**Department of Rehabilitation Services**

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

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

**Draft Minutes**

**September 19, 2019**

**Members Present**

**Al Sylvestre, Chairman, Eileen Akers, Astread Ferron-Poole (representing the DSS Commissioner), David Gregoire, Katherine Guzman, Beth Rival, Mary Silverberg, Stephen Thal, Samuel Pride, and Randa Utter.**

**Members Absent**

**Andrea Giudice.**

**Others Present**

**Brian Sigman, BESB Director, Chris Lassen, Adult Services Supervisor, Ed Owens, BEP Supervisor, Catherine Summ, Education Supervisor, Mary Burgard, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor, Lori St. Amand, Volunteer Program Coordinator and Andrew Norton, DORS Legislative and Administrative Advisor.**

**Welcome and Introductions**

**Chairman Sylvestre called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.**

**Public Comment**

**There were no public comments.**

**Old Business**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Akers, seconded by Mr. Pride to approve the draft minutes from June 20, 2019. Motion passed unanimously.**

**New Business**

**Blind Americans Equality Day Workgroup Update**

**Mr. Thal reported that plans are in the process of being finalized for several events that will be occurring during the week of October 15th, in celebration of Blind Americans Equality Day. In addition to a proclamation from the Governor, and a discussion on updates to accessible voting, scheduled events include a focus on adaptive technology for veterans at the Eastern Blind Rehabilitation Center on October 15th, coinciding with a celebration of the center’s 50th anniversary. There will also be a mentoring and career exploration event at Collins Aerospace on October 17th, a demonstration of accessible exhibits at Mystic Aquarium on October 18th, and later in the month, an ice hockey demonstration by the Hartford Braillers on October 27th. Mr. Thal is reaching out to radio stations to bring attention to these events. Notices will also be posted on Facebook.**

**Meeting Dates for 2020**

**MOTION: On a motion made by Ms. Silverberg, seconded by Ms. Guzman, the meeting dates for 2020 were unanimously adopted as follows: March 19, June 18, September 17 and December 10, 2020.**

**Budget Update**

**Mr. Sigman announced that through the federal reallotment process, the bureau has received an additional $1.4 million to put towards vocational rehabilitation services. With the addition of these new funds, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program is now able to project adequate funding to serve all eligible individuals through federal fiscal year 2021.**

**Bureau Update**

**Ms. Lassen reported on anticipated retirements forthcoming in the Adult Services Program.  The staff person who coordinated low vision services with the eye doctors has retired and the position was refilled. Stephanie Monk has now assumed these duties.  The 2020 large print calendar draft has been reviewed and Mr. Lassen is awaiting the revised final version with the new agency name and logo.  A target date for distribution of these calendars is late October. Advisory Board members asked about some of the duties of the Human Service Advocates, wondering if they assisted with housing, particularly for individuals who are blind that are homeless.  Mr. Lassen detailed some of the efforts by staff of the Adult Services Program to address each circumstance as they arise. Mr. Lassen stressed the individualized approach that is required to find alternative housing or shelters that have openings. Mr. Lassen offered to bring some specific examples to a future meeting when he provides the next update for the Adult Services Program.**

**Ms. St. Amand reported that the volunteer program continues in its efforts to recruit new volunteers. The Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection has notified the bureau that they will no longer be charging a fee for criminal background reports so bureau funding will no longer be necessary to obtain these reports. Ms. St. Amand was pleased to report that a former BESB volunteer has decided to enter a vision studies program based on her experience as a volunteer with BESB. The total number of volunteers was 227 for fiscal year 2019 with assignments consisting of assisting in the braille unit, in the community with direct client interface, home typists producing titles for the Children’s Services library and 5 office volunteers, for a total of 13,640 hours of volunteer services which has an estimated value of $423,514 for Connecticut.**

**Ms. Summ reported on the Children’s Services Program. Children’s Services sponsored programs and events in the Spring and early Fall of 2019 which included a cooking skills and wellness program, a fire safety day, a field trip to “NextGenSmartyPants” where students participated in guided builds using LEGOs to create levers, balances and gears, and a national Learn to Row Day adaptive boating program. In the spring, a cooking group met at Futures in Middletown and attended a field trip to EverWonder Children’s Museum. Two summer programs were held which included Camp Independence at Channel 3 Kids Camp in Andover and Skills for Life. Upcoming events include a pre-school, school age and special services fall in-services during the last week of September and first three weeks in October.**

**Legislative Update**

**Mr. Norton provided a legislative update reporting that a special session may take place to discuss the recent changes to the tax on meals.  The agency’s name will be changing to the Department of Aging and Disability Services effective October 1st.  The agency will be referred to as Aging and Disability Services. If an acronym is needed, it would be referred to as ADS.  Mr. Norton reported that the new Advisory Board for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing has been meeting regularly.  One bill suggested by that Advisory Board that passed this year would allow interpreters that have Massachusetts credentials to interpret in Connecticut. Another bill that passed would provide for greater attention to the needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing during school emergencies. Mr. Norton said that it is unlikely that DORS will be pursuing major legislation during the 2020 session but will, of course, be monitoring any legislation that might affect the agency or the people we serve.**

**Board Vacancies and Appointments**

**Ms. Jones has resigned from the Advisory Board creating a vacancy to be appointed by the Senate President. The appointment by the Speaker of the House is also vacant.**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**Chairperson Sylvestre announced that the Hartford Classical Guitar Ensemble will be performing at the Hamilton Heights Senior Living Community for a free classical pop concert on September 22nd. Mr. Pride encouraged members to attend any public meetings in their respective towns if they become aware of any proposed bills to try to ban plastic straws, since these are relied on heavily by people who have disabilities.**

**MOTION: On a motion by Ms. Utter, seconded by Ms. Silverberg, the meeting adjourned at 11:50 a.m.**

**Next meeting – 12 December 2019, 10:00 a.m. to noon at 184 Windsor Avenue, Windsor, CT**