

# State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

December 9, 2022

Seattle, Washington

Attendance – all members attended via videoconference

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***Council Members Present:***

Andy Arvidson, Cathy Wilson, Christopher Zilar, Jacob Kamaunu, Jen Bean, Jill McCormick, Julie Brannon, Julie Harlow, Kris Colcock, Kristin Geary, Linda Wilder, Michael MacKillop, Bek Moras, Sara Logston, Sean McCormick

***Council Members Absent:***

Chris Alejano, Larry Watkinson

***Staff and Visitors Present:***

Meredith Stannard, Yvonne Verbraak, Tricia Eyerly, LaDell Lockwood, Joe Kasperski, Doug Burkhalter, Kim Canaan, Sophie Watson, Dr. Adrian Thompson, Cheryl Cummings, Sheri Richardson, Dr. Sashil Oswal

Call to Order and Agenda Review: Julie Brannon, Chair

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Meeting was called to order at 9:00 AM. All parties on the call introduced themselves for the record. Meredith and Yvonne reviewed Zoom protocols for asking questions and accessible commands. Julie reviewed the agenda for today's meeting.

Announce dates for the 2023 SRCB meetings

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March 10, June 9, September 15, and December 8. All scheduled for 9am-12pm via Zoom. Yvonne will send the 2023 meeting dates to the State Register.

Approval of September 2022 Minutes

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Christopher moved and Kris C. seconded to accept the September 2022 SRC Meeting Minutes. Motion passed.

## SRC-B Annual Election: Christopher Zilar

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Elections for the 2023 SRCB Chair and Vice-chair were held according to the By-laws. Julie Brannon was re-elected Chair, and Linda Wilder was re-elected Vice-chair. They both ran unopposed.

## Executive Director's Report: Michael MacKillop

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Michael said his report today will include giving historical context to the new Council members on topics discussed over the past couple of years.

Michael is on the SRCB as a non-voting member. He gives the Executive Report at each quarterly meeting. Members can let him know if there's anything specific they want to know. Have brought in other staff to explain specific programs. The Council is DSB's connection to the community, even for non-VR topics. DSB relies on the feedback and each member's area of expertise, may not hear of these things otherwise. This feedback and input enables DSB to continue improving the customer service provided to participants. DSB provides the Council with a Quarterly Report, and the stories shared remind us all why we do this work. Feedback on the report is welcomed.

Michael's background includes serving as Acting Executive Director from January 2020 to April 2022, and as Deputy Director, Assistant Director, Regional Area Manager, and AT Specialist prior to that. In all he has 22 years at DSB; he has seen lots of change even in just the last two and a half years.

Some impacts to the agency in recent years include:

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, otherwise known as WIOA, came out of the Reauthorization of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Law was enacted in 2014 and implementation began in 2016, and everyone is still trying to figure it out, it's an ongoing process. WIOA says have to look at business as a customer of VR, to connect participants to jobs. DSB needs to build relationships and know where the jobs are.

WIOA also directed VR agencies to set aside 15% of their Federal VR grants to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). Prior to the change DSB served about 50-60 children and families a year, now it's increased to 350 a year. The effect of this change, however, resulted in reducing money available for adult VR services. There are precise Direct services we can provide using Pre-ETS funds, and while Michael feels it's over complicated DSB is learning to work with it.

Due to the reduced adult VR monies, DSB's costs were more than resources available and had to implement Order of Selection (OOS) in October 2018. This really impacted numbers, people chose not to apply and go on a wait list. DSB was able to open all wait list categories in early 2020.

Technically DSB is still in OOS, forecasting shows funding is good for at least the next two years unless there is a huge spike in applications. That possibility is why DSB is keeping OOS in place. Have to rewrite the State Plan every four years, and update it every two. It takes about six months to implement OOS. Michael's goal is not to have to use it again, but need to understand what it is.

VR can provide services as necessary (sometimes there are disagreements with participants about what is necessary), but have to provide these services for all people already in plan. The agency has to plan ahead to ensure these funds are in place, and that's where OOS can assist.

Christopher asked – What would be unnecessary services? Michael clarified that he meant there can be disagreements between the participant and the VRC. OOS does not impact the necessary services provided in the VR plan, DSB can't save money by not providing a service.

Sara commented that from her own experience and talking to others, it seems that DSB is inconsistent in the services provided. She'd like to know how it's determined who gets what. Michael said that DSB provides individualized services so it will vary what services are provided to each person. DSB works with the individual to determine the tools that they need to succeed on their pathway, there is no cookie cutter solution. This is part of the Rehab Act law. Michael said one performance measure he is proud of is that the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quarter after exit with employment number is consistent which shows folks are staying in their job. DSB does a good job of helping participants reach their employment goal, which results from having the individualized service plan. He understands if participants talk and compare what they are getting that they may be frustrated by that and not understand why it's not the same for everyone.

Jill asked – She works at PAVE and they kind of represent that transition age component of youth services. What are some barriers to providing transition services and spending the money set aside? Michael said it's a very complicated issue, but he will say that the general VR issue for working with youth under 18 is that there was no experience prior to WIOA. DSB had been providing these services all along even when there was little funding. Getting families involved and educating them to involve the youth in the family labor, not treating them differently, and having expectations of them, exploring careers, etc. Majority of the services are provided in-house which costs less money. Blindness is a low incidence disability, and 15% of the VR grant is a lot of money to spend towards Pre-Employment Transition Services for blind agencies.

Sean commented that transition services overlap with education funds too. From an educator's perspective there seems to be an awareness gap between what services are needed, the folks who need them, and who should provide them. Michael replied that due to not having enough staff to visit schools monthly and the low incidence rate, there may be students missed who could benefit from services. With the loss of funding for serving youth under 14, that increases the difficulty in reaching students. DSB is working to increase awareness with TVIs (Teachers of the Visually Impaired) of how DSB can work together with them to support a student.

Kris C. asked – Has noticed a growing separation between "others" and the "able-bodied". How can DSB ensure we are serving blind youth in a manner that embraces inclusion and not being separated out as "other", what role can Pre-Employment Transition Services play in that? Michael replied that he appreciates that and agrees that we don't want to always keep them separate. DSB tries to strike a balance because some students don't have ready connection to other blind and low vision students, and that peer to peer interaction is critical for learning self-advocacy skills.

DSB is always looking for ways to interact and to partner with the general VR agency, but we are prohibited from providing anything to students who are not potentially eligible for DSB services.

Michael said that hits the highlights of WIOA, and hoping folks can see how much that impacted and changed DSB's work. There are hundreds of data points to be tracked and reported on now, and staff get frustrated by the amount of time that has to be spent documenting and entering data now instead of working with the participant. Addressing this in 2023 by looking at ways that DSB can shift some of the data entry duties off the counselors so they can focus more on their counseling role rather than case management.

Many staff changes at DSB in past several years, including leadership. Saw a bump in retirements after implementing the new business management system Aware in 2019, then again during the pandemic. Many of these folks had decades of knowledge that went with them when they left. Many new staff at DSB and the knowledge transfer has been a challenge. Have seen a lack of blindness context/awareness, Michael really appreciates consumer orgs offering to do training, and having staff attend their conventions. Challenge to build back DSB expertise.

Dr. Sashil Oswal (Professor of Human Centered Design and Engineering at UW) asked for details of programs DSB offered for students using the 15% set-aside. Michael gave examples of three programs DSB offered this year that focused on Work Based Learning Experiences. These included: YES2 in Seattle where students work at paid jobs for six weeks throughout the city. It's been shown that students who get paid jobs become adults who get paid jobs; YES1 which includes job shadowing; and Bridge at EWU which gives students the college experience. In addition there are one-off workshops offered throughout the year such as job panels featuring folks who are blind or low vision doing all sorts of work and answering student questions. In 2022 one of the panels included blind scientists who work at NASA.

Dr. Oswal asked how DSB is engaging the community to know about services available and connecting to employers. Council member Kristin Geary works at Washington Vocational Services (WVS) and employers can contact her. She provides workplace skills needed to individual students, and part of her work is to match up interested employers and potential employees.

The COVID pandemic greatly impacted the agency. Learned that some services can be delivered remotely with success, such as remote Braille instruction; and some are not successful remotely such as Orientation and Mobility. Also experienced more staff turnover during this time.

RSA Monitoring in March 2022. Biggest result was being told DSB can no longer use Pre-ETS funds to serve youth under 14 years old. No other funds available to serve that population so DSB has submitted a Decision Package to the Governor to ask for state budget funds. Minor fiscal items noted from the monitoring but no report yet to know actual findings. One item highlighted is that DSB has a large number of participants who exit as non-rehabilitated without employment. Was impacted by OOS and the pandemic, but the high numbers continue. DSB has been aware this is an issue, and need to figure out why and make changes to increase number of exits with

employment. Michael said one challenge in sharing this information with staff is making sure it's understood that it's no one's fault, and no blame is being laid. Also to remember that there are many things DSB is doing well and doesn't need to change. However, we do need to identify where there are areas that we can change to increase employment outcomes.

DSB's mission is Independence, Inclusion, and Economic Vitality for our participants. And historically the values have been teaming, customer focus and individualized services, having high expectations and belief in the individuals we serve, leadership at all levels, and creativity and adaptability. With all the changes happening, what are our values now, and is it time to reevaluate them? There is a lot of new staff and there may be some values we hadn't considered before that can be added. Just as important, how are we acting on these values?

There is national attention on Vocational Rehab as well. Congress is frustrated with the amount of federal VR grant money being returned each year unspent. (Note that DSB does spend all their dollars or as close to it as possible.) In the past two years there has been \$500 million returned nationally. Why continue to fund VR if it's not being spent?

VR agencies have a state match requirement, for every one dollar the state provides the feds will match it with four; this increases to a one to ten dollar match for IL funds. This comes with a Maintenance of Effort (MOE) requirement which means DSB has to receive the same amount of state funds as we had two years prior to avoid penalties. DSB had a temporary bump in state funds several years ago due to receiving budget money for an IT project, and incurred a \$700k penalty from RSA for not meeting the MOE requirement in the next year. Fiscal explained the situation and asked for an exemption of the penalty which was approved.

The other frustration from Congress is that employment rates for VR are not going up. Labor participation rate needs to increase, and DSB needs to improve performance. DSB does fairly well as a Blind agency compared to other VR agencies, but the Washington state rehab rate, including general VR, ranks very low at 45<sup>th</sup> or 46<sup>th</sup>.

DSB has changed the Youth Services program to Pre-Employment Transition Services to serve Students with a Disability age 14 and older only, per the RSA decision during our monitoring in March. Have submitted a Decision Package for additional staff and funds to provide services to youth under 14 years old. DSB has a very small amount of money otherwise to spend on youth aged birth to 13.

Blind Enterprise Program (BEP) – the Randolph Sheppard Act gives blind vending operators priority in government facilities. This model essentially dissolved during the pandemic, workers in government buildings went home in March 2020 and have continued to work remotely, resulting in no customers on site in current model. Received money from the Legislature in the 2023 fiscal year budget to overhaul the program and add more options like micro markets. Did not ask for enough money, and saw hugely increased costs over past year, so submitted a Decision Package to ask for additional money to complete the project as planned. Over half of the BEP operators have

not worked or earned an income in two years or more. Additionally, after two years of closure, the Dept of Health has increased regulations and documentation for food service safety protocols so there is retraining necessary.

Independent Living – funded with money from the SPIL for adults under 55 who are not looking to return to work. Submitted a Decision Package to relieve wait list, and to increase vendor rates to retain and attract vendors. Vendor rates need to be increased regardless, so if we don't get the funding then there will continue to be wait lists for IL services. DSB also has a plan to help address this going forward by creating a career pathway for participants to become IL vendors.

Pro-Equity Anti-Racism, aka PEAR – Accessibility has been a big part of the PEAR conversation across the state enterprise; and Michael is proud of DSB's efforts to make accessibility be understood as a cornerstone of Pro-Equity. Also proud of our initial work in creating a plan for Pro-Equity at the agency with three targeted areas:

1. Looking at our contracts and purchasing for diversity, per the Office of Minority and Women's Business Enterprises (OMWBE).
2. In outreach for the Independent Living program – using culturally appropriate language for meaning of “independent”; in some cultures this is perceived as moving away from the family unit.
3. Looking at the equity in VR services provided by DSB across the state.

Benchmarks for PEAR have been added to the State Employee Engagement survey. Results will help to show how staff are understanding aspects of PEAR and that helps DSB understand what needs to be done to ensure a safe workplace for all, and that we're representative of all the communities that we serve.

Have been enjoying the Community Forums which are held twice a year in Spring and Fall. Have had good conversations and input on improving processes and how to partner earlier with other existing entities to keep participants engaged. Michael appreciates everyone who attends, asks questions, and offers suggestions/feedback.

Christopher added that TVR is also experiencing underspending at the national level and worry about losing funding. This past year Spokane TVR had more exits prior to employment than exits with employment, more than usual and not sure why. Michael replied that if they get any insights to please share; he thinks it's probably still from the pandemic and that people are not as willing to leave their home to seek services or a job.

Kris C. commented that in Kitsap County one of the issue is with public transportation not being available which makes it very challenging to get out and about.

Michael mentioned that Legislation was passed to compensate community volunteers for their time on councils, boards, task groups, etc. Criteria for compensation went out to all SRCB members and anyone who qualifies can self-report to Meredith and Yvonne. Will go into effect January 1.

Yvonne T-M asked about getting an IL provider hired for Whatcom and Island County. Kim C. said it is in the works, may combine with Skagit County to sweeten the pot. Yvonne would like to outreach about IL to the Lummi community. Kim suggested they talk directly about this.

Julie H. commented that she's noticed with the 30-somethings demographic that as they've stopped spending due to the pandemic they are more inclined to stay at home and less inclined to work.

## Public Comment

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No additional comments offered at this time.

## Executive Committee Report: Julie Brannon

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Julie explained that the Executive Committee consists of the Chair and Vice-chair of the council, and the Chairs of the other committees. New members have all been assigned to their committees, and most meet either once a month or once a quarter except for the Policy committee. Julie has been working on her sections for the SRCB Annual Report, and in reviewing her notes saw that it was a very active year for the council. Planning for a training in April to explain more about the history of VR and the SRCB. Andy and Kristin volunteered to be part of the Training committee.

## Membership Committee Report: Linda Wilder

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Linda shared a comment about IL first; Hope Vision Foundation in Tacoma has quite a few low vision aids that are available for folks with low vision in the greater Tacoma area.

Linda gave thanks to Andy and Christopher for their work on this committee over the past year. Introduced five of six new members to the council, Larry Watkinson was not in attendance.

Jill McCormick – Works at PAVE, director of Family to Family Health Information Center. She is excited to participate, sees a lot of intersectionalities with her work and home life.

Julie Harlow – DSB participant. She has started her own business in Health and Wellness Coaching.

Sara Logston – Instructor at WSSB and finishing up her degree to be a TVI. She has a non-profit providing ... Sees students from all walks of life.

Bek Moras – Recently hired as the new WASILC Executive Director. She comes from Alaska most recently, and has multiple disabilities. She is passionate about accessibility at all levels.

Kris Colcock – First Vice-President for NFBW, and on the employment committee for NFB. She is a Work Incentive Practitioner and just signed a contract with DSB to be provide Benefits Counseling.

Julie B offered kudos to Linda and the committee for their success in recruiting the new members.

## Customer Satisfaction Committee Report: Jen Bean

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The job of this council is to be the voice of the customer. The Satisfaction Survey response numbers are increasing slightly, but only ask those customers who have closed their case. Lisa had shared a report with the Council earlier in the year with results from the VR survey sent in the spring to all DSB participants. Jen believes that moving to an annual survey sent to more participants will result in more responses at all stages of a VR case. The state SRC uses WSU to administer their survey, and it includes analysis of the comment responses. Jen has talked to Lisa about this option and the costs, and they are going to explore further. Believe this would result in more useful trend information for the Council. Also, want to include several DEI questions from this committee's work with Nohemy. Jen would appreciate feedback about the survey, and this proposed change.

Kristin commented that the time with Nohemy has been invaluable, especially understanding that the term "independence" is not interpreted the same by all cultures, some think it means to leave the family structure which can be considered a bad thing.

Linda commented that UW used to administer the SRCB Survey. Michael replied that UW ended that relationship.

Jill commented that she is on this committee, and she'd like to see a survey around improving awareness of the student transition process into VR. Jen said they're thinking to do two surveys a year, and that could give an opportunity to ask those kinds of questions.

## Constituent Report – WCB Fall Convention: Julie Brannon

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This is Julie's 4<sup>th</sup> year elected as president of WCB. They've had remote conventions the past two years, and it was great to be back in person this year as well as offering it remotely. Very different experience from remote only! DSB youth and staff attendance fees helped WCB cover the cost of putting on the convention. Julie thanked DSB for past and ongoing support of the WCB conventions. They had 216 in-person attendees and 45 virtual. There was a great employment panel, a self-defense class, a new panel for those new to blindness, talks from DSB, WSSB, and the WTBBL, and much more including a Youth Track collaboration with DSB. They also had an author panel, gave out scholarships and awards, held board elections, worked on organizing a new Leadership Program and new Mentoring Program, and had 22 vendor booths. Offering a hybrid convention was a lot of work and not sure they will do that again.

Sara shared feedback from a few parents that it's hard to do both consumer conventions when they're held on back to back weekends.

Jacob commented that he sat with some parents, and they were excited that their kids wanted to experience and explore the convention on their own.



Julie H commented that the employment panel was very uplifting and motivating. She felt it was the best one in the nine years she's been attending.

## Constituent Report – NFBW Fall Convention: Kris Colcock

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This was NFBW's first in-person convention in two years also with 165 attendees registered. Many guest speakers/presentations including a job seeker, senior seminar, JAWS training, an AARP advocate, a QFC pharmacist who talked about accessible Rx labels, Job seeker seminar covered all aspects of looking for work, resume writing, interviewing, dress code, etc. They offered a Rookie Roundup for those new to attending and/or new to blindness, games night where youth were on their own, a luncheon with parents on their own and youth with mentors, presented scholarships, held a banquet, trivia night, held board elections, presented three scholarships, and had a DEI presentation. Held breakout sessions for blind parents and parents of blind children group, benefits planning, and the students division. The main feedback they heard afterwards is the desire to have more time available for mingling.

Kristin commented that there were so many great things at the convention. She really appreciated the JAWS training offered to educators; it reached a lot of people who didn't know about it. Incredible philosophy discussion held by Jim Portillo.

Sara added that the parent connections made at the consumer conventions are invaluable.

Michael reiterated that the conventions are a great way to get connected to the blind community, and he really promotes DSB staff attendance to them each year.

## Wrap-up/Meeting Adjourned

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Two links were shared during the meeting. [WINTAC Pre-ETS Training](#) and [DSB VR Survey Results](#)

Meeting was adjourned at 12:10pm.