**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**

**Minutes**

**June 18, 2020**

**Members Present**

**Al Sylvestre, Chairman, Eileen Akers, David Gregoire, Andrea Giudice, Katherine Guzman, Samuel Pride, Beth Rival, Mary Silverberg, Stephen Thal and Randa Utter.**

**Members Absent**

**Astread Ferron-Poole (representing the DSS Commissioner).**

**Others Present**

**Brian Sigman, BESB Director, Mary Burgard, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, Chris Lassen, Adult Services Supervisor, Tracy Morin, Business Enterprise Program Marketing Representative, Nancy Mothersele, Braille Coordinator, Andrew Norton, ADS Legislative Liaison; Ed Owens, Business Enterprise Program Supervisor, Lori St. Amand, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor, Maryanne Melley, President, National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of CT, Nathaniel Wales, Treasurer, NFB of CT, Deb Reed, NFB of CT, Phillip Magalnick, NFB of CT, Honorata Kazmierczak, NFB of CT, Francis Lane, NFB of CT, Tara Brown-Ogilvie, Helen Keller National Center.**

**Welcome and Introductions**

**On behalf of Chairperson Sylvestre who was delayed, Eileen Akers called the meeting to order at 10:07 a.m.**

**Public Comment**

**Mr. Thal commented on the article written by Andrea Giudice’s brother, stating that it was very well done, helping to inform the public of the unique challenges experienced by individuals who are blind as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

**New Business**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Silverberg, seconded by Ms. Utter to approve the draft minutes from the March 19, 2020 meeting. Motion passed unanimously.**

**Blind Americans Equality Day Workgroup update**

**Ms. Akers, Chair of the workgroup, expressed her gratitude to the workgroup members consisting of Mr. Thal, Ms. Giudice, Mr. Gregoire, Ms. Guzman, Ms. Weissman, Ms. Weaver Dunne and Mr. Sigman. She reported that due to COVID-19, plans needed to be adjusted. The members shared information regarding the tasks they were charged with. Mr. Gregoire remarked on how they have opted to expand the original essay concept to a larger focus that will include poetry or artwork as well. Ms. Weisman reported that efforts are underway with the veteran’s group to plan for an event that will likely be virtual. Ms. Guzman submitted a request to Google for their support in promoting Blind Americans Equality Day in a Google Doodle. The next meeting of the workgroup is scheduled for July 15th.**

**Bureau Update**

**Business Enterprise Program and Vocational Rehabilitation**

**Mr. Owens reported on the Business Enterprise Program (BEP). The last few months have been difficult for BEP and their vending facility managers who were greatly affected by COVID-19. By the end of March, 32 locations had closed and only 4 micro-marts and 1 gift store remained open. The vending facilities at three state parks have not yet opened, but plans are underway for an opening later in June. BEP staff have been assisting the vending facility managers to apply for unemployment benefits that were made available through the federal stimulus law and BEP was able to provide each of the vending facility managers with a vacation payment of $1,200 in place of providing for one week of vacation coverage at their locations this year. With the rapid closure of the vending facilities in March, a considerable amount of perishable inventory had to be discarded. Due to decreased building occupancy, vending machine income has decreased by approximately $40,000 this fiscal year. With the retirement of the vending facility manager who ran the newsstand at the Department of Labor, the Statewide Committee of Blind Vendors voted to close the location rather than seek a new facility manager due to the low income potential. Two field representatives were hired within the Business Enterprise Program, Mr. Joel Garcia and Ms. Jessie Towel. Mr. Owens announced his retirement effective July 1st and was pleased to announce the promotion of Mr. Tyrell Sampson into the role as Vending Facility Supervisor.**

**Vocational Rehabilitation**

**Ms. Burgard reported on the difficulties experienced by clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, some of whom have been laid off or furloughed from their jobs. There have been few new job opportunities in the last three months. The main focus has been to assist the clients who are working to maintain their employment, often in a new teleworking arrangement. The community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) have been working but providing very few services. There were some CRPs that provided online support and work continues with the American Job Centers (AJCs) in the arranging of virtual services. The Rehabilitation Technologists have been working remotely, providing virtual training.  A speaker from Career Index Plus was made available virtually to provide training and support on this accessible career exploration tool. Staff have been trained in the use of the Talent Acquisition portal, which is an on-line job search tool created by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. BESB lost two transition counselors, one to retirement and one moved to another position within the agency in March. The Transition Coordinator and Lead Counselor have been providing coverage for the clients in need of services while the agency works to refill these two positions. The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors are working to connect clients with programs that are being offered virtually. Nine students attended a virtual camp retreat in Vermont, through the LEAP program. The Carroll Center has announced their programs are going to be virtual over the summer. There are also online programs offered through World Services for the Blind. The BESB Children’s Services Program will be also be offering virtual programs this summer.**

**COVID-19 UPDATES**

**Mr. Sigman reported that the majority of BESB staff are teleworking and services are being provided to clients remotely using technologies such as Microsoft Teams. The agency has been provided with masks for the few employees who are currently coming into the building on a part-time basis. Mr. Sigman has also inquired about obtaining clear masks to be used when interacting with clients who are deafblind.**

**VR Policy for Personal Adjustment Programs**

**Mr. Sigman reported that a resolution from the NFB of CT asks the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to modify the policy on Personal Adjustment Programs. In reviewing the concerns contained in their resolution, Mr. Sigman acknowledged that the current policy identifies “personal habits, attitudes and skills” as training focus areas, while the granting of extensions to the duration of the service is only based upon the acquisition of “skills.” Mr. Sigman further noted that this policy requires the State Director to grant extensions of the service duration while the VR Supervisor is the level that is identified in other policies for approvals and exceptions. Mr. Sigman further noted that since each Personal Adjustment Program has their own curriculum and a time frame for the delivery of that curriculum, that perhaps the policy would benefit from an update in wording to align the timeframe with the curriculum of the specific program the client is attending. Mr. Sigman noted that the State Rehabilitation Council will be addressing this topic at their June meeting. Mr. Sigman further noted that changes to the policy would first require a public comment period.**

**Chairman Sylvestre invited members of the public to speak on this topic and Mr. Wales stated the need to revise the timeframes that exist in the current policy.**

**MOTION: Ms. Rival made a motion, seconded by Ms. Silverberg, to request the BESB Director work with the State Rehabilitation Council to develop recommendations to present to the Advisory Board on possible revisions to the policy and to present those recommendations at the next meeting of the Advisory Board. Motion passed unanimously.**

**Budget Update**

**Mr. Sigman provided an update on the impact that a reduction in purchased service options due to COVID-19 has caused across the programs at BESB. Many community-based activities and services have been postponed to later dates or have been cancelled entirely. In the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, reductions in purchased service expenditures will likely have an impact on the program’s ability to meet maintenance of effort fiscal requirements. This issue exists for many of the public vocational rehabilitation programs across the country. The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation and the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind have expressed these and other financial concerns to the Rehabilitation Services Administration.**

**Legislative Update**

**Mr. Norton reported that the current legislative session was cut short due to COVID-19 and has officially adjourned. He also reported that the legislature anticipates short falls in revenue due to sales and income tax decreases that have resulted from the COVID pandemic.**

**New Business:**

**Ms. Akers requested that the members address the matter of accessible absentee voting options. Ms. Akers, Ms. Rival and Ms. Silverberg expressed concerns that the absentee ballot process is not accessible to people who are blind and recommended that the Advisory Board take a position on the matter.**

**Ms. Melley stated that the NFB of CT has written letters to the Secretary of the State’s office, the Attorney General’s office, and Senator Blumenthal’s office regarding the need for accessible absentee ballots for people with disabilities and although two responses were received, no resolution was offered. The NFB of CT is exploring the option of taking legal action to seek a remedy.**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Akers, seconded by Ms. Rival, to make a resolution to the Secretary of the State’s Office to acknowledge that there is an urgent need to address the issue of accessible voting. Motion passed unanimously.**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**The Advisory Board acknowledged Mr. Owens for his efforts and dedication of 34 years within the Business Enterprise Program and wished him well in his retirement. Ms. Giudice announced that the name of the Connecticut affiliate of the American Council of the Blind has been changed. The Connecticut Council of the Blind (CTCB) is now ACB of Connecticut. Ms. Guzman acknowledged the teachers of students with visual impairments for their hard work and dedication.**

**MOTION: On a motion by Ms. Giudice, seconded by Ms. Akers, the meeting adjourned at 12:11 p.m.**

**Next meeting – 17 September 2020, 10:00 a.m.**