**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**

**March 19, 2020**

**Members Present**

**Al Sylvestre, Chairman, Eileen Akers, David Gregoire, Andrea Giudice, Katherine Guzman, Beth Rival, Mary Silverberg, Stephen Thal and Randa Utter.**

**Members Absent**

**Astread Ferron-Poole (representing the DSS Commissioner), Samuel Pride.**

**Others Present**

**Brian Sigman, BESB Director, Mary Burgard, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, Chris Lassen, Adult Services Supervisor, Ed Owens, Business Enterprise Program Supervisor, Lori St. Amand, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor, Catherine Summ, Education Supervisor, Nathanael Wales, National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut (NFB of CT), Honorata Kazmierczak, NFB of CT, Phillip Magalnick, NFB of CT, Jay Brown, State Department of Education.**

**Public Comment**

**Mr. Wales expressed concern over the short timeframe that was available for public comment on one of the sections of the draft Unified State Plan. Mr. Wales also indicated that the portion of the draft Unified State Plan that addressed collaboration amongst partner programs did not provide sufficient information on how accessibility for individuals who are blind is being achieved in partner programs and services. Mr. Wales also raised concerns regarding the Bureau’s policy that addresses residential Adjustment to Blindness Programs. His concerns focused on the policy requirements for requesting extensions of services beyond the initial authorized time period of twelve weeks, and also on the comparative costs of each program. He requested that the Advisory Board reconsider the policy.**

**Chairman Sylvestre requested that Mr. Sigman respond to the concerns pertaining to residential Adjustment to Blindness programs at this point in the agenda but to defer responses on the draft Unified State Plan until that portion of the agenda is reached.**

**Mr. Sigman stated that there was a public comment period of one month for the proposed policy change and no public comments were received. He further stated that the State Rehabilitation Council and the Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired both deliberated on and approved the draft policy as proposed. Mr. Sigman further indicated that since the policy update went into effect, there have been no denials of requests for extensions of the service duration. Ms. Rival stated that the Advisory Board members should have more information in front of them regarding the cost of each program prior to making any determinations for policy changes. Ms. Giudice agreed with this, but stated that the cost for each residential program should not be the only factor considered, and that client choice should be factored in as well. Mr. Magalnick stated that he concured with Mr. Wale’s comments and concerns.**

**New Business**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Akers, seconded by Ms. Rival to approve the draft minutes from December 12, 2019 meeting. Motion passed unanimously.**

**Blind Americans Equality Day Workgroup update:**

**Ms. Akers as Chair of the workgroup which consists of Mr. Thal, Ms. Giudice, Mr. Gregoire, Ms. Guzman, Ms. Weiseman, Ms. Weaver Dunn and Mr. Sigman provided an update. She commended the workgroup members for their enthusiasm and expertise. Ms. Summ was complimented for the Children’s Services efforts to involve BESB students with ideas for an essay contest. The workgroup is also considering other programs and exhibits throughout the state. The workgroup is hoping to have an event at the State Capital in October to include a proclamation issued by the Governor.**

**Bureau Update – Adult Services**

**Mr. Lassen provided an update on the Adult Services Program.  Two Social Worker Trainees with much experience will start on March 27, 2020. One of them is fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), is experienced in tactile sign language and will be covering the northwest part of the state (while serving all ASL users statewide). The second is fluent in Spanish and will serve 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 hire, one of which will be an internal transfer.  Despite the current COVID-19 pandemic, all field staff are continuing to serve clients and are testing out innovative ways to provide blindness rehabilitation services remotely.  Outreach is ongoing to community partners such as the Lions Low Vision Centers. In follow up to a request made by members of the Advisory Board during a prior meeting, Mr. Lassen provided information on how program staff are assisting with identifying options for clients who were on the verge of homelessness, connecting these individuals with partner programs that can provide assistance.**

**Ms. St. Amand reported on the volunteer program.  Certain aspects of the volunteer program are continuing uninterrupted. Recruitment, screening and orientations are continuing with five new matches made at the close of last week.  She also reported that a $200 donation was made to the Libby Zagoran fund as part of Webster Bank’s Volunteer Recognition Grant Program in support of their employee’s volunteerism at BESB.  While overall operations are continuing as usual, some interruptions have been noted. Social distancing has forced colleges to send student volunteers back to their home states/countries and those matches will be closed. Documented reports in from six volunteers serving 10 clients have indicated they will no longer do in-person visits.  In every case they have been encouraged to continue telephone contact to keep the relationship ongoing, enabling socially isolated individuals to maintain a connection to the community.  Ms. St. Amand is also assisting in the coordination of other essential community-based services such as facilitating requests for food deliveries.**

**Ms. Summ reported on the Children’s Services Program. Children’s Services sponsored programs and events in the Spring and Fall of 2019, which included cooking skills and wellness programs, and a crafts event. BESB provided a professional development session to the town itinerant teachers that had 20 teachers who attended. Ms. Palmer presented a case study on a student she was following for two years and how to determine if the child is ready for a calendar system as they progress. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a lot of uncertainty with the school systems. The Education Consultants compiled a contingency plan and generated a host of ideas for the provision of some services remotely. Interviews were conducted this month for an Education Consultant position. Ms. Summ encouraged parents to contact their child’s Education Consultant to seek out suggestions on how to provide for learning opportunities for their child while the schools are closed.**

**Public VR 100 Year Anniversary:**

**Mr. Sigman informed the members that June will mark the 100-year anniversary of the public vocational rehabilitation program. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, events were being planned to celebrate this milestone. However, under the current circumstances, the celebration will be through electronic communications. Rehabilitation Services Administration has a website page dedicated to highlighting the history and accomplishments of the program.**

**Unified State Plan**

**As requested by Chairman Sylvestre earlier in the meeting, Mr. Sigman responded to the public comments regarding the timing of the draft Unified State Plan public comment period. Mr. Sigman stated that there are several sections of the Unified State Plan, with each partner program responsible for developing their specific section. Earlier this year, BESB Vocational Rehabilitation put forth their section of the Unified State Plan for a 30 day public comment period. The public comments that were received went before the Advisory Board and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) for deliberation. Revisions to certain areas in the draft plan were proposed based upon these deliberations and the revised draft BESB Vocational Rehabilitation section of the Unified State Plan was approved by the Advisory Board and the SRC for submission to Rehabilitation Services Administration. There were other sections of the draft Unified State Plan that address services administered by partner programs. When Mr. Sigman was informed of the public comment period for one of these other sections, he forwarded that information to his distribution list on the same day that he was notified.**

**Ms. Rival requested that the Advisory Board revisit the Bureau’s policy on funding for residential Adjustment to Blindness Programs. Ms. Silverberg concurred. Chairman Sylvestre stated that this topic will be added to the agenda of the June meeting.**

**Budget:**

**Mr. Sigman provided details on how purchased services have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. With the closing of many businesses, programs and services, in combination with social distancing requirements, purchased services are greatly diminished across all of the programs administered by BESB. He expressed particular concern regarding the Maintenance of Effort requirements for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program that requires a level of expenditures that may not be achievable under current circumstances. He has been in contact with Rehabilitation Services Administration and was informed that other states have expressed the same concerns.**

**Legislative Update**

**Mr. Sigman informed the Advisory Board members that the state legislature is presently closed and no meetings of the legislative committees are currently scheduled. He also mentioned that the President has signed into law an economic stimulus package in response to the national pandemic crisis.**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**Ms. Rival was pleased to announce that the NFB is sponsoring a “Braille Readers are Leaders” contest. Winners will be announced at the NFB convention.**

**Ms. Giudice announced that this year is the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Ms. Akers raised concerns regarding accessibility in completing the United States Census, noting that while some individuals have found it to be accessible to screen reading technology, others did not. If consumers have their 12-digit i.d. numbers, they are able to call in their information.**

**Ms. Rival reported that the Bell Program may still occur, but that all depends on the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis. More information will follow.**

**Mr. Thal requested that the Advisory Board members remind people to register to vote.**

**MOTION: On a motion by Ms. Silverberg, seconded by Ms. Akers, the meeting adjourned at 11:52 a.m.**

**Next meeting – 18 June 2020, 10:00 a.m.**