

State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

September 15, 2023

Seattle, Washington

Attendance – all members attended via videoconference

Council Members Present:

Andy Arvidson, Cathy Wilson, Chris Alejano, Christopher Zilar, Jacob Kamaunu, Jen Bean, Julie Brannon, Julie Harlow, Kris Colcock, Kristin Geary, Larry Watkinson, Linda Wilder, Michael MacKillop, Sara Logston

Council Members Absent:

Jill McCormick, Sean McCormick, Bek Moras

Staff and Visitors Present:

Meredith Stannard, Yvonne Verbraak, Tricia Eyerly, Joe Kasperski, Lisa Wheeler, LaDell Lockwood, Kim Canaan, Sophie Watson, Rebecca Rodriguez (SILC), Doug Burkhalter, Phil Faris, Misha Lehmann, Shay Tegner, Kara Thompson, Danette Dixon

Call to Order and Agenda Review: Julie Brannon, Chair

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.

Review dates for the 2023 SRCB meetings

December 8. All meetings are scheduled for 9am-12pm via Zoom.

Approval of June 2023 Minutes

Minutes for the June 2023 meeting are pending and will be sent prior to December's SRCB meeting.

Executive Director's Report: Michael MacKillop

Michael congratulated Linda on her successful recruitment of Council members while she was chair of the Membership Committee.

Incredible IL and OTC stories shared in the current Quarterly Report, he encourages everyone to read it.

Recently had three retirements from the OTC, Kim Massey, Joy Iverson, and Robin Loen, and has been difficult hiring replacements. Still looking for a UAB certified Braille instructor.

BEP updates, the pandemic closed buildings and many are still closed, but starting to see a slight uptick. Robert Ott's café in the OB2 building is getting ready to re-open. The Dome Deli in the Leg building is also close to re-opening, lots of buzz and anticipation. These locations will demonstrate the shift to Micro Markets and more grab and go type items. Food service operations and safety regulations changed significantly in the last three years, which added a lot of work for the operators to complete as part of the re-opening process.

There are more BEP projects coming up. The Legislature authorized about half of the funds that were requested and needed for the BEP overhaul, so DSB has submitted another Decision Package to request the additional funds to complete all of the upgrades that are planned. Legislators will be able to see the changes made already and that should help.

DSB has negotiated with DVR to receive an increased percentage of the State VR grant money, from 16% to 18%, as well as a one-time funds transfer of \$3 million. Now DSB has to ask the Legislature for authority to spend the money. Planning to use the percentage increase to hire more staff, have been short-staffed for many years. Some of the positions include Business Relations staff to help connect to WorkSource training and opportunities; an internal Trainer to support new counselors and staff new to blindness needs; a self-employment/BEP Trainer; need for quality assurance support that was identified after the RSA monitoring; and some additional direct service positions. Not asking the Leg for any more money, we just need authorization to spend what we have.

Christopher commented – Congrats on increasing DSB's share of the VR grant, is there documentation that can be shared? Michael said there is a letter to/from RSA that he can share.

Jacob asked – Is there a chance that self-employment would include inventions? Michael said that it would depend on what it is and can it feasibly be turned into a business. And many qualities are needed from the individual as well to be successful at self-employment. Great questions for a participant to explore with their counselor.

Changing focus now to the State Plan, and updates on progress with the revision and reorg work already underway. The State Plan is a combined four-year document for VR agencies and all of the Workforce Development entities that lays out the goals agreed upon to get people back to work and the plans for reaching those goals. The first section in the State Plan asks for feedback from the State Rehab Council, so the input that was provided by the SRCB is critically important.

Another part of the Plan is the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) which will be completed in early October. The University of Washington Center for Continuing Education and Rehabilitation (CCER) is conducting extensive surveys with participants, staff, and stakeholders to uncover areas of strengths and identify where gaps exist.

The next section is about goals, priorities, and strategies; and information is being pulled from the SRCB Satisfaction survey, performance measures, recent monitoring with Federal partners, and other inputs. The last section is to evaluate agency goals from the last Program Year, and additionally Michael wants to evaluate how well DSB succeeded with stated goals and objectives from the previous State plan. Can list the improvements that have been made towards staff development and training. The last plan included the goal of moving the agency closer to achieving fiscal stability, and Michael feels good about the progress made towards that goal. The Agency will be able to move out of order of selection in the new Plan.

In their feedback, the SRCB identified three categories where they would like to see DSB make improvement. The first one is to increase the number of participants who exit with employment – currently 30% exit with employment and 70% exit before getting employed. Michael said DSB is also focused on that goal, and he wants to see that number flipped in the next two to four years and have 70% exiting with employment and 30% without. DSB can do better supporting participants and remove some of the bureaucracy throughout the process. One part of this is shifting work so the counselors are able to have more meaningful time with each participant.

There is a need to increase clarity and alignment with participants' goals earlier in the VR process. Participants need to understand what is expected of them, their responsibilities, and also their rights. More frequent contact will help with this understanding, and allow for early and ongoing conversations around employment as the goal.

Additionally, need to increase the job readiness of participants, and Michael sees Business Relations as a large part of that. There was a shift that occurred during the pandemic in how people look for work and how businesses hire. DSB wants to identify and create a number of career "paths", as well as create more opportunities for people who just need to find a job as quickly as possible.

Often businesses are more inclined to hire people with visual disabilities when they see them doing the work successfully. This is one reason why internships have been, and will continue to be, a valuable way to expose businesses to DSB participants, and remove any implicit bias that exists.

One challenge identified is the balance of providing training to participants using internal as well as external resources. Need to ensure that people are making good use of the OTC, and that takes ongoing marketing efforts to remind everyone of this important resource for intensive daily skills training. There's a need for more peer support for new and potential OTC attendees from current students, and DSB is working to create that right now.

In addition, there is a call to increase training for external contractors to help them understand the blindness context they're working in, boost their own expectations of what participants are capable of doing, and remove any implicit bias they may have about visual disabilities.

Julie H – Commented that marketing know-how is also an issue for blind business owners. Things like using social media and having materials printed/revised, need for more training and resources.

Kris C – Commented that she's excited to hear about these changes, and especially the self-employment trainer. Many blind business owners have these types of questions that Julie noted.

The second recommendation from the SRCB is around staff development, and Michael agrees that this will continue to be a focus for DSB. It was a goal on the previous State Plan as well. Many new employees due to turnover and retirements, and the old method of relying on senior staff to train and mentor new staff isn't possible anymore. That's part of the reason for adding three training positions, which also fills the need to ensure everyone gets trained with the same information. DSB is working with the blind consumer groups to create training around cultural awareness of blindness, and also with the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) to offer training around the DeafBlind community. Overall, training is an area where DSB is doing better and there continues to be room for improvement, especially with all of the new staff.

Michael appreciated that the SRCB included clarifying the need for medical documentation to determine eligibility. There is a national conversation about this right now. Is there really a need for a doctor's note when the counselor can observe there is an obvious disability? VR agencies want the Federal partners to understand this is a valid way to speed up determining eligibility and get participants receiving benefits much sooner.

The last recommendation from the SRCB is working on the gaps that exist with DSB's service to the DeafBlind community and ways to improve services provided. Michael said DSB has identified this gap as well, and formed a DeafBlind Committee earlier this summer to address it. One goal of the committee is to identify and refer participants to partner agencies in order to provide "wrap-around" services. Another goal is finding ways to help staff become more familiar with deaf and DeafBlind culture, and create resource pages for staff. Michael and Lisa met with leadership of the HKNC and conveyed that this is a focus area for DSB, and they offered their resources and support for the effort.

Michael intends to report out at each quarterly meeting on progress made towards goals and successes in these three areas, 1. Increasing number of exits with employment, 2. Staff development, and 3. Increasing service to DeafBlind participants, as identified for the State Plan by the SRCB. One item to report at today's meeting is that he and Lisa met recently with the Director of the Deaf and Blind Service Center to help them better understand DSB services.

Larry – Asked if the Feds recognize DSB as being a 504 provider or as having a Title II obligation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)? To clarify, under Title II of the ADA there is no need for proof of disability, but under the Rehab Act section 504 it is not specified. Michael said that under the Rehab Act it does say agencies have to document how they know there is a disability, and counselor observation is one way that is listed. Larry said he feels that the two regulations seem to be in conflict with each other.

In the last State Plan DSB committed to building new models of career exploration, and adding a Business Relations Manager has been a part of that, with more to come. Have worked with the American Jobs Centers to help them understand where there might be gaps in working with folks who are blind or low vision. Also, looking to embed some DSB staff at the centers in the future.

Outreach was another goal in the last plan, and is still an area to focus on. It was not a priority during the pandemic and some ground was lost in getting the message out and helping people

understand who DSB is and what services are provided. There are great success stories out there that need to be shared more widely so people can see the ways that DSB can serve participants.

Michael shared there has been a big change made to DSB's Intake process, as part of the ReVision of the VR process to remove bureaucracy and get participants connected to services sooner.

Michael's goal was to have zero days from when a potential participant calls or emails and has an appointment scheduled for the Intake process. Rehab Techs in each region are responsible for taking referral calls, one person dedicated per day on a rotating basis. They can have a conversation with the caller and determine if that person needs Independent Living or Voc Rehab services, and then will either hand off the call to IL or make an Intake appointment within two weeks with a VR counselor.

This change is ultimately about changing the customer experience, if they start off on a good footing then it helps to build a good relationship ongoing. The VR process is very bureaucratic, and Michael doesn't want to put that on the participant. There's no reason to take all the time allowed by the law. The next step he expects to look at changing is the planning process. Currently the plan is not worked on until the participant has had months' worth of assessments done. There is no reason that assessments can't be part of the plan, so when a service or training is recommended it can be provided right away and not have to wait for all of the assessments to be completed and the plan to be written first. This is not the traditional way of Voc Rehab, and so still have to ensure that DSB is compliant with all the Federal regulations, but also focus on the customer experience and make the process work for them too.

Linda – Back to the comment that Julie H made, could DSB start an ongoing training group for blind entrepreneurs? Especially around marketing. Offered kudos for making efforts to work on things that have been suggested as needing improvement.

DSB has a public Town Hall meeting on Zoom scheduled for October 18, 7:00-8:30pm, Yvonne will forward invite to the SRCB members.

Presentation: Kim Canaan, IL Program Manager; Sophie Watson, IL Program Coordinator; and Tricia Eyerly, Assistant Director - HR and Training, DSB

Tricia introduced herself, one of her responsibilities is managing the Independent Living contract with the University of Washington. She works with Kim Canaan, and started monthly meetings with her to learn about IL. They continue to meet and now include Fiscal staff as well. Tricia also sits on the State Independent Living Council (SILC), and has learned a lot from their meetings. Part of the Intake process change includes asking more questions to determine if the customer needs IL or VR services. DSB also revamped the referral form and information being passed along to IL, so the participant doesn't have to keep repeating their story. Currently working on how to do a warm hand-off to IL.

Kim introduced herself, she is the Program Manager for IL, and has been with the program since 2008. Sophie does the day-to-day administrative support of the program. Currently the IL program

has seven contractors with 10 staff providing services. She introduced Sophie, who is the IL Program Coordinator.

Sophie explained that IL services are for adults aged 22 and over who do not desire to work, and have some level of vision loss. IL provides a seamless transition from the under 55 IL program to the 55+ IL program. They will also serve those under 22 if the Pre-ETS program is not appropriate for someone, and will work with a DSB counselor to make that determination. Two-thirds of IL participants still have some vision, and may have other co-disabilities such as hearing loss, mental health disabilities, mobility limitations, and/or cognitive impairments.

The program can provide up to eight hours of direct services towards living independently. That can include skills training for things like using a magnifier for reading, cooking skills, or managing appointments and medication. They offer mobility training and some adjustment counseling to cope with the change in vision. Also can provide a wide range of assistive technology from tactile markers to desktop video magnifiers.

The IL Program gets referrals from DSB, from community members who know about the program, and from other agencies such as the WA Talking Book and Braille Library (WTBBL). Lately they are seeing a lot of requests for help with technology such as smart phones and computers as they've become so ingrained in our daily lives. Once Sophie receives a referral she sends it to the provider for the county where the participant lives, and they contact the person directly. The services are usually provided in the person's home, and on average there will be two to three appointments for a total of four to five hours. People can come back for additional services any time, with no limit to number of times they can open a new case.

Kim explained they have about 10% of participants who return for more services within a year. Often as a result of their success with the training or device they had previously received from IL. Generally, participants are contacted by a provider within two-four weeks, however there is currently a six-month wait list for some areas along the I-5 corridor. They are working hard to fix this and have some solutions they're putting in place. Previously they've only looked for highly trained experienced providers, and want to open the door to more providers who have lived experience. There were areas that were understaffed pre-pandemic, and then the program only provided remote services during the pandemic, so there was a statewide wait list once direct services were being provided again. A number of providers only do IL part-time as they're still working full-time elsewhere. In addition, they are often sole proprietors and do not have support staff in an office helping them out.

Julie B – Asked what are the current qualifications to be an IL provider? Kim said that previously they required a degree for Rehab Teaching and O&M, but now only required for teaching O&M cane skills. During the pandemic they brought on someone who had worked with the Lighthouse in Florida, and this person was very qualified to provide direct IL services. Julie asked if a driver's license or transportation is a requirement? Kim said it is not, they can reimburse the provider for transportation or if they hire a driver themselves. That was a limitation for the program previously, but they can make that accommodation now.

Larry – Asked if IL has a pool of support volunteers? Kim said the program does not have anything formally set up like this. Someone could contact an IL provider directly to see if they would want to have someone volunteer with them.

Kara – Asked if there is any way to get follow-up on what happened with an IL referral made from DSB? There is no formal process, but can follow up with Sophie directly to ask about it.

Kim offered some additional updates from IL. There is a new provider in King County starting in October and that should help with the wait list. Also a new provider coming on to serve Whatcom, Island, and San Juan Counties which are shared with Lighthouse for the Blind, so cases will alternate between the two providers. One thing that's been impacting IL's ability to address all of their areas of work in a timely fashion is that UW recently implemented a new software system that replaces several old systems, and unfortunately it has not gone smoothly. It's been frustrating and very time-consuming to deal with it, and has impacted vendor invoicing and payments. They are hoping it gets easier over the next couple of months.

They've been revamping some of their policies and officially incorporating some things into contracts that were previously understood by vendors but not necessarily spelled out. These include the expectation of contacting a participant within two weeks of getting the referral, and checking in every three months with people who are on a wait list. They're also developing a policy that addresses provider and participant safety concerns; a policy that addresses how to record provider concerns about a participant or if they need to decline providing services; and a policy about what is and isn't appropriate touch when providing direct services.

Sophie added they are looking at setting up a tablet to mimic a computer for those participants asking for more computer/laptop training. They've been setting aside time to provide ongoing professional development for their providers, connecting them to more resources for providing services to participants. A recent presentation was with a Texas company, Computers for the Blind, that provides low cost computers and training for folks who are blind.

Kim reported that IL served about 900 participants this past year. While this is lower than pre-pandemic numbers it is slowly rebuilding. They recently added a provider in the Spokane area, which means more money will be spent on services in that area, instead of travel costs. They are updating the program's Travel Policy and will be including travel reimbursement for drivers or ride shares as alternative transportation options. Also revamping their IL program materials and offering them in eight different languages to hopefully reach more underserved communities.

Linda – Asked about the computer training that Sophie mentioned. She confirmed it is offered when you purchase a computer from the company. They are talking about expanding their offerings in the future.

Lastly, Sophie highlighted the success of the CCTV lending program in partnership with WTBBL, and also their success with the Assistive Technology lending program and placing more hand-held items like magnifiers, text to speech readers, phones, and tablets into people's hands who need them. They plan to do a survey to see if items are still being used, and what they're being used for to inform their next round of purchasing devices for the program.

Julie B – Thanked Kim and Sophie for the excellent overview, it increased her understanding of the IL program. She suggested they connect with the Consumer orgs to help find providers. She'll follow up with Kim to discuss.

Executive Committee Report: Julie Brannon

Julie B reported the committee used a different process for the State Plan work this year. They took input from council members as a committee, identified nine items, and chose the top three to focus on. She asked Council members if they had any feedback about their experience with this process.

Kris said that it was her first time being part of this process and she feels they were able to identify the needs they see as a community, and that they are well represented in the State Plan.

Julie agreed that she enjoyed the process this year also. And was happy to hear that it worked well for Michael, and he appreciated the items that were identified. In addition, it's exciting to see the identified items are things that DSB is already addressing, such as the improved Intake process.

The last part of her report is a reminder that the SRCB will hold elections at the December meeting for Chair and Vice-Chair. She has received two letters of interest so far, Andy Arvidson for Chair, and Kris Colcock for Vice-Chair.

Membership Committee Report: Linda Wilder

Linda reported there is someone interested in applying for her position on the Council. She's sad to go as she's really enjoyed her time and happy that her committee has been able to fill all positions on the Council, for the first time. Currently need to find new members to fill the State Educational Agency and the Workforce Board positions, so if anyone knows someone who'd be interested in either one please let Linda know.

Lisa – Said she knows someone at OSPI and will send the name to Linda. If they're not interested, maybe they can recommend someone.

Julie B asked Kara Thompson to introduce herself. She has applied for the VR Counselor position on the Council that Linda is vacating. Kara said she's been with DSB for 11 years and was with DVR for five years before that, so all of her career has been in Voc Rehab. She recently attended the first Annual Pierce County Work Force Board Convention, so she is thinking about whether she met anyone who might be interested in joining the SRCB.

Customer Satisfaction Committee Report: Jen Bean

Jen is excited to announce that the new set of survey questions have been created, and a copy of them was included with the meeting packet. They've decided to use a five-step scale from Very Dissatisfied to Very Satisfied. The new contract with Washington State University (WSU) includes analysis of comments made. Jen went over the eight "scaled" questions and the six new open-

ended questions. She would like there to be communication with staff when the new survey starts so they can mention it to participants. WSU has a number of methods to ensure the survey is accessible to all users. Jen reminded everyone that this is just the starting point and can review the questions after some time to see if any tweaks are needed.

Jen shared a couple of comments from the last Satisfaction Survey to be administered by Yvonne to exited participants only. Future reports will come from the new survey. There was one comment that a participant was frustrated there are no services available on Fridays. They felt it was too long to wait until Monday if they were having an urgent issue, and that it could impact their job. The other comment was from a participant who felt rushed to close their case as soon as possible once they were employed, and they felt they could have benefited from more training to help them with the new job.

Michael commented that many DSB staff do work a four day/ten hour schedule, and he hears the feedback, as do the Assistant Directors of VR. He noted that both Lisa and Damiana were in the meeting also. The Council has been aware that DSB wanted to split Lisa's position and he was happy to announce that it was offered to, and accepted by, Damiana Harper. She was previously the East Region Area Manager. Lisa is now Assistant Director of VR – Workforce Initiatives, which includes Business Relations, BEP, and Pre-ETS. Damiana is now Assistant Director of VR – Participant Services which includes the VR program, the OTC, and the future Birth-13 program.

SRCB Member Report: Kris Colcock, representing Consumer Advocacy Organization

Kris introduced herself, she is representing the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) where she is the first vice president of the state affiliate, NFBW. Over the summer she was the program coordinator for the NFB BELL (Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning) Academy, and was happy to be part of that successful program. She's been with NFB for 20 years now.

Kris is self-employed, and was excited to hear about a self-employment trainer being added to DSB staff. Her business is called Achieving Access, she is a certified Work Incentive Practitioner, also certified in Braille, and does a little bit of everything. Mainly she's focused on Benefits Planning. She loves working with people and being able to explain that they don't have to go off their benefits cold turkey when they go to work. Navigating the Social Security Administration is very confusing, and Kris likes working out the puzzle pieces with participants to plan how to avoid receiving overpayments after they start working.

Kris believes in the strength of the consumer organizations, not only as support and mentors to each other, but being able to provide help and hope to someone who is new to vision loss or blindness. The organizations are also important to bring attention to, and make changes to, legislation around disability rights and accessibility.

Kris has been coordinating the "Job Seeker" Seminar at the Annual NFBW Convention since 2019. It's a full day seminar that explores all aspects of looking for work. They address questions such as, Where are you looking? How do you find a good fit?; as well as discussing resumes, the value of taking aptitude tests, interviewing tips, interviewing on Zoom, how to network, and other topics.

Tricia commented that she attended the seminar at last year's NFBW convention, and it was very informative and well-presented. She highly recommends it for anyone attending a future convention.

Lastly, Kris mentioned that the next convention will be next year over the first weekend of March. They are hoping to put on a Career Fair, and she'll be reaching out to DSB to discuss participation.

Wrap-up/Meeting Adjourned

Larry – Wanted to mention that his agency, Department of Licensing, is looking for accessibility testers and will pay stipends to do it. Anyone interested can contact Larry, his info is on the SRCB member list that was sent out with the meeting packet.

Meeting was adjourned at 12:00pm.