox, and seconded by Susan Head, to adjourn the meeting. All were in favor; meeting was adjourned. The next SRC meeting is scheduled for Friday, April 15, 2016 at the Joseph Kohn Training Center.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christine Cooper

CBVI – Administrative Assistant