**Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS)**

**Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)**

**Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS)**

**Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired Meeting September 19, 2024**

**Members Present  
Chairwoman Eileen Akers; Elizabeth Rival; Stephen Thal; Mary Silverberg; Andrea Giudice**

**Members Absent**

**Samuel Pride;** **Astread Ferron-Poole, Ex-Officio for the Commissioner, Department of Social Services; Katherine Guzman.**

**Others Present  
Carol Jenkins, BESB Director; Catherine Summ, Children Service Supervisor; Chris Lassen, Adult Services Supervisor; Jennifer Proto, Legislative Liaison; Lisa Drew, Administrative Assistant; Anthony Spence for Astread Ferron-Poole, Ex-Officio the Commissioner, Department of Social Services.**

**Chairwoman Eileen Akers called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m.**

**Minutes of the Meeting for Action June 20th, 2024, as amended with Stephen Thal placement associated with the board reports and the correction of the word astrology in Mary Burgard's report with astronomy.**

**MOTION: Elizabeth Rival moved to accept the minutes as amended, with Stephen Thal's** **placement associated with the board reports and the correction and replacement of the word astrology in Mary Burgard's report with astronomy, and Andrea Giudice seconded the motion. The Motion carried unanimously.**

**New Business:**

**Proposed Meeting Dates for 2025 for Action: meetings will be held on the following Thursdays from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. March 20th, June 12th, September 18th, and December 18th.**

**MOTION: Elizabeth Rival to accept the meeting dates for 2025 Andrea Giudice seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.**

**Blind Americans Equality Day: Stephen Thal**

**Stephen Thal reported that Blind Americans Equality Day 2024 will focus on emergency preparedness and fire safety for individuals who are blind, DeafBlind, or have low vision. The event is scheduled to take place on October 15th, 2024, from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. at the Town of Windsor Fire Department, located at 340 Bloomfield Ave, Windsor, CT 06095. The program will commence with a proclamation and remarks by officials. It will be followed by an open house featuring fire safety tips and demonstrations specifically tailored for individuals who are blind, DeafBlind, or have low vision.**

**Bureau Program Updates**

**Children’s Services Supervisor Catherine Summ**

**Appendix[[1]](#endnote-1)**

**Adult Services Supervisor Chris Lassen**

**Appendix[[2]](#endnote-2)**

**BESB Director Carol Jenkins**

**Appendix[[3]](#endnote-3)**

**Progress on filling vacant and anticipated positions, Budget update, including future planning to reduce maintenance of effort penalty, and Other administrative items**

**Appendix[[4]](#endnote-4)**

**6. Legislative Update by Jennifer Proto, Legislative Liaison, ADS**

**Application/Appointments the Advisory Board**

**Jennifer Proto gave an update. She reported the State Department on Aging and Disability Services is preparing submissions to the Office of Policy and Management for the upcoming biennium budget. This effort supports the governor's budget proposal for the legislative session beginning in January.**

**The Submissions are due on October 1st, 2024. Throughout the session, the governor's and legislature's priorities will be negotiated, with the aim of reaching an agreement by the end of the session.**

**The finalized biennium budget is prepared for the next two fiscal years.**

**Ms. Proto added that the statute does not specifically limit the board's advocacy role, allowing members to advocate as they see fit. This could involve a group effort. For example, she suggested considering writing a letter to advocate.**

**The appropriations chairs are Senator Cathy Osten and Representative Toni Walker. It's important to engage with your representatives and state senators, as they can advocate for your concerns. There are various ways to make your voice heard, such as attending public hearings, especially when important matters like the budget are being discussed. It's important to recognize that there are many options available for advocacy, and there are no strict restrictions on how you can engage in these efforts.**

**Ms. Proto also added Connecticut has an upcoming election with an initiative on the ballot to expand absentee voting. Currently, absentee voting requires voters to meet specific criteria (e.g., being out of town or having a permanent disability). Connecticut is one of 14 states that does not allow no-excuse absentee voting for the general public. The proposed change would enable anyone to request a mail-in ballot without needing a specific reason. Studies indicate that allowing no-excuse absentee voting increases participation among individuals with disabilities by reducing obstacles to voting. It's important for voters to consider this initiative on Election Day.**

**Director Jenkins has indicated about the application and appointment that she is collaborating with Tom Scanlon in the governor's office to facilitate communication with individuals who expressed interest in applying. However, to her knowledge, she has not received any updates since that time. Therefore, it appears that no applications have been submitted at this point.**

**The discussion took place on the preferred Platform for future meetings.**

**Platform Preference for upcoming meetings: Utilizing the ZOOM Platform for upcoming meetings.**

**Motion: A motion was made by Andrea Giudice and seconded by Marybeth Silverberg. The motion carried unanimously.**

**Adjournment**

**Motion to adjourn was made by Marybeth Silverberg and seconded by Andrea Giudice.**

**Chairwoman Eileen Akers adjourned the meeting at 11:40 pm**

**Next Meeting: Thursday December 19th, 2024.**

1. **Appendix**

   **BESB Advisory Board**

   **9-19-24**

   **Children’s Services Program Updates**

   **Staffing and student updates:**

   * **BESB staff:**
     + **There are currently 30 Education Consultants, three O&M instructors, one Rehabilitation Instructor, and one Quality Control Reviewer in Children’s Services (total of 35) who are all directly supervised by the Children’s Services Education Supervisor.**
     + **Two of the Education Consultants were recently hired. One started on August 22 and the second is anticipated to start as soon as her CT teaching certification is processed. This should be any day now.**
     + **One Education Consultant resigned this past August, and I submitted a refill request and it is still pending approval. Her caseload has been temporarily assigned to other Children’s Services Education Consultants until her replacement is hired. When this position is filled the number of Education Consultants directly supervised by the Education Supervisor will increase to 31.**
     + **A request to establish and fill a new Education Consultant position was submitted by me this past August.**
     + **A request to establish and fill a new O&M position was submitted by me this past August.**
   * **13 itinerant teachers utilize the Education Supervisor as their primary BESB liaison.**
   * **There are currently 924 active Children’s Services clients.**
   * **Bristol and Meriden are utilizing BESB Education Consultants for the 24-25 school year and no longer employ their own certified teachers of the visually impaired.**
   * **Due to the increase in staffing, the Children’s Services budget does not have sufficient funds to support additional programs and activities, and adaptive educational materials. Some examples of programs and activities impacted are: Expanded Core Curriculum activities, parent events, in-service trainings, low vision exams, etc. Some examples of educational equipment and supplies impacted are: braille and large print books, assistive technology, low vision aids, dark lead pencils, etc.**

   **A sample of past ECC Student Events earlier this calendar year:**

   * **Skills for Life: July 15-19, 2024**
   * **Leap Into Life- Yardgoats Dunkin Park Baseball Field Tour: 6-18-24**
   * **Preschool family field trip at New Pond Farm: 5-18-24**
   * **Family event at the Beardsley Zoo: 5-4-24**
   * **Leap into Life Cooking and Wellness: April 11-12, 2024**
   * **Leap into Life Virtual College Experience: 3-26-24**
   * **Middle School duckpin Bowling: 3-26-24**

   **The BESB Buzz:**

   **Twice yearly Children’s Services newsletter, published electronically and in print. The newsletter is also translated into Spanish.**

   **Link to the spring 2024 English edition:** [**https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/aginganddisability/besb/buzz-newsletters-english-and-spanish/besb-buzz-spring-2024.pdf**](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/aginganddisability/besb/buzz-newsletters-english-and-spanish/besb-buzz-spring-2024.pdf)

   **Link to the spring 2024 Spanish edition:** [**https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/aginganddisability/besb/buzz-newsletters-english-and-spanish/el-zumbido-spring-2024spanish.pdf**](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/aginganddisability/besb/buzz-newsletters-english-and-spanish/el-zumbido-spring-2024spanish.pdf)

   **Spring and fall in-service events for district educators:**

   * **Children’s Services will conduct its annual series of fall in-services for education team members in Wethersfield.** 
     + **Large Print: 9-30-24**
     + **Braille: 10-01-24**
     + **Preschool: 10-15-24**
     + **CVI (Academic): 10-15-24**
     + **MI/VI Day (participants attend one day): Oct. 21-22, 2024**
   * **Children’s Services conducted a spring B-3 in-service on 5-21-24 at the Pitkin Center in Wethersfield for education team members**

   **Respectfully submitted by Catherine Summ, 9-11-24** [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. **Appendix**

   **ADULT SERVICES PROGRAM REPORT, Sept. 19, 2024**

   **The Adult Services program reports that work with OIB-TAC, the Older Individuals with Blindness Technical Assistance Center, has been completed. Three priorities were addressed: to revise the Adult Services Policy & Procedures Manual, to develop standard assessment tools by discipline that staff members will use to guide the development of goals with clients when constructing Independent Living Plans, and to devise a Client Satisfaction Survey. As reported in March, the Client Satisfaction Survey was piloted, and staff will shortly begin to use their version of the assessment tool. Meanwhile, the Policy and Procedures Manual is undergoing internal ADS legal review before being forwarded to the ADS Commissioner.**

   **In May, Adult Services held the first BESB Silver Summit in Hartford. Nearly 60 ILOB clients in open plan status gathered for a three-day, two-night event undertaken with the assistance of Blind Savvy, a national training consultancy, on maximizing independence.**

   **As regards staffing, the two Rehabilitation Technologists have simultaneously begun studying for CATIS certification at UMass/Boston. They shared a statewide caseload for about five months before each of them assumed primary responsibility for roughly half of the active clients. In just the past month, we outlined the geographic territories in which each will assume primary responsibility. Colleagues in Rehabilitation Teaching are mentoring them in gaining an understanding of case management and documentation standards. At the same time, the three Rehab Teachers are continuing to serve clients while clarifying the somewhat fluid boundaries between technology and rehab teaching. The three Orientation & Mobility Instructors are undertaking to demonstrate proof of concept for the demonstration kit of canes, shades, and monoculars that they dispense to clients in open status This effort was spearheaded at the initiation of the O&M staff but was shepherded through a series of meetings with Fiscal Services by Director Carol Jenkins. Additionally, there are four Social Workers conducting intakes and constructing independent living plans. The ILOB program has benefited from a major influx of funding from Social Security Reimbursement Funds that the VR program is not presently in a position to use. Chris Lassen, AS program supervisor.** [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. **Appendix**

   BESB Updates

   September 2024

   1. **Staff Vacancies**
      * Two VR Pre-ETS Counselor positions are vacant. Mary and Carol are working on getting them refilled.
      * Mary and Carol will be discussing and evaluating what position VR needs to see if a Secretary II is what is actually needed to refill that vacant position.
      * There is a vacant TVI position in Children’s services which Catherine and Carol are working to refill.
      * Carol and Catherine are also working to hire more TVI’s and an O&M instructor, which will depend on what the budget allows for
      * BESB welcomed a New Special Assistant on August 9th Chris Goudarzy.
   2. **BESB Phone Call Tree**
   * The new message has been recorded by staff in English and Spanish and is in the process of being uploaded to go live.
   1. **Large Print Calendars**
   * Half of the 2025 large print calendars have been mailed out. We are waiting for the other half to be printed and delivered to BESB. Once that happens, the remaining 2025 calendars will be mailed out.
   1. **BESB Eye Report**
      * The BESB eye report form is now online and on the agency website for eye doctors to begin using. This will now be completed and submitted online for consumers.
   2. **Zoom AI Companion** 
      * The Children’s Services Zoom account and the Administration Zoom account have had Zoom AI Companion AI enabled on them. Carol is still working on obtaining a Zoom account for VR, Adult Services, and BEP. Once these accounts have been obtained, the AI Companion may be enabled.
   3. **Audio Visual Equipment for BESB Conference Rooms**
      * Carol has sought prior approval from RSA to spend BESB funds on AV equipment for both conference rooms to make hybrid meetings easier.
   4. **New Case Management System** 
      * BRS, BESB, and BITS are currently working to negotiate a price for the new case management system in which both agencies can afford and maintain for the long-term.
   5. **VR Program Outreach Materials**
      * BESB VR staff are working on outreach materials with Camelo for a phase one of this project. This will help BESB with outreach to potential clients, employers and eventually eye doctors.  There will be online materials as well as brochures and a pull up banner. BESB has new updated tablecloths for events, which have already been used.
   6. **VR Consultant Project** 
      * BESB is contracting with Synergy Consulting for guidance and assistance on preparing for the potential up-coming RSA Monitoring.
   7. **VR Satisfaction Survey** 
      * The contract request for the annual VR satisfaction survey has been completed. The proposed amount was $18,822.00. The final report will be completed and sent to BESB by mid-December.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. **BESB Budget Report**

   September 2024

   1. **Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) FFY 2023**
      1. Original VR Grant: $3,584,073

   Maintenance of Effort (MOE) Reduction: $444,034

   VR Grant after MOE Reduction: $3,140,039

   Reallotment: $750,000

   Total VR Grant with Reallotment: $3,890,039

   VR Remaining Balance: $490,803.68

   * 1. Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)
        1. Pre-ETS Total 15% Reserve including Reallotment: $583,505.85
        2. Pre-ETS Remaining Reserve: Met the reserve
     2. Supported Employment (SE)
        1. Part A: Adult Remaining balance: $23,500.00
           1. This includes a $1,000 credit from a vendor
        2. Part B: Youth Remaining balance: $22,156.20
   1. **Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) FFY 2024**
      1. Original VR Grant: $3,584,073.00

   Maintenance of Effort (MOE) Reduction: $4,206.00

   Total VR Grant: $3,579,867.00

   Reallotment: $80,796.00 (Haven’t received yet)

   Total VR Grant with Reallotment: $3,660,663.00

   VR Remaining Balance: $3,571,058.82

   * 1. Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)
        1. Pre-ETS Total 15% Reserve: $549,099.45
        2. Pre-ETS Remaining Reserve: $549,099.45
     2. Supported Employment (SE)
        1. Part A: Adult Remaining balance: $22,500.00
        2. Part B: Youth Remaining balance: $22,500.00
   1. **Business Enterprise Program (BEP)**
      * Remaining Balance: $3,117,721.18
   2. **Independent Living/Older Blind (IL/OB) FFY 2023 (Adults Over Age 55)**
      * Beginning balance: $361,314.00
      * Remaining balance: $61,722.88
   3. **Independent Living/Older Blind (IL/OB) FFY 22024 (Adults Over Age 55)**
      * Beginning Balance: $370,257.00
      * Remaining Balance: $370,257.00
   4. **Independent Living (IL) SFY 2025 (Adults Under Age 55)**
      * Beginning balance: $9,081.95
      * Remaining balance: $4,169.40
   5. **Children’s Services SFY 2025**
      * Beginning balance: $1,249,176.00
      * Remaining balance: $276,620.92

   [↑](#endnote-ref-4)