



STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES (DHS)

COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND & VISUALLY IMPAIRED (CBVI)

## STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL (SRC)

### MEETING MINUTES

DECEMBER 6, 2024 - HYBRID MEETING

130 LIVINGSTON AVE | NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ 08901

#### **Appointed Members Present:**

#### **Members Awaiting Appointment/Reappointment Present:**

Donald Campbell, Vito DeSantis, James Good, Sioban Leahy, Steven McCoy, John O'Connell, Gary Robinson, Sarah Schiffelbein, Lauren Weishaar, Joseph Zesski

**Absent:** Ronda Williams Banks, Breeanna Douglas, Alice Eaddy, Jeanne McMahon, Linda Melendez, Gwen Orlowski, Kathleen Spata (appointed), Wanda Williford

**Ex Officio Present:** Dawn Corbett, Dr. Bernice Davis, Charles Pat McKenna, John Tkacz

**CBVI Staff:** Paul DeCarlo, Esther Lavarin, Bryan McClain

**Members of Public Present:** Haley Carney, Susan Head, Mark Ruoff, Janna Sheiman

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Vito DeSantis, SRC Chairperson, welcomed everyone, calling the meeting to order at 9:40am.

Vito announced that the meeting was being held in compliance with the New Jersey Open Public Meeting Act, NJSA 10:4-6.

After attendance and introductions, Vito reminded all those participating on Zoom to keep themselves muted until speaking and for all those participating to announce themselves prior to speaking. Vito reminded members of the public that they are welcome to be at the meeting and if they have questions concerning the meeting, they can send an email for a response to Charles Pat McKenna {[Charles.McKenna@dhs.nj.gov](mailto:Charles.McKenna@dhs.nj.gov).

### Approval of Meeting Minutes:

The minutes of October 4, 2024 were acknowledged as received and reviewed. Vito asked if there were any comments about them, or corrections to be made. John motioned to accept the meeting minutes; Dawn seconded the motion. All were in favor. These minutes will be put into the permanent record of the SRC.

### New Business:

#### Critical Need for SRC Appointments and Updates on Actions:

After the approval of the previous meeting minutes, Vito then acknowledged that the SRC really does not have any authority to approve or vote on anything and would like to bring the SRC up to date on his efforts regarding getting the needed appointments from the Governor.

Vito has spoken twice with the Governor's office since the last SRC meeting, and has sent a letter via email and Postal mail. This council is a Federally mandated council with a very specific purpose under the law, and this council has not met that purpose.

Conversations were also had with the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), and they confirmed that the agency is out of compliance due to this lack of appointments. After further explanations on what this means for the SRC and the agency, Vito asked John Tkacz of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) if their agency has a fully functioning SRC. John responded that he checked with his Program Chief and yes, they do have a full SRC.

Vito feels this is curious that the General VR Agency (DVRS) has a full SRC but the Blind VR Agency (CBVI) only has 1 appointed member on the SRC, everyone else is pending appointment/reappointment. It was confirmed that the one appointed member is Kathleen Spata.

Vito then urged those with the Client Assistance Program (CAP) to reach out to the Governor's office to express the need to make appointments to the SRC. Janna Sheiman confirmed that they have been reaching out and they have not been able to get responses either.

Vito wanted to make sure that all know that he has not been sitting idle on this topic, and neither has Dr. Davis, without any efforts. It just has not yielded any results.

John O'Connell mentioned that Gov Murphy was on a radio show on WNYC shortly after the election. He is on the show once a month and John is determined to call in to the show to speak directly with the Governor, hopefully next month. When he finds out when the next one is he will send it out. Pat asked that John send it to himself and he will make sure that it gets communicated out to Vito and the rest of the SRC.

Vito then asked for Dr. Davis' input on the topics. Dr. Davis confirmed that CBVI does not have a current Corrective Action Plan (CAP) from RSA for the lack of SRC appointments. However, she did receive correspondence from them that put the agency on notice that if they could not get the Governor's office to move on these appointments that CBVI could be given a CAP.

The RSA understands and is aware of all the efforts of the SRC and Dr. Davis and her team. Conversations have been made with the DHS Commissioner's office and there are talks of finding an alternate way of getting the appointments, but it has to be vetted by DHS Legal Department.

Vito then opened for questions.

- Gary wanted to clarify that the SRC does not have a quorum? Vito confirmed that is correct. So, then Gary asked if there was anyone that actually sat down with the Governor's office face to face to find out what is actually going on?
- Vito answered that he has not sat down in person but has spoken with the Governor's office on two occasions. They then tell him this is for the Appointments Office. He has spoken to the Appointments Office, was given incorrect information, sent a letter to correct them on how the appointments should be made according to the regulations but have still have not heard back from them.
- Paul mentioned that he had a conversation with the DHS CFO per Dr. Davis direction, to make him aware of the situation since it could have Grant award implications.

Vito asked Gary if he had any follow up on correspondence he had received previously?

- Gary mentioned speaking to a person in the office named Kathleen, when he received the application but has not heard from her since.

#### SRC Meeting Dates for 2025:

Just prior to announcing the meeting dates for 2025, Vito suggested moving one of them to a Thursday, so that the SRC can see the activity and programming at the JKTC.

Pat will look into scheduling a date for a Thursday, and doesn't want to commit to a particular Thursday yet so as to be sure everyone involved will be on board with the visit.

Pat announced the 2025 meeting dates as follows:

- February 7
- June 6
- October 3
- December 5

Meeting time will be the same, 9:30am – 12:00pm, with a hybrid format.

Pat then explained that the JKTC's content on Friday is entirely virtual, so a visit to the JKTC would need to be made on a day other than Friday. Afterwards, Pat opened for discussions on the SRC meeting dates or on the walk around at JKTC. There was no change to the meeting dates.

### SRC Goals for 2025

The 2025 SRC Goals were emailed to the SRC prior to the meeting and read by Bryan McClain at the conclusion of the meeting. They are as follows:

Despite the current lack of a quorum, the SRC will meet four times in 2025, as well as continue ongoing support to foster the goals of CBVI and its commitment to excellent services.

### 2025 Meeting Dates:

- February 7, 2025
- June 6, 2025
- October 3, 2025
- December 5, 2025

Once in compliance with Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act & CFR 34 361.17 whereby a quorum exists,

- The SRC, by reviewing various reports and current and proposed policies, will:
  - Work with CBVI to enhance and improve competitive integrated employment outcomes across all VR consumer groups being served;
  - Assist CBVI in identifying and partnering with apprenticeship opportunities;
  - Assist CBVI in enhancing partnerships with the local One-Stops and larger workforce system;
  - Assist CBVI in providing services ensuring that Rapid Engagement is utilized, while ensuring Informed Choice to the consumer;
  - Assist CBVI in developing Career Pathways for appropriate consumers who wish to progress from education and training to Competitive Integrated Employment.
- SRC members will continue to participate, as appropriate, in public forums and agency programs for the benefit of consumers.
- SRC will work with CBVI to identify, develop, and provide an on-boarding training for new SRC members, to ensure all members understand the scope and role of SRC membership and the VR program.
- SRC and CBVI will conduct a yearly SRC Purpose and Responsibilities training.
- SRC will work with CBVI to identify topical presentations that can be presented at each SRC meeting, related to agency performance and compliance.
- SRC will enhance and operationalize the role of the subcommittees to align its focus with the core requirements of the SRC, the SRC bylaws, Federal Regulations, and the VR program.

## Appropriate Announcements to Share as SRC Members

Vito acknowledged that SRC Members often share items that are of interest with the SRC from their experiences, or from their specific organizations on disability related items. However, Vito cautioned the council regarding sharing information that could bring financial benefit to themselves.

## **Dr. Bernice Davis – Executive Director’s Report**

Dr. Davis started with National news. The US Department of Labor (DOL) announced a proposed rule that would phase out the issuance of certificates that would allow employers to pay certain workers with disabilities less than the minimum wage. This would begin a 3-year phase out. There has been some push back from employers stating this would result in loss of employment opportunities for people with disabilities. This would also include the reopening of the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Both Jim Good and Dr. Davis was at the BLAST Conference in Nashville, TN which focuses on the Randolph-Sheppard Act and Blind Entrepreneurs across the country. One of the topics that came up was the pros and cons of opening up WIOA and Randolph-Sheppard for amendments. Some were nervous about opening it up because of some of the opposition felt around the country against the priority of the Randolph-Sheppard Act.

One of the things that inspired her was a drummer, who shared in a presentation and spoke about someone believing in him. He had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) growing up and was always seen hitting and patting things. There was a teacher who saw this and told him that he is not a problem child but that he is a drummer. He then handed him a pair of drumsticks and began to mentor him. He has since gone on to play in many bands, played on America’s Got Talent, and is an Emmy Award Winner. He spoke on the value of mentoring others.

Regarding State news, Dr. Davis wanted to make everyone aware that the State budget for this fiscal year is not looking so great. The DHS Commissioner asked the agency to look at some reductions along with every division in every department across the state.

Also, Dr. Davis attended the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation and National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (CSAVR/NCSAB) Fall Convention in Seattle. There was a lot of focus on recruitment and retention of staff, as well as on Artificial Intelligence (AI). She was particularly interested in some state agencies developing policies around AI.

## **Pat McKenna - Assistant Division Director’s Report**

### Business Enterprises of New Jersey (BENJ):

As a historical recap, the last several years have been a bit rough on the BENJ program because of the workplace landscape employing remote and telework practices affecting the number of persons walking into the workplace. This has caused a reduction of sales to the BENJ locations

and some locations has had to close unfortunately. It appears as though through 2024 that the sales of the various BENJ locations are starting to trend in a positive direction.

Would like to see measures that can be employed to safeguard the program and the operators. This means finding additional locations that are insulated from decreases in foot traffic due to telework. There are a few new locations, one in Edison, and one in Toms River, both of which are Veterans Association facilities.

CBVI has also been looking into the best approach of getting BENJ locations into college locations. Pat has been working closely with the Regulatory Officer to craft that approach. One of the important researched questions has been does the Randolph Sheppard Priority apply to the community college sphere, and if that is the case, what is the best approach to messaging that priority. Two community colleges have been identified to approach with a conversation.

Another option considered is what can be done to optimize existing facilities. Overtime what is desired/wanted/needed/works in a vending facility change over time. In the past a full-service cafeteria was desired, which seems to be trending out of favor, for smaller facilities with fewer staff, utilizing the space well, also the micro market which utilizes more smart technology.

Pat congratulated Jim Good on opening a new micro market at the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) and will be visiting the location on February 6, 2025 with DHS Deputy Commissioner, Kaylee McGuire.

Working with Deacon Truesdale - BENJ Manager for CBVI, a quarterly meeting has been implemented for additional networking and informational opportunities for BENJ stakeholders.

For the last 2 years there has been a collaborative opportunity with the BENJ program and the EDGE program, a work readiness program for high school and college aged students 14-21 years. This collaborative opportunity is for internships at BENJ locations, which students will need to interview for. Pat is looking to increase the internship opportunities to 6 for the summer of 2025.

### Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC)

The JKTC Manager, Susan Engstrom, has retired at the end of September and since Pat has been the interim Manager since. Over the last few months Pat has grown in his appreciation for what is accomplished at the center. Pat was also hopeful that in the next couple of months an announcement of a new JKTC manager would be made.

When leadership changes, it is often a good time to see where enhancements or opportunities from changes can be made. Pat highlighted a few items that has been looked at recently.

- JKTC program is a 20-week program and various points throughout the time where a progress review meeting is held. This has now increased to have one progress meeting every month.
- Last month a Family Day was held, where each student was able to bring one family member or relation to the center to allow them to see what the center and the instruction is

like. This helps the family member/relation to see the value of the instruction and the impact it has on their life. This will help the family members at home to be more helpful to the student in continuing to apply what was learned through the JKTC program.

- Seeking to have additional collaborative efforts between units, for example, during an Orientation & Mobility (O&M) lesson, someone from technology can come in and help with travel apps on a mobile device.
- Final area looked at is to create a graduate support group. Students come to the JKTC for 20 weeks and are a part of a supportive group and then go home and some report feeling isolated or cut off. Having a support group for graduates could be created under agency guidance and direction to meet periodically to discuss challenges, successes, mentoring tips, employment and VR messaging.

### Independent Living Updates

Today, December 6, 2024 is the Virtual Blind Health Expo. CBVI will have a virtual booth at this event running from 10:00am – 4:00pm. At 3:30pm, CBVI will be featuring 2 success stories from consumers, one of which is Alice Eaddy of the SRC.

The Senior Hands-On Retreat Experience (SHORE) Program, a program for Independent Living Older Blind (ILOB) consumers, took place in early October 2024. The 2025 program will be scheduled in the next few weeks.

ASPIRE Program, CBVI's network of Peer Support Groups, currently has 60 support groups with 5 more starting. One of them is a Spanish speaking group which will meet in person at the JKTC.

### **Esther Lavarin, VR Coordinator- Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Update:**

#### Performance Measures

At the previous SRC meeting Vito asked Esther to explain Performance Measures for this meeting. There are 6 performance indicators used to determine performance of the agency.

1. Employment Rate 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter after exit
2. Employment Rate 4<sup>th</sup> quarter after exit
3. Median Earnings 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter after exit
4. Credential Attainment Rate
5. Measurable Skills Gains
6. Effectiveness in Serving Employers

All performance measures are mathematical equations of those who have exited and have been involved in education or a training program with the agency. Credential Attainment Rate is the

percentage of individuals enrolled in an education or training program who get a recognized post-secondary credential or a secondary school diploma/equivalent one year after the program.

Measurable Skills Gains is the percentage of participants who, during their program year, are in an education or training program that leads to a post-secondary credential or employment, and are achieving measurable skills gains. For example, a highschool student showing their report card is a measurable skill leading to their diploma, and college students showing their transcript is a measurable skill gained, leading to their post-secondary school diploma.

Regarding agency performance measures, CBVI is looking at ways to make improvements in the Credential Attainment Rates, since these numbers are not where it was expected to be. But the Agency is very optimistic in seeing improvements and are receiving technical assistance.

Following the explanation, Vito asked Gary, Chair of the Quality Assurance committee, if he had any questions.

- Gary asked why Median Earnings are being used as opposed to the Average Earnings?
  - Esther explained the Median Earnings is the performance measure set by the RSA.
  - Gary wanted to know if RSA explained why they chose the median, because he feels that using the median doesn't show an actual picture of earnings?
- Gary followed this question by asking about the agency approaching individual businesses in the community regarding employment and would like to know what measures are being utilized to measure the agency's success rate in doing that? This question was for future conversation.

Vito commented that this last point mentioned also concerns John O'Connell, Chair of the Business Engagement committee and that conversations should take place between Esther, John, and Gary. If he can be of assistance to facilitate meaningful conversations between them, he would be glad to assist.

#### Employment, Development, Guidance, and Engagement (EDGE) Program:

EDGE Program currently has 98 students, there were 4 more referrals since October. The new EDGE Director has been selected, Perry Sandler, who began in EDGE in 2023 as an Employer Engagement Placement Officer, and was serving as the interim Director until being officially selected.

A parent call was held in November with 16 parents attending, one of the highest numbers for a parent call that EDGE has had. For this month, there is a focus on putting skills into practice and will be visiting Target to allow students to observe real world job environments, interact with employers, work on O&M skills by navigating the mall and more.



The agency is also active in developing additional transitioning programming, and Request for Proposals (RFPs) are in process.

#### Fellowship Program with Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey (VLANJ):

Today, the last Fellowship Program for 2024 is taking place and is expecting 15 consumers. Instructions are being given in Cooking & Kitchen Skills, Technology, O&M, and Yoga.

#### Business Relations Unit (BRU) Updates:

The BRU's Dining in the Dark event held in October was a huge success. There were several employers at the event, such as Kind, ShopRite, PSE&G, Princeton University. These participants were positively impacted by the blindness guide and blindness etiquette training provided as some acknowledged not knowing what to do or say when approaching a blind person. They were also very involved and had questions around hiring individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Two of such questions were: How would they get started with hiring persons with disabilities, and how did work place staff acclimate to working with a person with disabilities?

#### Deafblind Unit Updates:

In an effort to enhance service delivery to the deafblind population, CBVI recently hired a Deafblind-Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) who will be starting in January. Also looking to continue interviews for the Interpreter of the Deaf position. In January, there will be a training for CBVI's IL and VR staff, focusing on Support Service Providers (SSP) of NJ and I Can Connect (iCC).

The agency continues to look at options for spending CBVI's Supported Employment (SE) funds. There are less consumers who are eligible for these funds and so they are exploring opportunities for job placement through a Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) to help consumers gain employment which is believed to make consumers more eligible for SE funds.

Following the VR report, Vito opened for questions. There were none.

#### **Old Business:**

##### Update on Budget and Implications on VR - Paul DeCarlo, Fiscal Manager

Vito introduced Paul to provide an update to the discussion held last meeting regarding SE Funds. The previous discussion detailed that CBVI had to return SE Funds to the Federal Government because of not being able to spend them, and that services being rendered were being provided by the General Funds not the SE Funds. This was viewed possibly as a glitch in the system.

Paul, Esther, Lou Mancuso (Regulatory Officer, CBVI), and Pat looked into some of the SE areas that may be unclear. It does not appear to be a glitch in the system however, it was identified that there were some limitations in the youth with the most significant disabilities being available to CBVI as well as some system limitations that could be impacting the expending of the SE Funds. There was also a meeting with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) to see how they are spending their SE Funds. There is hope to have a resolution in the near future.

Vito then opened for questions. There were none.

Paul continued with a report on the budget for Fiscal Year 2025 (FY2025) for both state and federal are in good standing. The technical process for the FY2026 was completed, and during that process, Governor Murphy announced that there was overspending and that next year there will not be the same amount of funding availability. Dr. Davis and Paul has gone through various scenarios, looking at the impact to the programming and making plans to have the least amount of impact to the programming. VR Funding does not seem to be impacted, State match to Federal Funding will not be impacted, and there is not a final answer regarding what will be reduced during this “Savings Initiative,” but the agency is prepared.

#### Client Assistance Program (CAP) Report by Disability Rights New Jersey (DRNJ):

The CAP Report was reviewed and submitted for inclusion by Janna Sheiman, the CAP Coordinator of Disability Rights New Jersey (DRNJ) regarding FY2024 information for the CAP program and a question that arose at the last DVRS SRC meeting regarding CBVI. This report will be appended at the end of these meeting minutes.

#### Committee Reports:

- Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) – Chaired by Vito DeSantis
  - Pat explained this is now the halfway point between the last one and the next one due. Soon conversations will be had on what items are needed for the next report.
- Policy and Procedures – Chaired by Lauren Weishaar
  - Lauren recently received public notice for NJAC 10:92, for Education Services. Three key items changing are: updating and expanding terminology, the removal of service provider fees so as to review annually, and having more specific services offered at each level.
  - Suggested language will be accepted and finalized in 30 days.
- Business Engagement Committee – Chaired by John O’Connell

- John did not have any updates to present on Business Engagement
- Quality Assurance Committee – Chaired by Gary Robinson
  - Gary did not have any updates to present on Quality Assurance.
- SRC Annual Report Committee – Chaired by Breeanna Douglas

Pat presented the report for the Annual Report Committee.

- The goal is to have this report submitted by the end of this month.
- There are various sections in the report from the different units of CBVI.
  - Pat begins to collect the various items beginning in June of every year and acknowledged that some on the SRC has been very helpful regarding compiling the success stories.

### **Member Updates:**

Members were called upon to provide updates to the SRC.

- John O'Connell provided an update from the Blind Veterans Association regarding the Veterans facility in Toms River, that there were no sidewalks from the bus stop to the new building about 500 feet away. They installed sidewalks and that benefits everyone not just the blind community.
- Sarah Schiffelbein, DOE gave a few updates on the Collaborations In Transit (CIT) project. Most recently the Needs Assessment was sent to the 3 Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) that are being worked with, to get an assessment of what the schools need. Monthly meetings with the working groups are being held and recently had the LEAs speak on the challenges they are seeing in the school districts. Work is also being done on building their Transition Hub website, a smaller website should be up in January.
- John Tkacz provided a brief update on DVRS continuing their search for hiring a Director, and their Assistant Commissioner Charyl Yarborough is Acting Director at this time.
- Donald Campbell SILC working on end of year 704 report.

**Announcements:**

Vito thanked all of the SRC Members who remain active although not having the appointment yet because it shows what their dedication is. It may be just going through the steps, but they are valuable steps, valuable to the consumer and valuable to the agency, to hear from a different voice. The SRC does have a purpose under the law and again want to thank the members who have stuck by the assignment and their advocacy.

Also, the SRC should be voting on a new chairperson but are unable to do so without the appointments, however, Vito encouraged the members to consider this topic.

The next SRC meeting is scheduled for February 7, 2025.

**Adjournment:**

Janna Sheiman on behalf of Gwen Orlowski made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

All were in agreement.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:08pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Bryan McClain*

Bryan McClain

Executive Secretarial Assistant