**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**

**Draft Minutes**

**September 17, 2020**

**Members Present**

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

**Members Absent**

**Andrea Guidice and David Gregoire.**

**Others Present**

**Brian Sigman, BESB Director, Chris Lassen, Adult Services Supervisor, Andrew Norton, ADS Legislative Liaison; Tyrell Sampson, Vending Facility Supervisor, Lori St. Amand, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor, Jay Brown, Department of Education-Bureau of Special Education, Maryanne Melley, President, National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of CT, Nathaniel Wales, Treasurer, NFB of CT, Frank Roberts, Chairman, Statewide Committee of Blind Vendors, Kailie Gulino, Department of Social Services.**

**Welcome and Introductions**

**Chairperson Sylvestre called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m.**

**Public Comment**

**Mr. Thal inquired on the status of the 2021 calendars as well as how the new referrals to BESB were being processed. Mr. Lassen confirmed that the clients who have requested a 2021 large print calendar will receive them prior to the end of this year. The social workers are conducting intakes remotely for newly referred clients. Ms. Silverberg stated that the Library for the Blind is operating with limited staff due to COVID-19 and those who have requests should be encouraged to contact the Library for the Blind directly. Mr. Wales commented on the Vocational Rehabilitation personal adjustment training draft policy updates and felt it addressed the NFB of CT’s concern by including skills, habits and attitudes as metrics and by not putting a time limit on the criteria. He fully supported this proposed training policy update since it is consistent with the NFB of CT’s resolution and he urged the Advisory Board members to support it.**

**New Business**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Mr. Thal, seconded by Mr. Pride to approve the draft minutes from the June 18, 2020 meeting as amended. Motion passed unanimously.**

**Blind Americans Equality Day Workgroup update**

**Ms. Akers, Chair of the workgroup, reported that Ms. Guzman will continue to work with Google regarding the possibility of getting a Google Doodle with a blindness-related theme posted on or near October 15th. Although an essay project was proposed, only a few responses were received and therefore, it was concluded that the essay project might be something that would work better as an on-going project with help from the Children’s Services and the Vocational Rehabilitation Programs. Projects that are anticipated include a gathering at the Tobacco Museum to highlight the museum’s accessible exhibits, hosted by the local Lions Club, as well as a planned activity at Jonathan’s Dream playground. Ms. Weismann from the Veterans Administration will be overseeing a multi-media project. Mr. Sigman said that the bureau is developing success stories to post on the agency website. Ms. Akers noted that several individuals are planning to call in to local radio station talk shows on October 15th to bring attention to the significance of that date as Blind Americans Equality Day. Chairperson Sylvestre commended the workgroup on their efforts.**

**Proposed Meeting Dates for 2021**

**MOTION: On a motion made by Mr. Thal, seconded by Ms. Silverberg, the 2021 meeting dates of March 18, June 17, September 30 and December 16 were passed as amended.**

**Bureau Update- Adult Services**

**Mr. Lassen provided an update on the Adult Services Program.  Two Social Worker Trainees with much experience started on March 27, 2020. One of them is fluent in American Sign Language (ASL) and is experienced in tactile sign language. She is covering the northwest part of the state while also serving clients with deafblindness statewide. The second Social Worker Trainee is fluent in Spanish and is serving greater Hartford, while assisting clients who speak only Spanish in the northern half of Connecticut.  Two Orientation and Mobility Instructor positions have been requested for refill.  Despite the current COVID-19 pandemic, all field staff are continuing to serve clients and utilizing innovative approaches to provide blindness rehabilitation services through virtual technology. The Rehabilitation Teachers are creating audio training sessions that will be made available to clients when completed.**

**Ms. St. Amand reported that at the onset of the pandemic, BESB was not asking for in-person volunteer visits, anticipating that volunteers and clients would remain connected via phone, social media and/or video platforms.  As social distancing guidance has evolved, some volunteers and clients have resumed in-person support for activities such as food shopping and transportation to medical appointments. Volunteer recruitment, screening and matching continues.  Since January 2020, volunteers were matched to 289 ongoing services in support of 48 clients. Volunteers have also been producing books to add to the agency lending library for braille reading students.**

**Children’s Services**

**Ms. Summ reported on the Children’s Services Program. Staff have been working remotely via email, phone, text, video. Some in-person meetings and activities have resumed. Staff are utilizing Microsoft Teams, as well as other resources, to provide virtual services. They are collaborating with parents, Birth-to-Three programs and school districts regarding service delivery. Replacements for recent retirees Gail Johnson, Jill Baker, and Peg Palmer have been hired. Champagne Marsh-Williams, Jessica Gibson, and Jacquie Dettore are the three new Education Consultants. Andrea Garewski retired on September 1st and a request to refill her vacancy has been submitted. Interviews were conducted to fill an Orientation and Mobility Instructor vacancy, but the position remains unfilled. A request was made to continue the recruitment. Children’s Services conducted virtual online summer camps this year since the Camp Independence residential camp and other in-person camps were cancelled due to the pandemic. Leap into Life and the Summer Programs Committee developed several facilitated and self-paced family-oriented summer experience activities. In addition, Leap into Life partnered with the Vocational Rehabilitation Program on some of their summer programming.**

**COVID-19 UPDATES**

**Mr. Sigman reported that BESB staff are still working remotely while providing services to clients using different technology approaches such as Microsoft Teams. A small number of staff are coming to the office on a part-time basis to provide support services. The agency has provided personal protective equipment to staff who are going into the field or coming to the office. Protocols have been issued to staff as well as contractors on in-person services so that safety can be at the forefront of all interactions. In response to a question regarding the provision of in-home services, Mr. Sigman stated that the protocols allow for these types of services to be provided within the parameters of the safety requirements detailed in the protocols.**

**VR Policy for Personal Adjustment Programs**

**Discussion took place regarding the draft VR Policy for Personal Adjustment Programs. Mr. Sigman reported on the proposed changes to the policy. During discussion, Chairperson Sylvestre recommended to divide a long sentence in the last paragraph into two separate sentences. He also proposed to change the wording to require the submission of accessible reports rather than electronic reports. Mr. Sigman noted that the State Rehabilitation Council will be addressing this topic at their September meeting. Mr. Sigman further noted that changes to the policy would first require a public comment period.**

**MOTION: A motion made by Ms. Silverberg seconded by Mr. Thal, to accept the proposed policy update as amended and to share the revised proposed draft with the State Rehabilitation Council for their consideration. Motion passed unanimously.**

**Budget Update**

**Mr. Sigman announced that the VR Program received $1.2 million in re-allotment funds. With these additional funds, projections indicate the bureau will be able to serve all eligible VR clients into FFY 2023. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the options for expending VR funds due to the high volume of providers that were not offering services until recently. BESB had to return to the federal government $45,000 in supported employment funds due to the lack of employment opportunities that would qualify for the use of these funds. In the Business Enterprise Program, with so many public buildings having substantially reduced occupancy, the earnings from vending machine sales are down by approximately $100,000 compared to the same time period in the prior year. In the Deafblind Community Inclusion Program, due to the curtailing of in-person services resulting from the pandemic, approximately $144,000 of the $265,000 FY 2020 allotment was expended.**

**Legislative Proposal**

**Mr. Norton reported that the agency plans to resubmit to the Governor and the Office of Policy and Management the same proposals as last session due to the fact that the state legislature had to pause and could not hold any meetings in March due to COVID-19. The proposals will request technical adjustments, such as deleting an out-of-date reference to the Department of Social Services (DSS) regarding the former Department on Aging, removing duplicative provisions within the ADS statutes, and bringing the statutes from the various bureaus of ADS together into one location of the statutes.**

**New Business:**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**Ms. Akers reported on the recent passing of Mr. Guidice’s grandmother and the Advisory Board expressed their condolences. Mr. Sigman announced that Ms. Burgard is currently out on leave and that he will be overseeing the Vocational Rehabilitation day-to-day functions until her return.**

**MOTION: On a motion by Ms. Akers, seconded by Mr. Thal the meeting adjourned at 12:17 p.m.**

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