

State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

September 13, 2024

Seattle, Washington

Attendance – all members attended in-person and via videoconference

Council Members Present: Andy Arvidson, Cathy Wilson, Jen Bean, Julie Brannon, Kara Thompson, Kris Colcock, Larry Watkinson, Michael MacKillop, Sara Logston, Bek Moras, Jacob Kamaunu, Julie Harlow, Liz Stewart, Bill Dowling

Council Members Absent: Kristin Geary, Shawnda Hicks, Christopher Zilar

Staff and Visitors Present: Meredith Stannard, Yvonne Verbraak, Damiana Harper, Lisa Wheeler, Joe Kasperski, LaDell Lockwood, Sophie Watson, Linda Wilder, Colette Arvidson, Crissy Urban, Alco Canfield, Kathy Watkinson, Kim Canaan, Tricia Eyerly, Marci Carpenter, Mary Craig

Call to Order and Agenda Review: Andy Arvidson, Chair

Meeting was called to order at 9:08 AM. All parties in-person and on the call introduced themselves for the record. Meredith and Yvonne reviewed Zoom protocols for asking questions and accessible commands. Meredith reviewed the agenda for today's meeting. Larry raised concern about public meeting compliance and legal implications of excluding the public when transitioning to training for council members during the meeting. It was confirmed the committee decided the scheduled training would be for council members only and not part of council business. It was also recommended to adjourn the meeting before the training began. Michael acknowledged Larry's concern, reassured no business will be conducted during the training.

Review dates for the 2024 SRCB meetings

December 13, 9am-12pm via Zoom.

Approval of December 2023, March 2024, and June 2024 Minutes

Kris moved and Larry seconded to accept December 2023, March 2024, and June 2024 SRC Meeting Minutes, Motion passed.

SRCB Business

December will be the last meeting of 2024, next year's calendar will be set at that meeting.

The question, “We are wondering from all of you who in your life do you admire greatly and what makes you admire them so much?” was asked as an icebreaker and all council members shared their answers.

Executive Director’s Report: Michael MacKillop

Michael started by acknowledging and thanking everyone who showed up for the in-person meeting as well as expressing his appreciation of the sharing of inspiring individuals.

Michael mentioned Tricia Eyerly receiving a Governor’s Award for Outstanding Leadership, one of 23 recipients. He talked about her accomplishments with DSB over the past 24 years, from her beginning as a vocational rehabilitation counselor, to the present as the Assistant Director of HR and Training,

DSB is experiencing a wave of new staff, energy, and ideas. Recognition that traditional methods have not effectively served customers, the need to reassess the effectiveness of the public Vocational Rehabilitation systems. One of the changes was to update the agency’s Mission, Vision, and Values statements, developed through agency-wide input, emphasizing simplicity and clarity.

Mission: Collaborating with individuals who are Blind, Deaf-Blind, or Low Vision to help them thrive

Vision: Creating an accessible future without limits

Core Values:

- Empathy – Understanding individuals’ situations
- Integrity – Providing authentic, transparent, and responsive services
- Collaboration - Building dynamic teams and partnerships

DSB acknowledges past reliance on technical jargon and the need to step back and simplify the language. Not use technical jargon and to question the processes that have been entrenched for decades in the agency on how business is done. Michael emphasized the importance of focusing on individuals’ strengths and passions, and the need to support clients in rebuilding self-belief after experiencing a huge change in vision until they learn to believe in themselves again.

It was noted in the SRCB quarterly report that there was an increase of 12% of people being served in the Independent Living (IL) programs. It also represented an increase in diverse backgrounds, race, ethnicity, and people identifying as having multiple disabilities. Michael highlighted a story of Carly, 79 years old, in Eastern Washington who regained the ability to cook, which is a passion of hers; and an Orientation Training Center (OTC) story of an individual who talked about regaining skills through attending the OTC and receiving services through DSB. They had a paid work experience at the DSB Seattle office front desk, felt more confident about the blindness skills learned, and regained their career path at the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) section also showed an increase in the number of applications and people served during that time frame. There was information about the types of careers obtained, where

they worked, numbers of hours, and salary. Michael is aiming to make data a core part of public reporting, telling the full story while keeping it manageable. DSB is looking to change up how data is presented and shared.

Larry Watkinson asked about the distribution of information to the congressional delegation and state senators.

Michael confirmed the information is always public on the DSB website. He stated that deliberate outreach to all legislators has not been done but is something he would like to do. Mentioned plans for a focused outreach and messaging plan for 2025, and that including legislators would be a part of those plans.

Larry noted many elected officials are eager to learn about DSB's work, shared his belief that outreach could help communicate the positive impact of services for the blind, reflected on his long history with the DSB and advocates for prioritizing outreach.

Michael appreciated Larry's enthusiasm and emphasized there is a need for increased outreach and education about the agency's services.

One of the programs recently started was the Birth through 13 Explorers program, which supports blind youth under 14, and provides connections for youth and their families. Sara Logston has been the backbone of this program, focusing on family workshops and building relationships among families and partners across the state. There have been challenges with federal regulations on funding for younger services, and state funding has been critical to bridge that gap for the Explorers program.

Next is the Workforce Initiative program, led by Lisa Wheeler. It includes the Business Enterprise Program (BEP), Business Relations Program, and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). The Business Relations Program and Pre-ETS connection is to business and the focus of the Workforce Initiative. The BEP is based on the Randolph Sheppard Act of 1936, prioritizing blind vendors in public buildings (all government buildings). The pandemic significantly impacted this program as many customers for the vending operations are now working from home. DSB received state funds and has modernized several facilities, and added micro markets with ready-made, grab-and-go products. The Natural Resources building is another big remodel project, being redesigned to be more functional and budget friendly. BEP is focused on strategic planning for the upcoming year and exploring ways to streamline contracts and identify potential opportunities. A key goal is to train and engage the new generation for emerging opportunities while acknowledging there are gaps in the vending market. New opportunities must be identified that move away from outdated food and service models, and training vendors to adapt to new opportunities and business models.

Larry Watkinson shared personal insights on DSB's focus on BEP, expressing excitement about its potential. He highlighted the challenges faced by vendors during the pandemic and encouraged young individuals to pursue self-employment within the agency.

There are a lot of ongoing activities in Pre-ETS, which are not limited to summer programs. Looking to offer activities, workshops, and work exploration and career exploration, readiness for higher

education year-round. Summer is when students are available for intensive workshops and some traditional programs like youth employment services and the 3T Academy. The 3T Academy (formerly called Bridge Program) is a two-week workshop designed to prepare students for the transition for K-12 to higher education that focuses on self-advocacy to how to advocate for their own accommodation needs in higher education.

The 3 Ts:

- Transform: Change mindset and approach to learning for success
- Transition: Apply new skills to become college and career ready
- Thrive: Integrate everything to succeed in college and careers.

Pre-ETS Specialists are getting training to help them better understand the intricacies of available services and ensuring students are eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services. 98% of Pre-ETS students are VR-eligible customers, which shows the importance and success of the Pre-ETS Specialists and VR Counselors working in tandem. Efforts to obtain data on students with visual disabilities from the state superintendent's office have been challenging but are improving. A new system for acquiring contact information will help connect with more students.

Youth Employment Services (YES2) in Seattle offers paid internships and experiential learning opportunities throughout the year, focusing on teaching life skills such as banking, grocery shopping, and managing transportation. Fifteen percent of grant funding is dedicated to Pre-ETS and DSB has successfully utilized this funding, spending fully this year without concern for underutilization.

Michael stated the LIFTT (Living Independently for Today and Tomorrow) program supports young adults after high school up to age 21. The program is a ten-month, residential program where young adults learn independent living, skills of blindness, get career exploration or take initial classes at Clark College. Located at the Washington State School for the Blind in Vancouver, the new building features wallpaper with inspiring, motivational words in Braille.

Business Relations Specialists have been hired for each region: North Region – King County to the Canadian border, South Region – Pierce County to Vancouver, and the East Region – east of the mountains. The specialists provide real-time labor market data and support recruitment information as well as help bridge communication with businesses. Connections were made with the Washington Workforce Association to establish ties and enhance partnerships with the invitation to meet the directors of twelve Workforce Development Centers. The program manager, Carl Peterson, has been working with the Governor's Committee on Disability Employment and State Human Resources, aiming to expedite recruitment for individuals with disabilities in state enterprise. A survey was conducted last year of 300 state employees with disabilities that identified gaps, challenges, and barriers related to recruitment and retention practices. There is a focus on creating an environment of belonging and improving recruitment and retention practices.

Larry Watkinson wanted to acknowledge that Michael has really stepped up in his role as the sponsor for the statewide Disability Inclusion Network (DIN). Michael's leadership has been crucial in representing the voices of the individuals with disabilities, including those who are Blind, Low

Vision, or Deaf-Blind; significantly raising the visibility of the DIN and fostering unity within the network.

Damiana Harper is the Assistant Director for Vocational Rehabilitation – Participant Services, and has led a pilot program in the North Region since January aimed at reworking how customers are processed within VR. The traditional method of long waiting periods for eligibility and assessment was identified as ineffective. With the introduction of a new system for intake specialists to expedite the process, applicants will be contacted at their initial call and scheduled within two weeks for eligibility assessments. This change has significantly reduced wait times for customers as well as knowing what the next step is with that first call.

The previous method of prolonged assessments kept customers waiting too long before starting services, and developed plan goals before having enough experience for a customer to believe in the highest expectations for themselves. The new approach of milestone planning encourages immediate engagement in services to help build confidence and explore potential, and to more quickly experience what they can achieve. There is an emphasis on creating achievable short-term goals rather than long-term, inflexible plans. Moving away from periodic check-ins to a more proactive approach where counselors assist customers in overcoming obstacles, provide relevant resources, as well as allowing for more meaningful conversations and adjustments to goals as needed. Efforts to reduce the administrative burdens of the counselors are being made to enable them to focus more on coaching and meaningful interactions with their customers.

Damiana expressed her enthusiasm for the milestone planning process. She stated the approach is designed to help set achievable goals rather than overwhelming customers with the end goal. Milestones allow customers to experience accomplishments, fostering confidence along the journey. The process helps staff provide appropriate support, especially for customers considering postsecondary education. The new planning format encourages accountability for both customers and staff, ensuring everyone is invested in the goals. The milestone format will start October 1, whether it is a brand-new customer or time to do a plan review with an existing customer. Damiana acknowledged that this new way to plan is a work in progress and encourages feedback from both staff and customers for continual improvement. By enhancing customer engagement, the goal is to retain more customers and help them achieve meaningful employment.

Julie Harlow shared how three of her fellow students at the Orientation Training Center (OTC) quit college due to not being proficient in computers, specifically using JAWS, and asked if the computer training piece at the OTC has been resolved yet or is it still an issue for students.

Michael acknowledged the critical role of technology and the need for continuous training beyond the OTC, and emphasized the importance of open communication between customers and counselors to address any obstacles, including technology confidence. Suggested forming an OTC alumni association or peer support network to help current students navigate technology challenges, reinforcing the idea that students can benefit from connecting with others who have shared experiences. It was mentioned that both of the blind consumer organizations offer computer training resources also.

Sara Logston added that the Explorers program is incorporating the Center for Assistive Technology so parents know what resources are available, and that they can advocate for technology assistance in the student's IEP meetings.

Projections show DSB is financially stable to cover all anticipated services for current customers. There is an anticipation of tighter financial situations in the future, noting other agencies across the nation are closing categories and creating waitlists due to resource limitations. DSB is currently not facing similar dangers. Last fiscal cycle, \$3 million was requested from the general agency's portion of the VR grant, significant for DSB's annual budget and facilitated several additional projects to be completed. DSB also asked for and received \$1 million in reallocation funds for the next year. This funding will be split 85% for Vocational Rehabilitation and 15% for Pre-ETS. Approval for 15 new positions has been secured, with ongoing recruitment for specialists in business relations, quality assurance and digital accessibility. There are also openings for Vision Rehabilitation Specialists (O&M) in Vancouver and Yakima, and adding a position in Pierce County.

The Department of Health is seeking public comment on new accessibility labeling rules for prescription drugs, with a deadline of October 4th at 9 am.

Andy Arvidson shared his desire to take on an intern from the YES 2 program to help transition responsibilities as he begins his retirement process.

A current OTC (Orientation Training Center) student asked about transition services related to employment opportunities available at OTC, seeking clarification on how to access these services and connect with the right resources. Julie Brannon encouraged the student to reach out to their VR counselor or staff for assistance with services and support needed for success.

Presentation: LaDell Lockwood and Mary Craig

LaDell is the communications manager, collaborating with Mary on the new website launch. Over the last nine months, DSB has been working to redesign the website to improve user experience for visitors. Both the brand and the website have been redesigned to make it easier and faster for users to discover DSB services and programs, to focus on what users want to find. The redesign aligns with the mission developed during the all-staff meeting in May, emphasizing that the new site reflects a "whole new DSB". The development involved research, surveys, tests, and focus groups. A data-driven, human-centered approach was taken based on the feedback from users. Several personas were created to help tailor the website content, including "Potential Customer Pete" – representing potential customers, and "Liaison Linda" – representing individuals who refer customers to DSB. A Content governance and management plan was established to maintain relevance and importance to the people searching for it.

The partner, Anthro-Tech, brought in potential customers, current customers, and some liaisons to get input on the new site, and Mary shared some positive quotes that were received about the new website layout.

The DSB logo was modernized, featuring a walking man on an upward path, surrounded by a rounded diamond shape for a softer feel. New contrasting colors, a different shade of blue that

resonates emotionally with users, and a new type face selected for optimal legibility with the new mission statement prominently displayed at the top of the page. Top navigation and main section for the website include Learn About Our Services, Career Support, Independent Learning Services, Youth and Families, Services for Business, and Events. A new section on the main page that was not previously present on the website is 'Gain skills of blindness training & Counseling'. Each page includes clear calls to action (e.g. call, email, request for more information). The website features stories of individuals served and encourages personal communication – users can talk to a human, avoiding automated systems with clear options for contacting the agency. There is an enhanced social media presence and chat functionality for real-time support.

The new website goes live September 18th. The main page will remain the same, but subpage links or bookmarks will need to be updated.

Larry highlighted the influence of accessibility efforts across state agencies. Stated that Mary Craig, the Chief Information Officer (CIO) for DSB, is a strong advocate for accessibility and has been instrumental in organizing a major statewide technology conference on accessibility in the first week of October.

Marci Carpenter asked about the websites optimization to be used by those who only access the internet through their iPhone or Android.

Mary confirmed the website is designed with human-centered design principles, ensuring accessibility with multiple software applications on mobile devices of all kinds.

Marci Carpenter asked Michael what the percentages are of those that exit with employment.

Michael replied he does not know this quarter's data, and it is too soon to have any real information about the impact of the new changes and how many people leaving the program before employment. Earlier in the year, DSB was at 34% percent with the goal being 70% employed upon exit.

Executive Committee Report: Andy Arvidson

Collaboration with the Deaf-Blind Consortium was to have happened in August but was postponed. It will be rescheduled to begin the collaboration in January,

The positions of Chair and Vice Chair will be up for election in December as the terms are for one year. There will be a group of SRC-B members attending the NCSRC Conference in Seattle in October.

A subcommittee has been established to focus on advocating for Michael to remain in the director position considering the potential changes when the new governor takes office.

Policy Committee Report: Kris Colcock

The Policy and Planning Committee has faced challenges in gathering due to varying schedules but will be meeting in October. The committee is still involved overall in the website design and in

areas where decisions and policies are being made. With upcoming outreach efforts, there is potential for the committee to play a vital role in ensuring effective and appropriate engagement.

Membership Committee Report: Julie Brannon

The Council now has full membership with all seats filled, and this accomplishment is built on the groundwork established by Linda Wilder during her time as chair. The committee aims to meet quarterly in between SRC meetings. Julie extended thanks to Lisa Wheeler for connecting the committee with the newest member, Bill Dowling, to fill the Workforce position. Bill Dowling has over 25 years in Workforce Development, starting his career at a Workforce center in Chinatown, Los Angeles. Bill worked as the local Workforce Director for seven years, Colorado State Director for eight years, then relocated to Washington due to family and the pandemic. In Washington, he has been involved with services for blind and low-vision clients, actively providing services in rural areas. Bill shared a story how one of his board members connected him with a young man who wanted to keep an accountant with visual impairments employed. By reaching out, they found the right programs to support him, and he has now become an advocate for services.

The committee has worked on an on-boarding packet. It is available electronically and in large-print copies for both old and new members.

Larry asked if the on-boarding packets go to the consumer groups and mentioned that previously, the consumer organizations have had an opportunity on the agenda to have comment and receive status. Julie stated consumers have been involved and can certainly get the packets to the consumer organizations.

Many new members have expressed interest in mentorship by former long-term members. More details will be shared soon.

Customer Satisfaction Committee Report: Jen Bean

The committee is currently focusing on Deaf-Blind listening sessions and is appreciative of the Executive Committee's partnership. Due to scheduling conflicts and upcoming conferences, the plan is to kick off these sessions in January.

A major focus last year was updating the customer satisfaction survey with Washington State University, who will compile the data annually. The first quarter's raw data has been summarized and the results will be shared at the quarterly meeting. Over 400 responses were received, a significant increase from previous surveys, which only targeted closed cases. The new survey includes individuals eligible in the plan, both working and closed cases. The survey used a five-point scale and yielded the following scores:

- Overall satisfaction: 77.4%
- DSB understands my disability: 75%
- DSB understands what's important to me: 73.5%
- DSB understands my disability barriers to employment: 73.6%

- Services are moving quickly enough: 57.5% (which was noted as a downward trend)

These scores are generally higher than those of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR).

The scores for specific service areas:

- Assistive Technology services: 68.5%
- Orientation and mobility: 60.9%
- Work readiness: 63.2%
- Information and training to achieve employment goals: 63%

This data provides a solid baseline for future analysis and advocacy.

A notable aspect of the survey asked how DSB services positively impacted lives and showed responses of counselor interactions, information tools, and ability for greater self-reliance. Conversely, some reported issues on DSB staff communication, untrained new staff, counselors not demonstrating empathy, listening, responsiveness, pace and lack of skills to address blindness and other disabilities. When asked, about 60 people commented as to their reasons for exiting the program before achieving employment: health issues, other priorities, and lack of personal effort towards progress being the top reasons. This shows that the exits are often related to individual circumstances rather than DSB shortcomings.

Even though the goal is an 80% satisfaction rate, the current scores offer a positive snapshot of DSB's services given the current environment as well as the exit reasons showing that individuals do value the program even if the timing isn't right for them.

Michael thanked Jen for sharing valuable insights and that feedback is essential and understanding challenges is key. He also acknowledged the trauma customers experience with change of staff and having to rebuild relationships, that more frequent and meaningful interactions with the customers will help to create an environment where the customer feels valued and empowered to progress.

Kris Colcock added that customers often have limited knowledge of what services are available. With greater engagement VRCs can identify appropriate interventions and resources that align with the customer's goals.

Jen agreed with Kris' statements and added as staffing stabilizes, overall service quality and engagement should improve. Recognized that it can take counselors years for them to fully grasp their roles and become proficient. DSB is supportive of new staff, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Julie Harlow shared an experience with her first counselor and the one-on-one counseling provided and how she hasn't had that experience since. She acknowledged that counselors are busy and overwhelmed which is affecting the quality of interactions with the customers and asked if that is being addressed in training sessions.

Michael stated that prior to the pandemic, there was no training program in place, senior counselors were relied on to mentor new staff. A curriculum is now being developed to address staff training needs, and DSB connected to a learning management system with valuable resources

on vocational rehabilitation processes. In addition, the training team is creating new onboarding processes to better prepare new staff. A goal for DSB is to replicate positive experiences that customers have had previously.

An OTC student asked about collaboration with universities to involve students in assisting VR counselors, suggesting that student involvement could ease counselors' workloads and improve efficiency.

Michael acknowledged the idea but noted it is not ideal as students may lack VR knowledge. Emphasized the goal of freeing counselors to focus on their core roles by reducing caseloads and adding Business Relation Specialists.

The student mentioned potential programs at the University of Washington (UW) involving students in similar life situations, and asked if working in internship roles to assist the VR counselors could be a possibility.

Michael confirmed UW does not have any training programs for VR counseling or for rehabilitation teaching for the adaptive skills of blindness. However, DSB does provide internship opportunities to Portland State University, and Western Washington University does have a Masters in rehabilitation counseling. There is a national challenge in recruiting people who are trained in the specialized skills for blindness, counseling, and skilled vendors.

Jen added the CAP Assistant Director, Doug Burkhalter, is on the advisory committee for Western's Rehabilitation counseling and engages with student to education them about VR and employment opportunities. DVR is experiencing a significant increase in customer applications after years of decline and about a month ago, CAP calls tripled. This is seen as positive, meaning more people are applying and getting services. Jen asked Michael if DSB is seeing an uptick in applicants. Michael said DSB has had a gentle, manageable increase since the pandemic.

Presentation: Ron Jasmer, OTC Manager and OTC Student Panel

Ron Jasmer welcomed everyone and introduced the five members of the OTC Student Panel. Four of the students are currently in the residential program and the fifth commutes to OTC. The students were asked four questions:

1. What brings them to the OTC?
2. What is the most impactful thing you have learned while at the OTC?
3. What are your plans after you graduate from the OTC?
4. What would you tell others who ask about the OTC?

Board members thanked the students for sharing their answers.

One student mentioned that after she went to a WCB conference last year, she went online to obtain information and did not receive a call back. Wanted to know how she can obtain information if no one responds.

Julie Brannon apologized and asked the student to make sure Andy Arvidson gets their information before leaving.

Andy Arvidson asked Ron what made him decide to work at the OTC?

Ron shared his story starting with his diagnosis with a visual impairment at the age of three. Initially a high school drop-out but went on to pursue a master's degree and certification in school district administration. Was a teacher of students with visual impairments at the state school for the blind. Interned at the training center, gaining insight into its operations and impact, and applied for the manager position when he saw it was available. Through all the struggles and the triumphs, he became passionate about helping others navigate similar challenges, motivated to promote the success of blind and visually impaired individuals, and sees his current position as an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the community.

Jacob Kamaunu expressed empathy and offered encouragement to the OTC student that expressed discouragement and emphasized the importance of not losing hope. He shared personal experiences and the importance of the training programs. The student thanked him for his story and ensured everyone they will not lose hope.

Kris asked the commuter student if it is more beneficial to commute or would they rather stay in the residential apartments?

The student stated they love commuting. They have met many wonderful and helpful people during their travels. They shared a story of when they had to run across the train tracks because the signals were off for them, and they misunderstood and went at the wrong time while the train was barreling down the street towards them. Stated the only downfall was not being able to get to the OTC early enough for the meetings that take place with the other students prior to their arrival.

Larry asked what the student capacity is at OTC. Ron stated there is room for up to 12 residential students.

Wrap-up/Meeting Adjourned

Meeting was adjourned at 1:30.