**State of Connecticut**

**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– Special Meeting**

**DRAFT MINUTES**

## **January 23, 2020**

**Welcome and Introductions**

**Chairperson Sylvestre called the meeting to order at 10:09 a.m. Mr. Sylvestre acknowledged the presence of members of the State Rehabilitation Council who were in attendance.**

**Members Present**

**Mr. Alan Sylvestre, Chairman, Eileen Akers, Samuel Pride, Beth Rival, Mary Silverberg, Stephen Thal and Ms. Randa Utter**

**Others Present**

**Brian Sigman, BESB Director, Ms. Mary Burgard, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, Mr. Daryl Pease, Secretary, Ms. Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor, Mr. Gary Allen, Mr. Scott Baecker, Mr. Nathaniel Barnes, Mr. Alan Gunzburg, Mr. John McNickle, Ms. Enaida Mendoza, Ms. Eileen Rose, Ms. Dawn Russell, Ms. Kendra Valente, Leslie Warren, Interpreter, and Kathy Strauss, Interpreter**

**Members Absent**

**Ms. Andrea Giudice, Ms. Astread Ferron-Poole, (representing the DSS Commissioner), David Gregoire, Katherine Guzman**

**Public Comment**

**None**

**New Business**

**BESB Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Section of Unified State Plan for Action**

**Mr. Sigman summarized the results of the public comment period, that was available from December 18, 2019 through January 17, 2020 and that included a public hearing on January,15, 2020. In total, there were 5 public comments submitted. Mr. Sigman provided a summary of each of the comments and the proposed response to include in the state plan.**

**One commenter recommended that BESB VR contain the level of funding reserved for administrative overhead costs and reserve sufficient funding for client services versus staff salaries. The commenter also recommended that there should be a limit established for the number of clients per VR Counselor caseload.**

**Mr. Sigman clarified that salaries and fringe benefits are not variables that BESB VR can control as these are determined outside of the VR Program. BESB VR has already reduced staffing levels through attrition and staff transfers to contain administrative costs as much as practical. It would be difficult to maintain adequate service levels with additional reductions in this category. Mr. Sigman further clarified that imposing fixed levels on case load size could result in some clients being placed on a waiting list until the caseloads fell below the established level and that a waiting list would only be permissible if BESB VR were in an order of selection. He noted that the average caseload size has been decreasing.**

**One commenter commended the quality of rehabilitation technology training received from BESB VR. The commenter further stated that more funding should be directed to serving clients, citing the cost of the large print calendar production as one area where savings could be achieved to put towards other VR services.**

**Mr. Sigman clarified budgetary projections included in the draft plan are not proposed caps on expenditures but rather estimates of how much funding will be necessary for purchased services in future years based upon analysis of prior year trends. He further clarified that BESB VR funds are not utilized for the design and production of the large print calendars. However, the Bureau may look to a different approach toward providing large print calendars in the future. Mr. Thal stated that if the calendar is not going to be provided in the future that notification to clients should be done. Mr. Sigman clarified that low vision calendars will be provided but they may not be BESB produced calendars in the future.**

**One commenter stated that the BESB VR policy requirement for clients to obtain an additional level of approval to participate in more than 3 months of attendance at residential adjustment to blindness training programs creates an administrative burden on BESB VR staff, as well as the clients and the staff at the residential programs. The commenter further stated that these residential programs typically provide for a much longer time period to deliver the full scope of their curricula, varying in both cost and duration from program to program. The commenter recommended that other variables, such as total cost for the full program be considered instead of imposing a 3-month duration on initial approval to attend the residential program.**

**Mr. Sigman clarified that the State Rehabilitation Council and the Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired each deliberated on the proposed policy revisions, and a duly noticed public comment period was provided prior to their mutual approval of the policy change. He stated that it would be up to State Rehabilitation Council and the Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired to decide if new deliberations on the provisions of this policy are desired.**

**One commenter stated that efforts should be undertaken to encourage transition-aged students to be more pro-active early in the transition process to increase independence and critical thinking. Examples such as having the students provide evaluations of their participation at job fairs, expanding mentoring opportunities, offering peer-to-peer support networking, and leadership development activities were recommended. The use of technology would be instrumental for many of these activities, in part to overcome barriers imposed by limited transportation options. Development of BESB sponsored activities was emphasized. Additionally, the commenter recommended that personnel, such as para-professionals or job coaches, should receive training in the most meaningful and effective communication approaches with BESB clients.**

**Mr. Sigman stated that based on this comment, he was recommending that the second proposed Objective under Goal B of the draft plan be amended to read:**

**“Pre-ETS clients and their parents or guardians are provided timely notice through the Educational Projects Coordinator or their assigned VR Counselor of BESB-sponsored, as well as BESB endorsed external opportunities that promote the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills.”**

**The new Strategy for this Objective would become:**

**“BESB VR Counselors and the Educational Projects Coordinator working with the Pre-ETS clients shall develop initiatives, and also distribute information on existing initiatives, that focus on peer-to-peer support networking, mentoring matches to individuals with blindness who are employed in a wide-range of careers, job shadowing experiences, paid employment, internships, college preparatory programs, technology training programs, life skills programs and related career development programs.”**

**The new Measure for this objective would become:**

**“Documentation of the services being provided to clients in each of the specific categories identified in the Strategy section.”**

**Mr. Sigman further clarified in reference to the recommendation to provide training to personnel, such as para-professionals or job coaches that BESB VR does provide these types of training opportunities.**

**One commenter recommended, that in terms of career planning, to ensure that people who are blind, especially youth, gain real work experiences. This is also important for individuals who must change careers due to vision loss as they may have been limited to just one type of job before losing vision. The commenter also stressed the importance of providing training in the use of mainstream technology, as many of these individuals may not be familiar with how to use basic technology devices that would be necessary to compete in the labor market. The commenter also stressed the importance of providing resources that would enable these individuals to keep current with advances in technology.**

**Mr. Sigman stated that opportunities to participate in real work experiences through summer youth work opportunities are offered through the American Job Centers as well as through community rehabilitation providers. Additionally, there are opportunities for paid internships, on-the-job training arrangements and work assessments at employer locations included in the vocational rehabilitation process. VR Counselors assist clients in registering for services offered through the American Job Centers to access employment and training opportunities. The AJCs also offers classes in the use of some mainstream technologies that clients can participate in. He further noted that the State Rehabilitation Council is exploring how other states address this critical training need to assess if similar approaches can be used by BESB VR.**

**Chairman Sylvestre proposed adding the phrase “including worklife balance** **in addition to maintenance of good mental and physical health” in parenthesis following the wording “life skills programs” to the proposed revision for the Strategy section of Objective 2 in Goal B.**

**At the request of Chairman Sylvestre, and hearing no objections from the membership, the Advisory Board entered into recess at 10:39 a.m. to allow time for the State Rehabilitation Council to convene their meeting. Chairman Sylvestre reconvened the Advisory Board at 10:45 a.m.**

**Discussion took place regarding Chairman Sylvestre’s recommendation for additions to the Strategy section of the proposed updates for Goal B, Objective 2. Ms. Akers and Ms. Silverberg’s voiced their objections to the addition of wording that addressed healthy living, expressing concerns that this was not directly related to the work of VR and that it also could result in placing value judgments onto what is considered to be a healthy choice. After further discussion, it was agreed to not include “in addition to maintenance of good mental and physical health.”**

**Motion: A motion was made by Mr. Pride, seconded by Ms. Rival, to accept the phrase “including worklife balance.” Motion carried with six in favor and one opposed.**

**At the request of Chairman Sylvestre, and hearing no objections from the membership, the Advisory Board entered into recess at 11:09 a.m. to allow time for the State Rehabilitation Council to reconvene their meeting.**

**Chairperson Sylvestre reconvened the Advisory Board at 11:15 a.m. and entertained a motion to accept the amended BESB VR Section of the Unified State Plan.**

**Motion: A motion was made by Ms. Utter, seconded by Ms. Silverberg, to adopt the Vocational Rehabilitation section of the Unified State Plan as amended. Motion carried unanimously.**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**None**

**MOTION: On a motion by Mr. Pride, seconded by Ms. Silverberg, the Advisory Board meeting adjourned at 11:17 a.m.**

**Next Advisory Board meeting: March 19, 2020 at 10:00 a.m. at BESB.**