**State of Connecticut**

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

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

**State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) to BESB**

# DRAFT MINUTES

## March 24, 2021

**Members Present: Mr. Gary Allen, Mr. Scott Baecker, Mr. Michael Bartley, Mr. Jay Brown, Mr. John Carnemolla, Ms. Lucretia Jones, Mr. Phillip Magalnick, Mr. John McNickle, Ms. Enaida Mendoza, Ms. Deborah Reed, Ms. Beth Reel, Mr. Dennis Regan, Ms. Dawn Russell, Ms. Nicole Rico Serrano, Mr. Brian Sigman, and Ms. Kendra Valente**

**Others Present: Mr. Bill DeMaio, Ms. Francis Lane, Ms. Mary Burgard, Mr. Andrew Norton, Mr. Barry Rita, and Ms. Brenda Lamarre**

**Members Absent: Ms. Brandy Altergott, Ms. Jennifer Jenkins, and Ms. Eileen Rose**

**Call to Order: Ms. Dawn Russell, Chair of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.**

**Public Comment: None**

**Old Business**

**Review and Approval of Minutes from the December 16, 2020 minutes: MOTION: A motion was made by Mr. Baecker and seconded by Mr. McNickle to adopt the minutes from the December 16, 2020 meeting. Motion carried with one abstention.**

**Workgroup Reports**

**Membership: Ms. Jones welcomed new members Mr. Dennis Regan, Mr. Philip Magalnick, and Ms. Jennifer Jenkins. She also reported there are 4 vacancies: Employer - 2; Workplace Investment Board - 1, and Community Provider – 1. She also stated that there are 9 members whose terms are going to be expiring in 2021. For those who have only served one term, Ms. Jones asked that they let Mr. Sigman know if they are interested in seeking reappointment to a second term.**

**Finance: Mr. Baecker reported on the expenditures since the federal fiscal year started. NCSAB membership dues and registration fees for the Chair and Vice Chair to attend the spring virtual conference of CSAVR were new additions since the last update report.**

**Consumer Satisfaction: Mr. Sigman informed the Council that they need to determine who to utilize to conduct the consumer satisfaction survey for the upcoming year. He reported that** **the Center for Public Policy and Social Research at CCSU has been conducting the survey for several years and has longitudinal data that is utilized in their analysis of trends in consumer satisfaction. Chairwoman Russell noted that she has been a recipient of these surveys in the past and found that CCSU was very professional. Ms. Reed commented on how well run the focus group for SRC members was.**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Reed and seconded by Mr. Bartley to have CCSU conduct the next consumer satisfaction survey. Motion carried unanimously.**

**New Business**

**VR Success Story: Mr. Barry Rita, BESB-VR Educational Projects Coordinator, introduced Jesus Betancour and Ms. Shawn Auslander, his Teacher of the Visually Impaired. Ms. Auslander has been assisting him through the years and is very proud of his achievements. Mr. Betancour informed the Council that he was born in Columbia and came to this country when he was 9 and had to learn English. BESB has been part of his life since then and with BESB’s help and guidance, he learned many things including braille and computer technology. He is a graduating senior in high school where he mentors fellow students and even has his own YouTube channel where he conducts computer training. He will be furthering his education in college in computer science and his hope is to one day go back to British Columbia to teach people there. Mr. Magalnick commented that he has worked with Mr. Betancour in the past and commended him for his accomplishments.**

**Comprehensive Needs Assessment: Mr. Sigman pointed out that this assessment is one of the most useful tools for the Council to utilize when developing state plan goals. The comprehensive needs assessment was conducted by the Center for Public Policy and Social Research at CCSU. Some of their findings included: BESB’s VR Program is successfully engaging individuals with visual impairments from underserved populations when compared to the demographic of Connecticut’s population; VR is actively engaging youth with blindness; and VR needs to provide more equipment and technology training. Some recommendations included that VR should frequently check with clients during the pandemic; VR success stories should be posted on our website; conduct more outreach with eye doctors and community providers to make them aware of BESB services, and to hold more mentoring events with clients to highlight success stories. Mr. Sigman thanked Ms. Russell, Ms. Jones, and Mr. Carnemolla for being part of the virtual mentoring presentations held earlier this year.**

**Consumer Satisfaction Survey: Mr. Sigman stated that the FY 2020 consumer satisfaction survey was also conducted by CCSU. Their report indicated that service utilization rates showed declines in several areas from 2019 levels. While 81.5% of the respondents said they received rehabilitation equipment in FY 2019, in FY 2020 it was down to 65%. Skills training went from a 30% utilization rate in FY 2019 to 20% in FY 2020. Higher education went from 22% in FY2019 to 7.5% in FY 2020. Mr. Sigman reflected on how the options for service provision had been drastically impacted by the pandemic in FY 2020. Mr. Sigman also highlighted some of the categories where levels of satisfaction with services experienced a decline. On a scale of 1 to 10 where a rating of 10 represents the highest satisfaction level, in FY 2019 low vision services were rated at 8.5 while in FY 2020 the rating was 7.86. Satisfaction with rehabilitation equipment went from 8.41 to 7.88. Skills training went from 9.25 to 7.75. Transportation went from 6.71 to 5.80. Small business went from 8.5 to 6.20. The report acknowledged the sudden impact on the provision of services caused by the pandemic, noting that many services were abruptly interrupted. The entire consumer satisfaction survey as well as the comprehensive needs assessment are posted in the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation section of the agency website and can be viewed through this link:** [**BESB Services for Job Seekers**](https://portal.ct.gov/AgingandDisability/Content-Pages/Bureaus/BESB-Services-for-Job-Seekers)**.**

**COVID-19 Updates: Mr. Sigman reported that people age 45 and older are now able to receive the vaccine and starting April 5th, age 16 and older will be eligible. He provided the Vaccine Appointment Assist Line’s phone number of (877) 918-2224 and also reminded members that 211 Infoline is available to provide information and assistance related to COVID-19.**

**He stated that a few staff report to the building on a part time basis, but most staff are working virtually and there is no date yet as to when staff will be back in the office. Staff have the opportunity to go into the field if there is no other way to provide the service virtually, but they must ask screening questions in advance to be sure no one has COVID-19 symptoms.**

**Report from BESB State Director**

**Program Update: Ms. Burgard provided a staffing update. A new Rehabilitation Technologist has been hired and will cover the southern part of the state. Recruitment is underway to hire a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor to cover the South-Central region of the state.**

**BESB VR has been purchasing computers from Computers for the Blind and other vendors so that VR clients can have the technology they need to access virtual services and training programs. Mr. Sigman added that the virtual services offered through the One Stop career centers have been an important option for clients to obtain training without the need to travel to a physical location.**

**Program Update from BESB State Director: Mr. Sigman reported that expenditures for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program remain at much lower levels than in prior years due to the impact the pandemic has had on the availability of on-site services. Virtual programs typically cost less than residential training programs and there are fewer options for vendors and the services that are available virtually. Most of the vending facilities through the Business Enterprise Program remain closed. BESB will be receiving approximately $315,000 in federal stimulus funds to be used to compensate the vending facility managers for their losses sustained in 2020 that were not compensated through other available funding sources.**

**Legislation Update: Mr. Andrew Norton reported that the agency resubmitted the same bill as it did last year since that proposal had not been acted upon when the legislature shut down due to COVID-19. The bill would only make technical changes to the statutes including the deletion of duplicate sections of the law that date from when the bureaus of ADS had been separate state agencies. Another bill proposes to change statutory references from “guide dog” to “service animal” as defined in federal law. The bill is intended to align state terminology with federal terminology.**

**Report from Chair: Ms. Russell thanked Ms. Burgard and all of the VR staff for their hard work and continuing their services throughout this pandemic. She thanked Mr. Rita for the great opportunity to participate with transition students in the mentoring teleconferences. Ms. Russell also stated that herself and Vice-Chair Bartley attended the virtual CSAVR and NCSAB fall conferences and she will be attending the spring virtual conferences as well.**

**Adjournment**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Mr. Bartley, seconded by Ms. Jones, to adjourn. Motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 11:53 a.m.**

**The next Council meeting is scheduled for June 23, 2021 from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon.**