**Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS)
 Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)
 Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired
Meeting Draft Minutes

June 15, 2023

Members Present
Al Sylvestre, Chairman; Eileen Akers; Katherine Guzman; Beth Rival; Stephan Thal; Mary Silverberg; Samuel Pride; Astread Ferron-Poole

Members Absent
Andrea Guidice

Others Present
Carol Jenkins, BESB Director; Mary Burgard, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor; Tyrell Sampson, Vending Facility Supervisor; Chris Lassen, Adult Services Supervisor; Andrew Norton, Outgoing ADS Legislative Liaison; Jennifer Proto, Legislative Liaison; Rayah Martin, BESB Secretary

Public Present
None

Welcome and Introductions
Chairman Sylvestre called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m.
New Legislative Liaison for ADS Jennifer Proto was introduced by Andrew Norton.

Public Comment
Board member Stephen Thal brought two items to the attention of the board. He has started a Low Vision group at Masonicare Retirement Community and is looking to have a BESB representative visit. He also wants to get started on planning for Blindness Equality Day, and to work with other blindness groups.

Old Business
Minutes from the March 16, 2023 Meeting
MOTION: A Motion was made by Eileen Akers and seconded by Beth Rival to approve the draft minutes from the March 16, 2023, meeting.** **Motion passed unanimously.

New Business
Work Group Reports

Low Vision
Director Carol Jenkins reported on the work that has been done to update documents for Low Vision providers to apply. The committee discussed the possibility of making the application process easier.

Education
No membership

Employment and Training
No report was given during the meeting, but Beth Rival sent a written report regarding the workgroup’s activities to be included with these minutes. This can be found in Appendix A.

Technology
No membership

Chair Sylvestre asked for volunteers to be members of the vacant work groups.

Administrative Items
Progress on filling vacant and anticipated positions and Report From the Director

Director Jenkins reported on these two agenda items combined. She reported that a new Administrative Assistant is starting on June 16, and a Rehab technology Teacher has been hired. She updated the committee on the hiring in process for other clerical, Adult Services and Vocational Rehabilitation positions.

She reported on Bureau work to update the policies and procedures manual for Adult Services. There is also work being done on consumer surveys and assessments, making our forms more accessible electronically, and updating and improving BESB’s electronic case management system.

The committee discussed scheduling of blind staff field visits and improvements in the fielding of bureau phone calls.

Bureau Program Updates

Business Enterprise Program
Tyrell Sampson gave an update on the BEP program. He described a new 12-month pilot vending machine route partnership. He updated the Advisory Board on the status of seasonal concession stands as well as the ongoing and new operations in Community Colleges and the National Guard Training Facility.

A brief discussion of the challenges of the pilot program followed.

Mr. Sampson’s full notes can be found in Appendix B at the end of these minutes.

Vocational Rehabilitation
Mary Burgard gave an update on the VR program. She discussed staffing and ongoing recruitment and interviews for open positions. She also discussed in-person conferences that are starting again and the benefits she and other attendees from being able to meet and network on employment and transition issues.

The consumer survey is going out soon. Increasing the number of individuals getting the survey, whether they have closed successfully or unsuccessfully. Implementing the survey electronically instead of phone calls if an email address is available. The comprehensive needs assessment is also in the works.

Closures for June: projecting close to 10 more putting us around 96 or 97 for the year. This is more than last year and brings us closer to pre-Covid numbers.

The committee discussed being able to find jobs that work remotely, even out of state, and that being a help to employment.

Specifics of this update can be found in Appendix C at the end of these minutes.

Budget Update
Director Jenkins provided the budget update. We are in the last month of our state fiscal year and reaching the end of carryover fiscal year 2022. Specifics of her report can be found in Appendix D of these minutes.

A question was raised about money set aside for large print calendars. Director Jenkins said there is money set aside for them in Supplemental Services for the Blind, but she is hoping to use some VR funds available from Social Security reimbursements.

Some additional discussion was held regarding VR funds, reallotment dollars and penalties. Director Jenkins will be working with fiscal next quarter to determine what reallotment dollars we can apply for in federal fiscal year 2024.

Legislative Update
Ms. Proto gave an update on legislation affecting BESB and its consumers. There were updates to service animal legislation and accessibility parking permits. She also reported on a wide-ranging omnibus bill affecting resources and support services for people with disabilities, as well as the biennium budget bill which takes effect July 1, 2023.**

 **Details of this report can be found in Appendix E

Points to the Good and Welfare
Mr. Thal and Chair Sylvestre encouraged filling the vacancies on the Advisory Board and workgroups.

Adjournment
MOTION: A motion was made by Eileen Akers and seconded by Katherine Guzman to adjourn the meeting.
Chair Sylvestre adjourned the meeting at 12:05 p.m.

The next meeting will be held on Thursday, September 21, 2023, at 10:00 a.m.**

**Appendix A: Employment and Training Workgroup Update**

**Employment and Training**

**Workgroup members: Beth Rival, Eileen Akers Primary focus: a more informed understanding of the  operation and structure of BESB Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) beyond the time that can be spent at a Board meeting.**

**Meetings were held on Aug. 18 and Sept. 6. and appreciation to all who participated including VR Supervisor Mary Burgard for coordination and information and to Carlotta Copenhaver Transition Coordinator, Jonathan Richmond Counselor Coordinator, as well as to VR Counselors Jonathan Alberto, Angelo Vitale, and Enaida Mendoza. Special thanks to Zachary Moore for setting up our meetings.**

**As reported by Mary Burgard, currently there are**

**1- VR State Director (vacant)**

**1- VR Supervisor**

**1- VR Counselor Coordinator**

**9 VR Counselors — (2 vacant)**

**3 Rehabilitation Teachers (1 Vacant)**

**1- Transition Coordinator**

**2 — clerical (1 Vacant)**

**1- Quality Control Reviewer**

**The transition-aged students program was the focus of the first meeting. The transition program consists of a supervisor and two counselors. (One counselor position needs to be refilled.) Although some preliminary work can begin at age 14, focus begins at age 16. Interaction continues with students through the first year of college. Paid summer employment has included many remote positions where tasks are clearly delineated. Peer interaction is another benefit.**

**Training and employment was the focus of the meeting on Sept. 6. A majority of BESB clients are not part of the system beginning with Children's Services but are newly registered clients focusing on maintaining or finding new employment. There are several categories of vision loss. Clients come in through Adult Services. The process includes different types of assessment. Examples may include trial work experience and one to one or group support. The IPE is a road map which is necessarily highly individualized and can always be modified.**

**Regarding the issue of staff training, it was indicated that familiarity with people who are legally blind or visually impaired before being employed by BESB may often occur through American Job Centers. These centers also have adaptive technology where technology skills can be practiced.**

**Partnerships with Computers for the Blind in Texas have been established. Remote computer training was also noted. There are clients who have appropriate technology prior to acquiring employment. Acquisition of assistive technology can be a deal breaker when placing a prospective employee. There is adherence to a fine line in job development referencing the ADA.**

**In describing how computer training is essential for most jobs, the BEP program was cited as an example. BESB has replenished supplies to make it possible for some locations to reopen. This includes some college sites. Other sites are closed forever because there is not enough foot traffic. Because most state agencies are operating as hybrid, foot traffic is limited. Summer BEP sites have done very well. Furthermore some operators are overseeing two or three smaller locations including micro marts.**

**Addressing the area of manufacturing jobs, Mary referred to staff attendance at MASK out of Waterbury and how our folks can fit into that model. However, automation in manufacturing jobs was noted.**

**Another topic was the duration of residential training to help people who are blind develop a set of non-visual skills and techniques as well as achieving an emotional adjustment to blindness. Although there is no longer a twelve-week restriction, most programs are shorter than they used to be. Nevertheless training could last for nine months.**

**Preliminary Recommendations:**

**1. Staff**

**Given the enhanced scope of the transition program, in order for this program to be effective, the position of transition counselor must be filled as soon as possible.**

**Because an overwhelming majority of employment positions require knowledge of technology, it is imperative to have adequate BESB staff to provide technology training and employment follow-up. Currently there are two technologists on staff. VR is down one technologist. It is an urgent need to make every effort to rush positions through. Meanwhile contracting out needs to continue and perhaps increase.**

**The need for adequate VR field staff cannot be overstated. In tandem with the highly individualized nature of each situation, trust is at the core of how effectively a client and a VR staff member can work together to achieve a meaningful outcome. Short staffing in the northern part of the state was noted. Priority is urged to meet staffing needs.**

**2. We recommend a report to this Board of job placements annually at each December meeting to include a brief job description, also noting the visual status of each client placed, that is, totally blind, legally blind, visually impaired, or visually impaired progressive.**

**3. In summary, because of the special needs of people dealing with lack of vision, the integrity of BESB must be fully supported, including adequate staffing to fulfill the mission of this bureau.**

**4. This workgroup should continue to function to further study training and employment, including implementation of the VR State Plan.**

**program**

**we need to have an update about case closures and just what is precisely happening with getting jobs for people and the procedures that are in place. We suggest making a specific recommendation to the Board that VR make an annual report to the Board that includes a detailed update about closures.**

**“Technology accessibility and training” should be added under both Employment Services and Education Services.**

**Evaluation and identification**

**Doctors evaluation**

**Parent participation**

**Services and support**

**Data from PTP**

**NEAT market for training, perhaps also with Steve Deltatto.**

**Trades , electrical and plumbing**

**Leap, mobility**

**Staff positions need to be filled, especially technologists**

**Mary Berguard recommends waiting till staff positions have been refilled to continue Education and training.**

 **Appendix B: BEP Update
Business Enterprise Program Update:**

1. **To date, BEP continues to be in full motion assisting operators in maintaining their operations. Telework continues as a primary option within state government which, in turn, we continue to observe minimal building occupancy. As this work allowance is the new norm, our program maintains a positive outlook on our ability to increase operator profitability while preparing for future opportunities.**

**As a result, the Business Enterprise Program is proud to announce, with the approval of the Statewide Committee of Blind Vendors, the offering of a 12-month pilot vending machine route partnership program. This program aims to offer opportunities to current BEP operators in good standing on the 2023 Transfer and Promotion list who are interested in expanding their business opportunities or may be looking to transfer out of their current operations should this opportunity become permanent.**

**An SLA-approved vending route partnership is a vending route created within the awarded statewide vending machine contract. This proposed offering of opportunity maintains the integrity of the contract. It preserves the value for future statewide vending machines contract awards, ensuring that revenue will remain for the continuation of all program support, such as promoting business opportunities, providing training, health insurance, reimbursement of food loss, maintenance, repair, and purchase of equipment, etc.**

**Our program has earmarked $200,000.00 from the BEP budget to offer up to (10) $20,000.00 vending machine route opportunities. A vending route may earn up to $35,000.00 based on the number of operators interested.**

**Roles and responsibilities will include the following**

* **Weekly Visits**
* **Verify each vending machine is operational (non-operational machines will require a call or email to Pepsi and or to the current 3rd party snack vending company)**
* **Confirm product pricing in vending machine match the state contract prices by selecting various products ensuring the price displayed on the screen is correct.**
* **Wipe down each machine with the suggested cleaning products by Vending Partner.**
* **Maintain a suggestion box or create an email address to accept suggestions, recommendations, or complaints to relay to the appropriate vending partner. (Pepsi or 3rd Party Snack company)**
* **Communicate quarterly with a designated building contact to ensure vending needs are met and participate in a bi-annual meeting with the contract holder.**

* **Create a monthly audit report to include the date visited, address, vending machine type (snack or beverage), assigned vending machine number, and any important concerns.**

**Operators can select their vending routes within the pre-approved list of offered locations.**

**Should we find this Pilot opportunity to be of success, the goal is to make this 12-month pilot opportunity permanent with the possibility of expanding beyond the existing group of operators within the program.**

1. **Seasonal concession stands are back in operation this season (Hammonassett Beach, Rocky Neck State Park & Greenwich Beach.)**

**Gillette Castle, we did not resume this season as the operator withdrew interest due to a lack of profitability from the prior season, partially due to the park's decision to restructure the castle tours affecting the flow of concession stand traffic.**

1. **We are proud to announce that we have created one new micro-market at Quinebaug Community College in place of their prior over-the-counter food service. In addition, we will be placing two additional micro-markets in the coming months, Middlesex Community College and Camp Nett -National Guard Training Facility in Niantic.**
2. **SCSU's top administration has notified our program of their satisfaction with our operator Amos Fatorma who partnered with Sodexo Food at SCCU. We are extremely pleased with this update for the operator and our program, as it reassures our program's ability to successfully prepare and place the right individual for the opportunities offered.**

**Overall, the BEP program has been and continues to be hard at work in providing viable opportunities, whether offered as a single operation or multiple locations. The goal is to provide a wage of earnings and opportunity that fits individual operator needs

Appendix C: Vocational Rehabilitation Update

Staffing updates. We have a new Transition Counselor covering the Northern part of the state starting on June 30th. This person has since declined and this position will be re-posted.**

**We have interviews schedule for the Bilingual VR Counselor on Wed. the 14th**

**And we are in the process for setting up interviews for the Rehabilitation Technologist.**

**We are recruiting for our second Transition Counselor covering the southern part of the state posting should  go out soon**

**We have had a few in person conference over the past couple of months.**

**Our SRC Chair, VR Supervisor and Director attended Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and National Council for State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) in April, they were back to back in Bethesda MD. The focus was on federal fiscal regulations and contracts. NCSAB had a focus on BEP, Tyrell from BESB attended**

**We had a follow up training from our Technical Assistance program from George Washington University with a Fiscal Training in CT for two days on federal regulations through (EDGAR) and upcoming monitoring from RSA.**

**Also in April, VR sponsored the 29th annual Conference on Serving Adults with Disabilities in Westbrook, CT and 5 VR staff attended- the focus was on Customized Employment and Transition.**

**In May, VR Sponsored the  Association for Supporting Employment First Conference (APSE)- 5 VR Staff attended and the VR Supervisor was on the planning committee. This conference focused on Job Development, Supported Employment for individuals with Disabilities.**

**Also in May, the VR Supervisor, VR Counselor Coordinator and Transition Coordinator attend the Capacity Building Conference for Transition in Charlotte NC, this was a three day conference with 12 members from CT attending from BRS, State Department of Education and SERC. This year the conference focused on VR’s relationship with the Education system.

Appendix D: Budget Update
BESB June Budget Report**

1. **VR FFY 2022**
	1. **Remaining balance: $ 1,805,254.95**
	2. **VR Encumbered $ 787,107.81**
	3. **Potential Remaining (payroll needs to come out): $ 1,018, 147.14**
2. **Supported Employment FFY 2022**
	1. **Part A: Adults:**
		1. **Remaining balance: $ 2,478**
	2. **Part B: Youth:**
		1. **Remaining balance: $ 22,500**
	3. **Encumbered (Authorized): $ 20,022**
3. **BEP FFY 2023**
	1. **Remaining: $2,252,210.31**
4. **OIB (55 and older) FFY 2023**
	1. **Remaining for client services: $ 16,461.63**
	2. **Encumbered (Authorized): $ 5,872.34**
	3. **Potential remaining for client services: $ 10,589.29**
5. **Adult Services to the Blind State Funds**
	1. **Remaining balance: $ 13,600.59**
6. **Children’s Services SFY**
	1. **Remaining balance: $ 690,399.18**
	2. **Encumbered (Authorized): $ 219,060.17**
	3. **Potential remaining (June payroll needs to come out): $ 471, 339.01**

 **Appendix E: Legislative Update:**

 **2023 Legislative Session Update**

**to the**

**Advisory Board for Persons Who are Blind or Visually Impaired**

**by Jennifer Proto, ADS Legislative Liaison**

**June 15, 2023**

**Service Animals**

1. **One bill, which revised the domestic animal laws, updates the term “guide dogs” with “service animals,” conforming with federal law. It also eliminates the requirement that the animal be readily identified as a service animal (sSB 1069, § 9).**
2. **The 2nd bill allows the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to establish a sea- and shorebird protection program along the state’s public coastal areas and makes it an infraction to disturb the areas from March to September. The bill exempts service animals from the requirement that a pet or other animal under a person’s control be kept from coming within 100 feet of an identified protection area (HB 6813).**

**Windshield Parking Placards**

**The Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) bill makes some changes to windshield parking placards used by people with certain disabilities or blindness by updating their name from “parking permit for persons with disabilities” to “Accessibility Parking Permit.”**

**It also creates an Accessible Parking Advisory Council and charges it with developing a strategy to deter, detect, and prevent fraud and misuse related to these placards. The council consists of nine specified members, one of whom is appointed by the ADS Commissioner (sSB 994).**

**Resources and Support Services**

**A wide-ranging omnibus bill, HB 5001, that was primarily focused on persons with an intellectual or developmental disability, has several provisions that apply more broadly to people with physical disabilities. For instance, the bill:**

1. **establishes a Human Services Career Pipeline Program to ensure sufficient trained providers are available to serve the needs of residents who are elderly or have disabilities, ADS, along with several other agencies and advocacy organizations, will be consulting on this pipeline (§ 11)**
2. **requires the Department of Transportation and each transit district to jointly develop plans to modernize and maintain Connecticut’s bus stops and shelters to:**
	1. **ensure compliance with ADA’s guidelines;**
	2. **include sidewalks, appropriate curb cuts and ramps, shelter from weather conditions, and lighting and signage that give real-time transportation service information; and**
	3. **consider installing solar energy systems to operate the lights and allow the charging of mobile electronic devices (§ 22)**
3. **requires the DMV to create a video presentation that instructs and gives best practices on ways to appropriately interact with certain people with disabilities. Applicants for a public passenger license endorsement must then watch the video to obtain or renew their license (§ 25)**

**Numerous provisions in the bill pertain to special education, and particularly transition services as students prepare to leave the education system. For instance, the bill aligns state law with federal requirements for interpreters, including a registered interpreter for persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind, at PPT meetings and translated IEP documents to ensure student, parent, and guardian understanding (§ 39).**

**The bill requires ADS to employ enough vocational rehabilitation staff to provide transition services for students requiring special education, if determined that they may be eligible to receive services from ADS (§ 44).**

**The bill also increases the age up to which a court may issue support orders for adult children with certain disabilities, from up to age 21 to up to age 26 (§ 64).**

**Long-Term Care**

**A bill advocated for by the Long-Term Care Ombudsperson, requires nursing homes to notify her about a resident’s involuntary transfer or discharge on the same day the nursing home notifies the resident. Failure to do so invalidates the transfer or discharge.**

**The bill also establishes a dementia services coordinator within ADS to coordinate services across state agencies, assess and analyze dementia-related data collected by the state, evaluate state-funded dementia services, identify and support the development of dementia-specific training programs (HB 5781).**

**Highlights from the Budget Bill & Implementer**

**Beginning October 1, 2024, the biennium budget expands eligibility for HUSKY C, which provides Medicaid coverage to people who are age 65 or older, blind, or living with a disability, by raising the income limit from 143% of the TFA cash benefit to 105% of FPL, after any authorized income disregards. To put that into context, the HUSKY C monthly income limit is $700 for an individual and $946 for a two-person family. whereas under the bill it will be $1,276 per month for an individual and $1,725 for a two-person family (HB 6941, § 318).**

**The budget (effective July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2025) also:**

* **Allocates $2.25M in FY 24 from federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for Elderly Nutrition and appropriates an additional $1.5M for that program in FY 25**
* **Funds 10 service navigators (2 at each of the 5 Area Agencies on Aging)**
* **Carryforwards $150,000 for FY 24 to provide a grant to the Ellington Senior Center for replacing a bus**
* **Provides $100,000 in both FYs 24 & 25 for the Stamford senior center**
* **Provides $100,000 in FYs 24 & 25 for the Communication Advocacy Network for the hiring of an executive director**

**Study Bills & Working Groups**

**A few of proposals needed further research and policy development and so became a task force or working group:**

1. **to study and make recommendations concerning the elderly nutrition program. This includes a review of the (1) program eligibility requirements, (2) types of meals provided, (3) costs of meal prep and delivery, (4) comparing the number of program participants to the estimated number of people needing nutritional services, (5) looking at funding level adequacy, and (6) process for contracting with elderly nutrition providers (SB 1053)**
	1. **a representative from ADS is a designated taskforce member**
2. **to study minimum standards for the timely repair of motorized wheelchairs, including improving timelines for assessing and repairing them by a manufacturer or authorized service provider (HB 6855 as amended by LCO 9474)**
	1. **a representative from ADS, as well as several other state agencies, are designated taskforce members**
3. **concerning any revisions necessary to nursing home waiting list requirements**
	1. **the LTC Ombudsman and the Public Health and Social Services Commissioners, or their designees, are part of the working group (SB 989)**