

State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

June 14, 2024

Seattle, Washington

Attendance – all members attended via videoconference

Council Members Present: Andy Arvidson, Cathy Wilson, Christopher Zilar, Jen Bean, Julie Brannon, Kara Thompson, Kris Colcock, Kristin Geary, Larry Watkinson, Michael MacKillop, Sara Logston, Shawnda Hicks, Bek Moras

Council Members Absent: Jacob Kamaunu, Julie Harlow, Liz Stewart

Staff and Visitors Present: Meredith Stannard, Yvonne Verbraak, Damiana Harper, Kelli Anderson, Lisa Wheeler, Joe Kasperski, LaDell Lockwood, Sophie Watson, Linda Wilder, Colette Arvidson, Crissy Urban, Alco Canfield

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

Review dates for the 2024 SRCB meetings

September 13, in person 9 am-3 pm; December 13, 9am-12pm via Zoom.

Approval of December 2023 and March 2024 Minutes

Minutes for both December 2023 and March 2024 were not ready for approval. Yvonne apologized and stated the new administrative assistant, Crissy Urban, will assist in getting the minutes completed moving forward.

SRCB Business

Since September's meeting will take place in person, the option to stay at a hotel as a reasonable accommodation is being offered. Generally, hotels in the Tukwila area are used. It is close to the light rail station, but if a different method is needed to get to the Seattle office, the charges can be reimbursed. If travel and expenses are anticipated that will need reimbursement, a state vendor number is required. Registration as a statewide vendor takes about one month to complete the process. Lunch will be provided by Ingallinas for council members and staff, the menu will be sent

out in August for everyone to order their meal ahead of time. Coffee and light refreshments will be provided for everyone. Zoom will be logged into, but the meeting is not set up to be a remote meeting for those that will be attending in person.

Executive Director's Report: Michael MacKillop

Department of Services for the Blind (DSB) Staff went to the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Conference. They learned about congressional funding and awareness as well as the three main strategic goals for the national organization: staffing, streamlining processes, and marketing.

- Staffing – There is a lot of staffing turnover, at all levels. Also, adding positions to meet needs that have been unmet.
- Streamlining - There are five major projects in place for streamlining and reorganizing the agency.
- Marketing – overhauling the website, communications, rebranding, and all the materials as a next step

Overall, the DSB is fitting in with the national trend in a positive way.

The State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL) public comment period is ending, which impacts the SRCB because funding is derived from part B independent funding and that is the only money allocated towards those under age 55 that are not interested in working or cannot work; where work is not the goal, but they still need basic skills of blindness to maintain an independent life. While supplementation DOES sometimes happen with state funds or social security reimbursements, the funds from the SPIL are critical to support those under age 55 that don't want to be a part of the vocational rehabilitation program. Michael has been collaborating with Bek on how DSB's data can support the SPIL.

The SRCB quarterly report showed that while there was a slight decrease in numbers served, there was a sharp increase in those identifying as having multiple disabilities, and an increase in serving people whose income is at or less than \$30k per year (poverty level). Also, featured in the quarterly report was a compelling story about Ken, who demonstrated the impact of independent living services in enabling individuals to manage daily tasks effectively. This underscores the importance and success of these services in improving quality of life.

Business Enterprise Program (BEP) - The upcoming fiscal year marks the final year of major state funding for overhaul projects. The overhauling of the Natural Resource Building (NRB) has been started with positive outcomes noted for smoother project management and progress. The BEP team will continue to also be focused on getting more equipment and refreshing other facilities. Michael also expressed gratitude for the extra funding obtained at the last legislative session with the help of Senator Hunt.

During the legislative session, last minute and much appreciated support from Robert Ott at OB2 Café played a crucial role in maintaining high standards of service at the Dome Café, garnering positive feedback from legislators. The decision was made to close the in-person services at the

Dome Café during summer and go with a micro market that is supported daily with fresh products, with plans to reopen for the next legislative session. Micromarkets are a pay-as-you-go self-service model that is highly profitable. Overall, the addition of micromarket options has led to higher customer satisfaction.

Vocational rehabilitation has had a slight increase in applications and is serving more people. A significant change noted in the last quarter compared to previous quarters was the average hourly wage went from \$31 per hour to \$35 per hour. This increase reflects positive trends in job placements and wages for VR participants. An exciting note around the diverse careers obtained in the past quarter, from farm contractors, to lawyers, to an Atmospheric Earth Marine & Science teacher. This diversity underscores the Rehabilitation Act's core philosophy of identifying individual strengths and interests to foster long-term career success.

The state plan has been completed and turned in with requests for edits in May, with a focus on more refined goals and measures. The RSA wanted specific percentage increases and benchmarking where DSB is now. The SRCB has played a major role in developing the plan, identifying goals where DSB needs focus for improvement. One area of focus includes finding ways to keep customers engaged in the VR services and as a goal, increasing the percentage of customers exiting the program with employment. The 2023 benchmark was 32% percent; the new goal over the next two years is to achieve 42% of participants exiting with employment. The second goal is to ensure staff development as there are a lot of staff that are either in new roles through internal promotions or are just new to the agency. The focus here is to build the skill set, foster cultural and community connections, and promote a shared mission among team members. The third goal included was ensuring equity of services for deaf and blind customers.

DSB wants to achieve at least 44% of outcomes where individuals earned \$25 per hour or more; improve referral rates by 5%; and enhance VR process metrics to meet negotiated performance indicators. While the agency performs well against these metrics, when combined with the state, the numbers do not look as good. One example, the state goal for individuals still employed two quarters after leaving program is 44%, and state results came in at 38% of. Yet DSB, by itself, came in at 51.2% in the same period. Since the DSB works with a smaller number of customers, its numbers will not bring the state up as a whole. Close collaboration with DVR will be needed. The new DVR Director Dana Phelps has been very open to doing just that.

DSB has addressed findings from federal monitoring, focusing on revising policies, procedure, and internal controls. One significant adjustment was aligning the starting age for pre-employment transition services with DVR, ensuring compliance with federal expectations. Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) has been able to meet the federal requirement of dedicating 15% of VR grants to direct services for students. This has involved strategic financial management and collaboration to optimize resource allocation and support for vocational services.

Christopher Zilar asked: How did DSB manage to spend the 15%?

Michael stated that one way has been the YES2 (Youth Employment Solutions) program, which has increased the number of students and other workshops for pre-employment transition services. Last year it was 20 students, this year it is 35. Students are brought into Seattle and connected

with paid work for six weeks away from family. They learn how to get to and from work independently as well as how to do their own shopping. Getting students work experience is key to connecting them to workplace cultures and expectations. It also helps the employee realize the potential, value, and ability a person with a visual disability can provide to workplace.

Lisa Wheeler added year-round activities are also being done. Such as the Vision to Victory camp, Youth Track at the Washington State Consumer Convention, and the 3T Academy. A Family Conference was created called Stronger Together that is focused on mental health and well-being for students.

There is a plan to shift the traditional model for student career exploration services. Rather than have staff on-site, full-time during workshops, specialists will focus more on regional work, coordinating cases with counselors based on student needs, and building capacity through oversight and outreach to meet staff and administrators to share what is possible for students with visual disabilities.

Michael talked about the mission, vision and values that came out of All Staff back in April.

Mission: Working together with individuals who are Blind, Deaf-Blind or Low Vision so they can flourish in their homes, communities and workplaces

Vision: An accessible and prosperous future without limits

Values: Empathy – We seek to understand and meet you where you are

Integrity – We provide authentic, transparent, and responsive services

Collaboration – We build dynamic teams and meaningful partnerships

There has been active solicitation of feedback, which has shown polarization on terms like “flourish” and “future without limits.” Despite differing opinions, these terms were retained due to the positive energy they invoke, and the opportunity they present for discussion.

Julie Brannon stated it is a benefit and a detriment to being connected with DVR and wanted to know will it go back to how it was previously? Will DSB ever be counted independently?

Michael replied that it is not likely if federal partners maintain their current perspective. DSB values its autonomy and unique approach compared to other agencies like DVR, highlighting their success and distinct operational style. In some respects, the DVR may want to emulate the DSB.

Jen Bean echoed Michael using an example of DVR using DSB letters to update theirs, making the DVR letters more customer friendly.

There is anticipation of changes under a new governor and potential impacts on leadership roles within the DSB. The Director position of DSB is a governor-appointed position. The SRCB has been reminded of their responsibility under the Revised Code of Washington to educate the governor about the qualities and needs of the DSB Director. This involvement aims to inform the governor’s decision-making regarding any potential changes in leadership.

Fiscal – Congress has decided to flat-fund vocational rehabilitation programs nationally for the first time, foregoing the usual cost-of-living increase. This decision does pose a challenge, considering

the typical annual increase is around 7%. Nationally, too much money is being returned. However, DSB has state money to carry over into the second year of the biennium and is likely to be okay financially for the next two years. In the state plan, the Order of Selection category was ended for DSB, indicating that resources will be sufficient to serve eligible individuals over the next two years, without needing to prioritize based on severity of disability. It will be important to watch the forecast to ensure there is enough money to serve everyone and their needs in an individualized way.

Presentation: Sara Logston, Birth-13 Specialist

Sara Logston holds a master's in special education with an emphasis in Visual Impairment, although she does not hold a state license as a Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) as her role in DSB as the Birth-13 Specialist does not require it. Sara herself has low vision and partial deafness, which gives her a firsthand understanding of the challenges individuals with sensory impairments face. Sara joined DSB in March with no participants and many ideas, recognizing the challenges and excitement of building a program from the ground up.

Through the Ogden Resource Center, Sara discovered approximately 1,400 youth within the Birth-13 age group registered, suggesting a baseline for potential participants, noting that the age group birth to preschool, might not be immediately registered.

Sara's primary goal has always been to connect families and help students build a social network. This is one of the main gaps; families with children who are blind, deaf-blind or low vision need a community and support network. This network is crucial for developing social, independent living and advocacy skills among children. Finding the name "Birth-13" sterile and not engaging for families, Sara rebranded to the "Explorers Program" to convey a sense of adventure and discovery for children exploring their world and potential vocations, as well as their social and emotional growth. A marketing agency was engaged to ensure the program's branding and messaging resonate with families, educators, TVIs, and other stake holders.

A goal of Sara's is to identify gaps in education and support systems for visually disabled children from birth to age 13, aiming to ensure that children receive comprehensive education and support that includes skills typically taught by TVIs, fill in where there may be gaps. She stresses the importance of working not just with children but also with their families. She wants to integrate foundational skills into children's lives consistently and address any preconceived notions or fears parents may have regarding their child's capabilities. Rather than reinventing existing resources, she is making sure the existing programs are being supported and utilized such as Cane Quest and Advocacy Being. She's participated in events such as resource fairs, end-of-year parties, and literacy programs like Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL). These engagements help promote awareness of DSB's services and build connections within the community.

Data is currently being gathered through focus groups involving families, teachers and administrators. This data will help identify necessary programming across Washington state and uncover existing barriers that need addressing. Sarah emphasized that developing the program is a collective effort at DSB, integrating insights from data, her own education, and feedback.

Sara underscores significant gaps in services, particularly exacerbated by COVID, which has left many visually disabled children and their families feeling isolated. She aims to address foundational skill-building needs crucial for future independence. A poignant example was shared of a mother's apprehension about her blind son attending preschool alone for the first time. Through support and education, the mother realized her son's potential and became excited about his progress; she went from "He can't do this" to "I wonder what else he can do?" highlighting the importance of early intervention and parental support.

The program's primary focus remains on fostering social engagement and learning for children with visual impairments. Sara believes these skills – such as advocacy, social, and soft skills – are essential from a young age and critical for future employment readiness. The model developed by Sara closely mirrors that of the Pre-ETS program, focusing on foundational skills essential for future success. She envisions the Birth-13 program seamlessly feeding into the Pre-ETS program, preparing the youth for future vocational opportunities.

Damiana Harper added that her and Sara have been working with Matt Hines, of the Pre-ETS program, that the programs must be separate financially as the Birth-13 program is fully state-funded, and that they are doing meet and greets for families around the state.

Kris Colcock stated she is excited for this program, would like consumer groups to be part of the meet and greets as they have peer-to-peer groups, to which Sara agreed.

Julie Brannon asked can consumer groups know about events ahead of time so they can get information out to members.

Sara said to just reach out to her as everyone is still in the beginning stages.

Andy Arvid asked if there was a way to dispose of the term TVI (Teacher of Visually Impaired)? Dislikes the negativity of the word "impaired."

Sara agreed, stated it will take time and speaking up about it.

Presentation: Alice Klein, OTC Vision Rehabilitation Specialist Senior

The first Statewide Deaf-Blind Consortium met in May. Several organizations were invited to attend, including DSB, Lighthouse, Employment Security Department, Helen Keller Center, Washington State School for the Blind and Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing. A "wrap-around of services" to improve deaf-blind services across the state and offer collaboration between various organizations, improve employment outcomes, foster community engagement, and enhance DSB surrounding deaf and blind cultural issues.

DSB was tasked with exploring file-sharing between organizations to keep each other updated, an internal repository of who to contact at each organization.

Damiana Harper added she received notification that a Teams solution has been worked out. The committee and consortium came together as a result of feedback from customers and members of the SRC-B.

Executive Committee Report: Andy Arvidson

Andy reiterated SRCB's support of Michael MacKillop with the new governor, recognizing his efforts and achievements. There is an awareness of upcoming changes in leadership and the need to advocate for the importance of having an effective director with DSB.

Policy Committee Report: Kris Colcock

The in-person meeting in September is shaping up to be fun and informative. There will be an opportunity to hear from students at the Orientation and Training Center (OTC) during the meeting with an option to check out where the students live with a tour of the OTC apartments after the meeting.

Julie Brannon added the training portion will be from 1:30 pm to 3:00 pm. If there are any specific topics to include, please let Julie know.

Membership Committee Report: Julie Brannon

Committee meetings will be quarterly, with the next meeting scheduled for June 27th at 1 pm. Action items for the committee are New Member Onboarding and a mentoring program.

Customer Satisfaction Committee Report: Jen Bean

The committee is partnering closely with the executive committee to plan and execute individual listening sessions. The focus is on ensuring a diverse representation of deaf-blind customers by developing criteria for participant selection. Language access is also considered, with plans to use video relay calls and consult with advocates to ensure effective communication.

The vision is to conduct on-on-one sessions with selected customers, allowing for in-depth discussions about their experiences, accommodations, and feedback at DSB. This approach enables follow-up questions and a deeper understanding compared to traditional surveys. The plan is to schedule one session per month to manage workload and ensure quality interactions.

Wrap-up/Meeting Adjourned

Meeting was adjourned at 11:43 am.