**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**

**June 17, 2021**

**Members Present**

**Al Sylvestre, Chairman, Eileen Akers, Astread Ferron-Poole (representing the DSS Commissioner), Katherine Guzman, Samuel Pride, Stephen Thal and Randa Utter**

**Members Absent**

**David Gregoire, Andrea Giudice, Beth Rival and Mary Silverberg**

**Others Present**

**Brian Sigman, BESB Director, Mary Burgard, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, Chris Lassen, Adult Services Supervisor, Andrew Norton, ADS Legislative Liaison, Tyrell Sampson, Vending Facility Supervisor, Catherine Summ, Education Supervisor and Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor**

**Public Present**

**Lisa Flaherty-Vaughn, Jesse Stanley, Dawn Russell and Frank Losquadro**

**Welcome and Introductions**

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

**Public Comment**

**Ms. Akers asked for clarification as to how BESB collaborates with the long-term care ombudsman program and the Unit on Aging for services. Mr. Sigman responded that he is in close contact with the two Bureau directors when services for BESB clients are needed. He further said that staff from both bureaus also collaborate to coordinate services for clients who are mutually served.**

**Old Business**

**Minutes from March 18, 2021**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Utter, seconded by Mr. Pride, to approve the draft minutes from the March 18, 2021 meeting. Motion passed.**

**New Business**

**Blind Americans Equality Day**

**Chairman Sylvestre reminded the members that at the last Advisory Board meeting, he offered the opportunity to consider serving on a work group with the possibility of partnering with other groups to connect Blind Americans Equality Day with other relevant topics such as pedestrian safety and employment events. As of this date, he has not heard from any board members and stressed the importance of making the voices of the blind community heard. Chairman Sylvestre will reach out directly to members to ask for assistance and participation. Ms. Flaherty-Vaughn, who represents the Deafblind Association of Connecticut was very excited to hear about Blind Americans Equality Day and emphasized that she would like to make sure that the deafblind community is involved.**

**Bureau Update**

**Mr. Sampson provided an update on the Business Enterprise Program (BEP). To date, BEP has 7 businesses operating. Conversations have begun with the community colleges to whom BEP provides food services in regard to the Fall semester. To ensure a successful Fall semester reopening, an on-campus enrollment count will be needed to ensure that the Vending Facility Manager provides a service in-line with the population of the location. Discussions are also underway with Department of Administrative Services (DAS) Facilities Management regarding the cafeteria locations in state buildings that are run by Vending Facility Managers to assess when the number of building occupants would be sufficient to sustain a reopened food service operation. With Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) locations utilizing a wide range of virtual customer services, it is unlikely that building occupancy would allow for the resumption of the pre-pandemic food service model.**

**During the time that the vending facility locations have been closed, many Vending Facility Managers received various financial offsets to make up for their financial losses. Options such as Unemployment Insurance, Paycheck Protection Program, Restaurant Relief grant funds and CT small business grant monies have been utilized. In addition, Congress has approved funding to provide a one-time payment to Vending Facility Managers within the Randolph Sheppard program to offset losses to their businesses that occurred during calendar year 2020 if those losses were not otherwise compensated. ADS-BESB received approximately $317,000.00 to distribute to the Vending Facility Managers.**

**BEP is nearing the one-year mark with the transition of the statewide vending machine contract to Pepsi. The transition has been progressing successfully.**

**Vocational Rehabilitation**

**Ms. Burgard reported that the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program hired a new Rehabilitation Technologist who started in March. Christiana Rufino will be serving the southern part of the state. Barry Rita has retired, and efforts are underway to refill his position as the Program’s Transition Coordinator along with the VR Counselor position for the south-central region. The VR Program has been purchasing voice and large print adapted computers for clients to participate in virtual training programs and to enable clients to accept virtual employment opportunities. Clients have been participating in online training programs, many from the American Job Centers. Clients are also participating in virtual and residential training programs this summer. The VR Program has worked closely with the Vermont Services for the Blind’s virtual transition camp, making it possible for many of BESB’s transition age student to have virtual work experiences and mentoring opportunities.**

**On June 29th BESB-VR is sponsoring a virtual program by the UCONN Extension Financial Education Program on the topic of how to identify and avoid scammers.**

**Reopen Plan and COVID-19 UPDATES**

**Mr. Sigman affirmed that as of June 1st per the Governor’s instructions, that ADS has resumed forward facing services allowing staff to go into the field with greater frequency. As of July 1st, the building will re-open for occupancy of staff with some restrictions. Building occupancy will be reduced. Visitors can come to the building for meetings, but to the extent that a meeting can be successfully accomplished virtually, that method will continue. Masking will be a requirement when people come to the building. For any visitors who are unable to wear a mask, staff can meet with them outdoors or in the lobby with social distancing employed. The in-person services protocols are in the process of being updated to reflect updated protocols issued by the Department of Administrative Services for state buildings and also taking into account updated guidelines from the Center for Disease Control.**

**Budget Update**

**Mr. Sigman reported that BEP staff are gathering the information necessary to document Vending Facility Manager losses in 2020 to move forward with distribution of the Randolph Shepherd Relief and Restoration Payment funds. Subsequent to receiving affirmation from the Deafblind Advisory Committee for service provision levels in FY 2022, contracts have been developed and are in the process of being finalized. In the VR Program, with the pandemic causing so many of the providers to be either closed completely or offering only virtual services, there have been far fewer options for purchasing services. BESB will reach the end of the one-year carry forward period for the FFY 2020 funds on September 30th. While it is hoped that Congress will pass legislation to allow for another year of carry-forward, should that not occur, these funds would need to revert back to the federal government.**

**BESB VR has joined a mulit-state consortium that includes the Vocational Rehabilitation Programs for the Blind in Michigan, Vermont, New Jersey and Maine to apply for a federal Disability Innovation Fund grant. The grant application is for $18 million and if the consortium is awarded a grant, it will be used to coordinate a multi-state approach to employer outreach, technology solutions to job opportunities and increasing the accessibility of vocational training programs and apprenticeships.**

**Mr. Sigman was pleased to announce that through a collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT), they have secured funding to make the AIRA navigation system available on a pilot basis to clients of BESB. The AIRA technology would be provided to clients at no cost and they would use this technology to assess their experiences in utilizing public transportation and community access, sharing their experiences with DOT.**

**Mr. Norton reported on the State budget. The budget that has passed appropriates about $30.8 million for FY 2022 and $31.5 million FY 2023 to ADS. The Children's Services funding will be $4.4 million in FY 2022 and a little over $4.5 million in FY 2023. The budget for the Vocational Rehabilitation Programs (BRS and BESB) was funded at $7.7 million. Community inclusion funding for individuals who are deafblind was allocated $240,000. CRIS Radio was allocated about $70,000 each year of the two-year budget.**

**The State will be moving the Library for the Blind from Rocky Hill to Hartford. In regard to the implementer bill, Mr. Norton has recently been informed that there is an additional $2 million allocated to ADS for community support for individuals who are deaf or blind.**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**Mr. Sigman announced he is retiring on October 1, 2021. Advisory Board members thanked Mr. Sigman for his leadership over the years.**

**Ms. Akers reported that BCAC (BESB Consumer Advisory Committee) will be holding a meeting on June 21st to discuss the future of their Committee.**

**MOTION: On a motion by Mr. Pride, seconded by Ms. Akers, the meeting adjourned at 11:40 a.m.**

**Next meeting – 30 September 2021, 10:00 a.m.**