

# State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

December 13, 2024

Seattle, Washington

Attendance – all members attended via videoconference

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

**Council Members Absent:** Kristin Geary, Sara Logston, Shawnda Hicks

**Staff and Visitors Present:** Meredith Stannard, Yvonne Verbraak, Tricia Eyerly, Joe Kasperski, Damiana Harper, Lisa Wheeler, Mary Craig, Doug Burkhalter, Sophie Watson, Marci Carpenter, LaDell Lockwood, Nikki Brueggeman, Crissy Urban

Call to Order and Agenda Review: Andy Arvidson, 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. Meredith reviewed the agenda for today's meeting.

Review dates for the 2025 SRCB meetings

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Dates proposed for 2025 and accepted by the Council: March 14, 9am – 12pm; June 13, 9am – 12pm; September 12, 9am – 12pm; December 12, 9am – 12pm. All meetings scheduled to be virtual via Zoom unless otherwise announced.

Approval of September 2024 Minutes

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Kris moved and Bill seconded to accept September 2024 SRCB Meeting Minutes. Motion passed.

Annual SRC-B Elections

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Each position had one candidate who had expressed interest in the position, Andy Arvidson for Chair, and Kris Colcock for Vice-Chair. Julie called three times for each position, and no additional candidates were nominated from the floor. Andy Arvidson was re-elected as Chair, and Kris Colcock was re-elected as Vice-Chair. Both were elected by acclamation.

## Executive Director's Report: Michael MacKillop

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Michael began by congratulating both Andy Arvidson and Kris Colcock on their reelection to Chair and Vice Chair, respectively. He stated his appreciation of their positivity, and championing and support of DSB and its mission.

Michael brought up a British dancing competition show that has a blind comedian participating in the competition, Chris McCausland. While initially skeptical, Chris has shown incredible improvement despite his lack of visual understanding of dance. He developed excellent posture, spatial awareness and musicality, thanks to his professional dance partner's adaptive techniques. Michael encouraged others to look up Chris McCausland and watch his dancing and how he has progressed as he has made it to the finals.

Michael expressed his joy for the agency and his appreciation for the progress made in 2024 despite retirements and staffing challenges. There's a sense of stability and growth within DSB as new staff gain expertise and experience and learn to work together. About 80% of DSB's staff are new to their roles or the agency within the past two to three years; requiring time to build skills for teaming and effective communication in support of the customer, as well as understanding all the resources.

DSB is focused on building a strong sense of identity and understanding the culture. Kris Colcock joined DSB at All Staff in April, helping to refine DSB's mission, vision, and values. Discussions with management and teams have been crucial in making these values concrete, and living them in daily operations. The identity and values were developed collectively by the entire staff, not just leadership; creating a common language that was not there. There are still challenges, such as cross-team communication, but the agency is working on creating entry points to address these.

DSB had 100 career outcomes this past year. The focus is on the proportion of the people achieving their career outcome versus those exiting before achieving it. Since the pandemic, the completion rate has been consistent at 30%, but this past year it increased to 47%. Changes to the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) processes and quicker engagement is a big factor in having people stay in with their plan. While improvement is being made, the goal is 70%.

The State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRCB) quarterly report gave insight into different types of jobs and career outcomes that occurred during the past quarter. Career goals for DSB customers are diverse, based on personal strengths, aptitudes, and interests. Michael said he is proud of the performance measures of the agency; among the 22 blind agencies across the nation, DSB ranks high in state performance measures. The agency ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in the nation for second-quarter and fourth-quarter employment, second quarter median wages, credential attainment, and 2<sup>nd</sup> for measurable skill gains among blind agencies. Despite the state's lower overall performance, DSB's high performance positively impacts the state metrics. DSB's improvements help boost the state's performance, even though it has fewer customers compared to the general agency.

Lisa Wheeler, Assistant Director of Workforce Initiatives, presented at a Workforce Conference in collaboration with DVR with a positive reception.

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) hosted a three-day training for BEP operators in October known as the All State Conference. An espresso machine that is accessible for blind users was introduced, currently at the Lacey office. Vendors from across the country were brought in to talk about how they do vending. In the next year, there are two strategic initiatives for BEP: focusing on recruiting and training the next generation of BEP vendors, and exploring expansion opportunities through vending and micro markets. The BEP team is focused on stabilizing revenues by leveraging VR funds. After eight months, federal partners did not approve the revised set-aside plan. The Vendor Committee will need to regroup and find alternatives for the vendor support and revenue generation. Michael also recognized their efforts for updating long-standing policies.

Also in October, the Council for State Agencies of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and the National Council for State Agencies of the Blind (NCSAB) held their national conferences in Seattle. Damiana Harper and her staff presented on the changes being made to DSB's VR processes that aim to expedite services and enhance customer-centric planning, receiving phenomenal reception from peers nationwide.

Michael appreciated the attendance of the council members that went to the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) conference, which was held at the same time, and encouraged sharing of feedback that could assist the agency.

At the Washington Council of the Blind (WCB) State Convention, Michael said he enjoyed engaging with the youth track and interacting with the families and kids during lunch.

Michael partnered with Christopher Zilar and Jana Finkbonner at CSAVR. The presentation was focused on identifying gaps in partnerships and in support for Tribal VR, of which there are ten in the region.

Christopher Zilar commented the presentation was well-received. Christopher also mentioned that AIVRTTAC (American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Training and Technical Assistance Center), which is similar to WINTAC (Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center), had significant interest due to the presentation and nearly ran out of brochures.

DSB's new website was launched on September 19<sup>th</sup>. Feedback is requested regarding the user experience, missing information, and updates. This was originally an 18-month project that was completed in nine months thanks to the efforts of Mary Craig and LaDell Lockwood.

The new vocational rehabilitation learning management system, YesLMS, was implemented this past quarter. Staff will be able to access a wide range of specific VR, communications, and management trainings. The training team meticulously reviewed available trainings to ensure relevance to staff needs. Current training programs, including the masters of VR counseling, tend to be more generalized and focus less on vocational counseling. Internal training will incorporate vocational counseling and business relations, necessary to help staff understand how to work with businesses and the importance of these relationships.

Many staff members are new to their roles and may not have backgrounds in the blindness or vocational rehabilitation fields. There is a need for a platform to share information about vision, medical aspects, the blindness community, and the history of vocational rehabilitation. The

Learning Management System will provide the generalized trainings to ensure everyone has an equal understanding of the context in which they work. The training team was created earlier this year. They've been focused on building and figuring out where the gaps and needs are and the training plan for the next year. Michael expressed his appreciation to Tricia Eyerly, Nikki Brueggeman, Deb Talbert, and Alexis Clough for their hard work in making this happen.

Sara Logston is working diligently in the Birth through 13 Explorers role, connecting statewide with families and youth. DSB has the state funding, allowing focus on the Birth to 13 age group.

DSB partnered with Kris Colcock and the NFB BELL (National Federation for the Blind Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning) Program over the summer. Kris commented that the partnership led to improvements in Braille skills, orientation and mobility skills, peer skills, socialization, and connection among participating children. Planning is underway for the third year of the program in June 2025. Sara's involvement provided opportunities for her to connect with families of children under the age of 14 and the hope is she will assist again in June. Kris also emphasized the importance of children acquiring skills early, before age 14, to ensure they are better prepared for the future.

The Independent Living (IL) Program continues to be robust with increasing applications. King County is a challenge, despite efforts the waitlist remains long at six to eight months. With an average participant age of 82-83, the lengthy wait times are particularly challenging. Efforts to increase provider capacity, aided by the Seattle Lighthouse and an increased fee schedule, have been helpful. The IL Program continues the technology partnership with the Washington Assisted Technology Access Program (WATAP) and the Washington Talking Book and Braille Library (WTBBL). By partnering with WTBBL, the IL Program has been able to get over 100 CCTVs at a lower cost to the agency, and delivered to people that can use them at no cost.

The expected \$10 to \$12 billion revenue shortfall over the next four years has prompted state agencies to find ways to save funds. DSB's unique funding structure, with 80% federal and 20% state funds, offer flexibility in implementing travel, hiring, and equipment freezes without impacting the way services are done. Travel remains essential for providing in-person services to customers all over the state, though the travel freeze affects events like the All Staff meeting planned for May. Out-of-state travel for training and conference attendance will be limited, but staff local to an event can attend, such as the NFB Washington State Convention. The travel freeze will also make it difficult for DSB staff across the state to attend CANAR (Consortia of Administrators for Native American Rehabilitation) in Spokane, but there will be a presence from the local staff.

Direct service positions connected to the federal grant are exempt from the hiring freeze, allowing for continued recruitment to maintain services and revenue. Non-direct service positions require evaluation for justifications as an exception, and some positions like fiscal management and communications were put on hold. However, there are three vacancies for vocational rehabilitation specialists and orientation and mobility specialists that need to be filled to avoid disadvantaging customers.

Governor Inslee will be releasing the budget the week of December 16<sup>th</sup> and it is unclear what has been requested or allocated to maintain what DSB has been doing. The position of DSB Director is governor-appointed and Michael expressed interest in continuing as the Director to the Governor-Elect Ferguson transition team. Michael also highlighted the agency's successes, the community that supports DSB, and the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind to both the transition team for Governor-Elect Ferguson and in a one-on-one conversation with Governor Inslee. Governor-Elect Ferguson will start his term on January 15, 2025.

Governor Inslee's second executive order in 2013 promoted the hiring of people with disabilities in state government, setting 5% expectation. Some agencies are meeting the 5% goal; DSB's rate of employees with disabilities is around 23%. One of Governor Inslee's last executive orders refreshes the 2013 order, emphasizing hiring people with disabilities, accessibility, and training for creating accessible documents and websites. Department of Enterprise Services Learning Management System has been tasked with updating and creating new training to ensure all state staff are trained in creating accessible documents. The executive order also calls for agencies to take reasonable accommodations seriously, with OFM ensuring policies and training for management staff are clear on the reasonable accommodation process.

The Disability Inclusion Network Business Resource Group surveyed state enterprise employees about accessibility and accommodation. Around 60% of respondents noted that the reasonable accommodation process is a significant gap affecting their work and sense of belonging. It is critical for the state enterprise to improve the reasonable accommodation process. Training is being provided to ensure all hiring managers understand the requirements.

Christopher Zilar asked if the LMS is specific to DSB, if not, which other departments use it.

Michael explained DSB has access to two learning management systems. The one that was just implemented, YesLMS, is specific to vocational rehabilitation training and is exclusive to DSB. The second one is the Statewide Learning Management System, managed by the Department of Enterprise Services, and it is accessible to the statewide enterprise. It includes all of the accessibility and reasonable accommodation trainings.

DSB needs to focus on meeting the requirements set by the executive order with the state enterprise in the coming year. Additionally, the Washington Technology Agency is working on a robust digital accessibility policy. The policy has passed many obstacles and seems likely to pass soon. Once it passes, DSB will need to partner with other state enterprise agencies to strengthen accessibility efforts. The goal is to help agencies understand their responsibilities and requirements for digital accessibility, reasonable accommodation, and hiring individuals with disabilities.

Mary Craig added that the new digital accessibility policy passed the technical services board yesterday. The State CIO (Chief Information Officer), Bill Kehoe, will sign the policy into effect soon. The policy mandates that both public-facing and internal agency systems must be accessible and that all state employees must take training on creating accessible communication. Full implementation is a work in progress, with a target date of July 2029. Agencies not fully compliant by the target date will need to complete a waiver form. Mary highlighted the significant progress

compared to 20 years ago when accessibility was rarely discussed, crediting strong support from accessibility advocates and leaders like Bill Kehoe for the policy's success. Mary is optimistic that this policy can position the state as a top employer for people with disabilities.

Christopher Zilar asked if website designers ever receive consulting from people with disabilities. Mary replied the state has a partnership with Anthro-Tech, a local vendor in Olympia, that hires people with disabilities for testing. DSB utilized Anthro-Tech to get feedback on DSB's new website to ensure it was accessible. Mary also shared her dream of starting an internship program for Pre-ETS teenagers to ensure accessibility.

Larry Watkinson commented how he, Mary and three other people have been working on the digital accessibility policy. As a state employee involved in the initial development of the policy, he sees this as a hallmark achievement in his career. The policy has been strengthened by the executive order, which addressed concerns from detractors and agencies about internal accessibility requirements.

Michael, as the chair of the Careers and Business Relations Committee through the Council of State Agencies of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), stated there is a national conversation about storytelling and outreach. The goal is to effectively communicate and spread the message about the work being done in public vocational rehabilitation.

There have been significant changes among state representatives and funders in Washington DC. Many new congressional staffers need education about the value of the public VR system. While DSB can tell the stories of the customers and businesses; it is more powerful, impactful, and carries more weight coming from the customers and businesses themselves. DSB will be partnering with DVR and working with Dana Phelps (DVR Director) to develop a strategic plan to educate funders and the public; identifying some businesses that have benefitted from VR services from DSB and DVR and have them tell their story. The emphasis is on authentic, impactful stories rather than high-production videos; the importance of conveying the real-world impact of VR services on businesses and individuals with disabilities. The goal is to illustrate how businesses can support and retain long-term employees with disabilities, especially those with changes in vision, through accessible measures.

Connections or stories of businesses that have benefitted from DSB's or DVR's input, activities, and services are being sought. Lisa Wheeler and Carl Peterson, along with the Business Relations team, will be developing a plan for that in January. Utilizing the SRCB quarterly report for the general awareness and education campaign is under consideration.

Michael is proposing extracting key aspects from the quarterly report for a newsletter, possibly including a video from a customer or a business, with a link to the video for a general audience, including funders and stakeholders. Feedback is also being sought on the SRCB quarterly report as to what aspects are useful, engaging and effectively tell the story versus what is less useful to refine the content.

Despite the hiring freeze, DSB is making significant progress by filling essential positions through exemptions. Vision Rehabilitation Specialists for Yakima and Vancouver and a new floating

itinerant role to support the high-demand areas in Pierce County, South King County, and the Tacoma office. In addition, Intake Specialist (VRC4) positions have been created based on the success of the pilot program and will be focused on providing intake services through eligibility.

In the Fiscal Department, the Fiscal Analyst 4 (FA4) position was closed and moving through the interview process prior to the hiring freeze. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Program Manager position also closed prior to December 2<sup>nd</sup>. Interviews will be scheduled for early 2025. Also, the Human Resources Manager recruitment will be going out soon. Both the DEI Program Manager and the Human Resources Manager positions were exceptions and approved by Michael.

Lisa Wheeler has been working on the Workforce Initiatives position. The Business Training Coordinator position description has been approved, allocated and in the process of Michael writing an exemption for it.

One position that was put on hold is the Fiscal Operations position. This position is intended to support the CFO (Chief Financial Officer) and Deputy FO and would also be a way to support any transition that happens in higher-level management. The hope is for knowledge transfer to cover high-level responsibilities with the new FA4 role.

Another position put on hold due to lack of exception approval is a Digital Social Media Communications position to expand LaDell Lockwood's team from one to two. Currently, alternative strategies are being explored to support this role.

Larry Watkinson highlighted the importance of digital communication tools beyond just social media, emphasizing web content and digital accessibility as key components. Larry asked about the strategies that align with the executive order to ensure these tools are truly made accessible not only to the state employees, but to the customers as well.

Michael explained that DSB has hired a Digital Accessibility Coordinator, Robert Hardy, who is focused on ensuring internal accessibility and coordinating statewide discussions.

Larry acknowledged the new hire but pointed out that it does not fully address the needs of customers. Larry also suggested considering how the interactions with customers can be improved in line with the executive order.

Lisa reassured Larry that the agency is committed to improving communication with customers. GovDelivery is being explored as a resource to reach business customers, students, and families.

LaDell mentioned Robert Hardy's role in setting up GovDelivery templates and preparing for January training. DSB also plans to use the SMS features to reach youth and offer various newsletters and bulletins. DSB is also the first agency that GovDelivery will have that has admin users with visual disabilities. There will be a collaboration between DSB and GovDelivery to ensure accessibility.

Mary highlighted Robert's impact, noting his assessment of DSB to improve accessibility and upcoming training on Adobe PDF remediation.

Michael highlighted some key initiatives for 2025. Such as partnering with the SRCB to better understand and improve the customer experience for our Deaf-Blind customers; the multiprogram

coalition built for Deaf-Blind services and listening sessions led by Kris Colcock throughout the year; providing Helen Keller National Center training for all staff, with intensive training for direct service staff and less intensive training for others; emphasizing the importance of making Deaf-Blind customers feel comfortable and welcome at DSB; and exploring the use of artificial intelligence (AI) by meeting with adaptive technology specialists to create guidelines and tools for assisting customers in job exploration and career development.

Julie Brannon commented on the NCSRC conference and noted that Washington's SRCB is much more connected and communicative compared to others around the country, where there is often a lack of interaction between directors and agencies. She praised Michael and the agency for fostering strong communication and collaboration. Julie Harlow agreed and shared that many SRCs lack knowledge about blindness and were excited to take some knowledge back to their state.

Marci stated she is glad to hear about the percentage of successful employment outcomes as well as the progress in digital accessibility for customers and employees within the agency and state.

Michael replied that it takes a collective effort to make progress; that key conversations throughout the state enterprise are being led by dedicated individuals like Mary Craig and Larry Watkinson.

Lisa noted Mary's enthusiasm for the development of internships for students, pre-employment transition, business relations, workforce programs, and market trends. Opportunities for growing career pathways, especially in tech, have been a collaborative effort. There's a strong focus on growing career pathways, especially in tech, through collaborative exploration, training workshops, and individual work-based learning opportunities. DSB will continue to offer opportunities like these.

Michael concluded by asking for feedback on the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind quarterly report. What is interesting? Useful? What would they like to see more of or less of?

Marci also commented on the importance of the need for the SRCB and the community to stay informed about ongoing activities and looking forward to having quarterly report information available to the broader community. Marci also announced that the National Federation of the Blind Washington (NFBW) Convention will start the evening of February 27th and run through midday Sunday, March 2nd, at the Heathman Lodge in Vancouver; and the state and national scholarship applications are open and want to ensure those opportunities go out to everyone.

## **Presentation: VR Milestone Initiatives and Secondary Disability Discussion – Lisa Wheeler & Damiana Harper.**

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Lisa led the presentation describing the comprehensive approach counselors take to identify and address secondary disabilities when working with individuals who have vision loss. Emphasizing the importance of discussing not just the primary vision loss but also other conditions (physical, sensory, or psychological) that might impact someone's ability to work. Secondary disabilities are specifically addressed during the intake process, with questions aimed at understanding challenges beyond vision loss. Medical terms are simplified to help customers understand and



discuss issues like self-direction, self-care, work tolerance, and social interactions. Counselors are more proactive in recognizing and addressing mental health concerns, especially those affecting interpersonal relationships and work performance. It is necessary for counselors to have the difficult conversations with customers about difficulties they may encounter with their daily life or previous jobs. Lisa acknowledged Jen Bean's contribution to raising awareness about the importance of addressing secondary disabilities related to mental health, which were often overlooked in the past.

Jen Bean expressed gratitude to DSB for accepting and acting on her feedback, highlighting the significant progress made by implementing her suggestions, almost verbatim, leading to noticeable improvements.

Kris Colcock raised the question about how to approach a situation where a customer may have undiagnosed issues they are not aware of, especially when the VRC (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor) suggests further evaluation.

Kara Thompson, a VRC with 12 years at DSB, emphasized the importance of establishing a strong relationship with customers early on, especially during intake, to make discussions about difficult topics more comfortable. She highlighted the collaborative nature of the VR process, where multiple team members contribute to assessments, helping the counselor understand the customer's barriers. Data from various assessments is integrated to help customers recognize and understand their challenges, often validating what customers may already know about themselves. Kara acknowledges that customers may initially resist or feel vulnerable when confronted with sensitive issues, but stresses that the counselor's role is to create a trusting environment. Sometimes, customers come to new realizations about themselves during the process, and Kara works to keep them focused on their initial goal of securing employment. She also finds it helpful to remind customers of the counselor's responsibility to address any barriers they may face.

Lisa stated that as rehabilitation professionals, it's their responsibility to address emerging issues, even if they are difficult or generate resistance and acknowledged the challenge of having tough conversations, but believes that providing information about the process and the agency's role helps customers understand why the work is being done. Lisa stressed that the goal is not to just give customers what they want, but to help them identify and meet their needs for success, which requires external input. Echoing Kara's point that trust and relationship building are essential for customers to be open and move through challenges toward success, though the outcome may not always be positive.

Kris asked whether DSB can provide or help customers access services for mental health issues, additional mobility needs, or cognitive therapy.

Lisa confirmed that DSB offers limited support for these services, with counselors being well-informed about policies and exceptions. However, DSB is not a long-term solution for managing mental health issues and does work to connect customers with long-term services if needed.

Kara explained that, due to the nature of the program, DSB focuses on short-term solutions. For example, if customers need counseling for vision loss adjustment, it's typically short-term, but

some customers may realize they need more long-term support. Kara suggests customers explore medical benefits through future employers for ongoing counseling services once they're employed. DSB can provide for up to ten sessions of counseling. The importance of working with medical providers to identify long-term support needs is highly stressed. DSB acts as a resource for customers, helping to navigate solutions.

Bek Moras asked whether blind or low vision individuals with mental health diagnoses might be misdiagnosed as having a mental health condition when they might be on the autism spectrum, and if peer support from other autistic individuals has been considered as part of their care.

Lisa responded that, although she oversees pre-employment transition services where challenges (including mental health) are identified early, she hasn't encountered this specific misdiagnosis issue. However, if it does arise, DSB will ensure individuals are connected with peer support and external resources for further support.

Damiana stated she also has not been made aware of any misdiagnosis but noted an uptick in secondary disabilities. It was also made clear that for DSB purposes, vision is always the primary disability, even when other disabilities may create more significant barriers to employment. Discussions around secondary disabilities, particularly at the OTC (Orientation and Training Center), have become more prevalent, as instructors have struggled meeting the needs of students with diverse learning abilities, such as brain injuries. Ron Jasmer, the manager of the OTC, was tasked with researching training opportunities to help staff learn effective instruction techniques for students with different learning styles and abilities. This will be an ongoing effort to better serve customers in the OTC program and maximize the benefits of training for those with various learning needs.

Damiana transitioned to Milestone Planning, stating this has been her focus over the past 14 months after discussions with Michael on how to engage customers in a way that helps them change their life trajectories. Long-term plans are challenging, often multiyear plans (up to 10+ years) for youth from age 14, which can be difficult for customers and staff to understand or stay motivated by such long timelines. In addition, there is a federal mandate of a 90-day requirement from eligibility to the signing of the IPE (Individualized Plan for Employment). This three-month waiting period has led to disengagement for customers who are anxious to work or are financially struggling. DSB is looking to solve both problems, breaking down long-term vocational goals to more understandable, smaller, manageable Milestones. The plans will be flexible and changeable to reflect evolving goals as customers gain skills and confidence, discussing what the customer is ready to do *right now*, not just the distant future.

DSB has some customers that are new to vision loss that may not know what they are capable of or whether work is a viable option for them, while others come in with clear goals such as going to college tomorrow. The intent is to frame goals into smaller, more immediate actions, like building independence in home and community navigation or career exploration; helping the customer move forward realistically, understanding all the steps in achieving their long-term goals. As an example, a road trip to New York isn't about "just getting there," Milestone Plans are broken down into achievable sections. Milestone Plans typically cover 3-6 months, with flexibility based on the

individual's needs (e.g., college-bound individuals may have 12-months plans). This shorter time frame really helps the customer, the VRC, and the various specialists to work together to focus on what needs to happen now to meet the current Milestone. If progress stalls or challenges arise, the structure allows for natural points to recalibrate and adjust the trajectory of the plan.

An example of a delayed goal: if a six-month Milestone Plan includes 40 hours of assistive technology training and only ten hours have been completed at the five-month mark, the team can assess why progress hasn't been made. External factors such as family health issues or childcare challenges could be factors causing delays as well as any internal delays. The VRC and customer can modify the Milestone Plan, adjusting goals to reflect current needs and realities.

Previously, the comprehensive assessment was largely completed before the plan. With the new approach, special assessments (e.g., assistive technology, adaptive skills, low vision evaluation) now happen post-initial plan, allowing faster access to services and equipment. Specialists can recommend and provide necessary goods and services right away, reducing delays and giving customers the tools they need sooner that are beneficial to help the customer move forward and boosting their sense of accomplishment and confidence.

The Milestone Planning approach is aimed at helping customers see progress faster, feel accomplished, remain engaged with their goals, and increasing the rate of customers exiting with employment, with a goal of 70% success.

The Milestone Plan change was piloted first in the Seattle office (North Region). Conversations started a year ago around the idea and how to implement it, and as of May this year the Milestone Plans were put into effect. In September, statewide training for the program was conducted and the program went live with all counselors as of October 1<sup>st</sup>. Currently, there are 175 unique Milestone Plans in place across the state. Counselors are transitioning to Milestone Plans naturally as annual plans come due or as a change is required, rather than rushing to apply them artificially. The goal is for 100% of customers to be on Milestone Plans by October 1, 2025.

## **Presentation: Client Assistance Program Update— Jen Bean**

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Jen introduced herself as the Director of the Client Assistance Program (CAP) with over seven years at CAP and 20 years at DVR. Jen's experience includes working as a counselor, rehabilitation technician, independent living counselor, benefits specialist, and trainer. She focuses on DSB CAP cases with some assistance from Doug Burkhalter.

Doug Burkhalter has been the Assistant Director at CAP for three years with 25 years at the Lynnwood DVR office. His roles included rehabilitation technician, business specialist, vocational rehabilitation counselor, and trainer.

CAP is a private, nonprofit advocacy program that helps individuals working with vocational rehabilitation (VR) and those seeking advocacy in VR services. CAP supports customers working with DVR, DSB, Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Programs, and Independent Living centers. Funding is through the Rehabilitation Act and WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act), the same funding that supports VR programs. The CAP team includes Jen and Doug, covering the entire state

of Washington. The advocacy focus is both individual and systemic. Jen focuses on systemic advocacy, working with DSB and some DVR customers. Doug handles individual advocacy, CAP IT, marketing, travel, and facilities. HR is shared by both Jen and Doug.

CAP, along with tribal programs, is the only position on the SRCB and WSRC with no term limits due to its small size and unique role. The primary goal in systemic advocacy is to identify and amplify the voices of customers and staff to improve service delivery, employment outcomes, and satisfaction. CAP interacts regularly with individuals across the state, gaining insight into both systemic barriers, trends, and best practices. Unlike broad satisfaction surveys, CAP's ongoing conversations allow for a deeper understanding of issues and trends as they develop. Jen connects regularly with VR leadership at DSB and DVR, as well as serves on the rehab council to share feedback, advocate for improvements, and participate in projects and workgroups as appropriate with the agencies.

The VR world can be complex and full of acronyms, CAP acts as an information resource to clarify things for customers and answer questions or provide guidance without always getting involved in the case itself. CAP educates customers on their rights and responsibilities within the VR system and encourages customers to resolve issues on their own, providing them with options and guidance. The goal is to solve issues at the lowest level possible starting with information, referrals, and support for self-advocacy; move the case forward without escalating issues unnecessarily. The customer's side isn't taken blindly; instead, the situation is investigated by reaching out to the VRC to get their perspective and understand what happened from their end. CAP only escalates the situation to a higher level if the customer has already attempted to resolve the issue at that level. In that case, CAP would invite all relevant parties to the conversation. Doug emphasized that CAP works closely with the VR agencies to be seen as part of the team, not part of the problem.

While many customers are navigating visual impairments, communication issues are often at the core of the problem. Barriers could stem from cognitive issues, mental health challenges, or even just difficulty accessing services. CAP works to bridge the gap by helping counselors and customers better communicate and understand one another, encouraging both sides to engage clearly and openly. It is always highly encouraged that the VRCs summarize the next steps and expectations in writing to avoid confusion and misunderstandings and ensure that everyone is on the same page. CAP also encourages using technology, such as Zoom or interpreters, to improve clarity in service delivery and ensure that communication is effective for all individuals, regardless of their challenges.

Doug emphasized that DSB and DVR should work closely together, especially when customers have cases that overlap between the two agencies, scheduling regular meetings to help ensure that everyone is aligned with the customer's goals and services.

Customers often reach out to CAP when they face delays, like being unable to reach their counselor or not knowing what the next steps are. Customers also reach out when they disagree with decisions made by the VR program. CAP helps by providing information on rehabilitation laws and ensuring the VR program is following their policies and the Washington administrative codes

around rehabilitation law; they don't make decisions for customers but help ensure the system works as it should, according to regulations.

Jen distinguished who CAP considers a customer versus a client. A customer is someone CAP is helping on a more informal basis, usually for information, referral, or self-advocacy support. They might spend 15 minutes to a couple of hours interacting with CAP, and no formal release or demographic information is collected. A client is when a customer needs more assistance, CAP steps in formally, typically through investigation and informal mediation. A release of information is required, and these cases can take weeks to months to resolve. These are more involved and tracked for CAPS's annual reporting.

CAP saw a 100% increase in DSB cases this year, though seen as positive, indicating an increase in applications and that customers are being informed about CAP and are engaging in self-advocacy with support. Regarding demographics, CAP serves a wide range of ages and ethnicities, though more women are served than men, across both DSB and DVR. There was a decrease in the percentage of Deaf-Blind customers this year, an improvement attributed to the focus DSB put on that.

Main reasons for contact are communication issues, difficulty getting along with counselor, and a need for information in conflicts about services. Outcomes of cases are issues resolved for the customer or determined DSB's decision was appropriate, and these are the best possible outcomes and aligns with past work. In other states, lawyers are involved with disability rights programs and often take the litigation approach. CAP focuses on collaboration rather than litigation and is highly regarded by other states.

Since the election, there has been a dramatic increase in customers with behavioral health and anger management issues. There is concern that this will continue to be seen.

For about 20 years, many CAP cases involved unaddressed behavioral health issues and currently fewer than half of cases involve these issues. This significant improvement is due to DSB's response to feedback with eligibility changes and staff training.

The CAP program is currently operating at double pre-pandemic levels with work prioritized to manage high demand. Despite challenges, positive progress is being made. The partnerships with DSB and DVR are appreciated. Mental health and physical health concerns, such as higher baseline blood pressures being reported, are expected to continue, requiring more intensive work from counselors. The annual report, delayed by the workload, will be released next year.

## **Executive Committee Report: Andy Arvidson**

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The members of the Executive Committee are Andy Arvidson as Chair of the Executive Committee, Kris Colcock as Chair of Policy, Julie Brannon as Chair of Membership, and Meredith Stannard as Liaison, with Michael MacKillop providing support. Two committee chairs will change in 2025: Jen will move to the policy committee and Kris will move to the CAP committee for a trial year. The executive committee plans agendas for quarterly meetings to ensure they are interesting and informative. Andy invited Lisa Wheeler to the first executive meeting of 2025 for committee-level

discussions around secondary issues. Efforts are being made to change terminology around vision impairment, with a push for terms like “low vision” instead of “vision impaired,” with Michael being a strong advocate for the change. The membership committee is preparing a presentation for the incoming governor to ensure that Michael, the director, stays in place despite potential leadership changes.

## **Policy Committee Report: Kris Colcock**

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The policy committee has had limited meetings this past quarter; however, work was done on self-employment, All Staff, and website redevelopment. Kris initially wanted to consult Jen about best practices in policy development, leveraging her experience with policy development in self-employment and DVR. This led to Jen taking over as policy committee chair and Kris focusing on leadership in customer satisfaction, particularly for the Deaf-Blind community. Both Kris and Jen plan to attend each other’s meetings to aid in a smooth transition. Kris plans to support the policy committee regarding the needs of the Deaf-Blind community, with a follow-up back to the policy committee once listening sessions are complete. Kris expressed appreciation for the open communication, collaboration, and contributions of both the executive committee and policy committee.

## **Membership Committee Report: Julie Brannon**

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The membership committee successfully completed the onboarding packet, with positive feedback from SRCB members. In 2025, the committee will focus on developing the mentoring process and creating a code of conduct for SRCB members. The code of conduct is missing from the current bylaws. Michael and Jen provided templates from other networks to help the committee develop their own version. The goal is to complete the code of conduct by March, including guidelines on implementation and addressing issues.

Bill Dowling, from the Workforce Investment Board, has joined the council and was introduced at the September meeting. He will likely join the policy committee. There is a business and labor position open due to Jacob Kamanau’s term ending in September 2024. Andy and Julie have reached out to a potential candidate; however, Julie invited suggestions for potential candidates. Once the BEP position is filled, the council will be fully staffed.

## **Customer Satisfaction Committee Report: Jen Bean**

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Jen is excited to move to the policy committee as chair, bringing years of experience with self-employment at DVR and personal experience with CAP cases involving self-employment. Jen will continue to collaborate with the Customer Satisfaction Program Evaluation (CSPE) committee led by Kris Colcock.

Last year, the focus was on updating the customer satisfaction survey questions. The one-year analysis of the updated survey is still pending, but Michael has been sending quarterly updates. Kris’s committee will continue to review this data.

## Wrap-up/Meeting Adjourned

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Michael noted that past SRCB quarterly reports were uploaded to the agency website but often buried in the old format. There's a need for more accessible, newsletter-style format for easier distribution to representative offices, congressional delegates, and community stakeholders.

Meredith highlighted the positive experience at the National SRC conference, noting how well the agency's communication compares to many other states.

Executive committee meetings are typically on the first Tuesday of each month for one hour, 11:00 am - 12:00 pm. The first 2025 executive meeting will be on Wednesday, January 7<sup>th</sup>.

Meredith will send out invitations for all 12 meetings in advance.

Andy shared that only 11 states were represented at the national SRC conference, and only seven had council members present. He hopes for larger conferences in the future for better nationwide sharing and collaboration.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:51 am.