**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**

**December 10, 2020**

**Members Present**

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

**Members Absent**

**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, Mary Burgard, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor.**

**Public Present**

**Brenda Biernat, Dennis Regan.**

**Welcome and Introductions**

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

**Public Comment**

**Mr. Thal acknowledged Adult Services for the distribution of the 2021 large print calendars sent to clients. He also expressed concern about the future of the low vision providers since several of the providers are close to retirement age. He questioned the impact on services that COVID-19 can potentially have in the future and suggested forming a workgroup to discuss this further.**

**Ms. Brenda Biernat introduced herself as a parent of a client and also as a student at the UMass Boston Master’s degree program for teachers of the visually impaired (TVI). She spoke about the importance of having staff who are trained in techniques for working with children that have cortical visual impairment (CVI). She acknowledged the expertise that BESB education consultants have and felt it would be beneficial for children with CVI to receive BESB services. Ms. Biernat also expressed disappointment that she was not able to obtain an internship at BESB.**

**Ms. Rival commented that the National Federation of the Blind offers scholarships for students pursuing degrees to become a TVI and that more information can be found at** [**NFB.org**](http://www.nfb.org)**.**

**Old Business**

**Minutes from September 17, 2020**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Akers, seconded by Ms. Giudice, to approve the draft minutes from the September 17, 2020.**

**During discussion it was identified that an earlier draft of the minutes had been incorrectly distributed to the members. That version differed from the published draft that was previously distributed and posted. Ms. Akers and Ms. Giudice withdrew their motion and second. The draft minutes from the September 17, 2020 meeting will be taken up as an action item at the March meeting of the board and the draft minutes as posted on the agency website will be redistributed to the members for review.**

**New Business**

**Blind Americans Equality Day Workgroup update**

**Ms. Akers acknowledged the workgroup members for their efforts. Various projects included an activity at the Tobacco Museum in collaboration with the local Lions club, a creative expressions project, Veterans multi-media project, CRIS Radio sponsored Facebook page, interviews on CRIS Radio and on local radio stations, outreach to Google, and a press release from ADS Commissioner Amy Porter. Ms. Akers will provide a written report to the members.**

**Bureau Update**

**Business Enterprise Program (BEP)**

**Mr. Sampson reported that BEP continues to be greatly affected by COVID-19. To date, 28 out of the Program’s 32 vending facilities are closed. Since the Vending Facility Managers are Sole Proprietors, and in general are not eligible for unemployment, due to the federal legislation providing small business support during this time, all Vending Facility Managers within the program were eligible for this financial support. Pepsi has been awarded the statewide vending machine contract by the Department of Administrative Services for the term of July 1,2020 - June 30, 2025. The general program expenditure account remains stable, but continued shortfalls in vending commissions or increased expenses could pose future concern if the pandemic continues much longer. The current vacancy for the position of Fiscal Administrative Officer is on hold and those duties have been temporarily assigned to staff within the Bureau of Organizational Support.**

**Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)**

**Ms. Burgard reported that the Vocational Rehabilitation Program lost two transition counselors back in March and that both positions have since been filled. One position was filled with a new employee, Stacey-Ann Lewis, who is covering the northern part of the state. An existing Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, Charlotte Copenhaver, has transferred to the other position, covering the southern part of the state.  Recruitment is underway to hire a rehabilitation technologist to cover the southern part of the state and VR is seeking to refill Ms. Copenhaver’s regional caseload for the South Central part of the state. Staff continue to utilize on-line programs for clients and the focus is to get the clients set up to be able to access online training programs and virtual employment opportunities. The American Job Centers offer a variety of virtual training opportunities and clients have also participated in virtual training provided by the Helen Keller National Center, World Services for the Blind, and a program in Vermont which developed a virtual Work Readiness Program for transition age students. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program was an active participant in the Annual Disability Resources Fair that was held virtually this year.**

**COVID-19 UPDATES**

**Mr. Sigman stressed the importance of frequently checking the Governor’s website that is dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic to keep current on the protocols and requirements that are in effect for businesses, social gatherings and activities. The website address is** [**ct.gov/coronavirus**](http://www.ct.gov/coronavirus)**.**

**During this past Summer, protocols were distributed to staff and community providers that pertained to the provision of in-person services. The majority of BESB staff are still working virtually, providing services to clients using different technology approaches. In-person services can be provided where no feasible alternative option is available.**

**Public Comment Period Summary - Personal Adjustment Programs**

**Mr. Sigman reported that there were two public commenters both of whom spoke positive on the proposed changes. Two written comments were received, one of which was a follow-up by one of the two public commenters who expressed their opinion that these were positive changes. The second written comment was a suggestion to add language justifying the need for an out-of-state residential program. Mr. Sigman stated that the State Rehabilitation Council will take up this proposed policy update at their next meeting in December.**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Mr. Thal, seconded by Ms. Silverberg, to accept the proposed changes to the policy on personal adjustment training and to forward this on to the State Rehabilitation Council for their consideration. The motion passed with two abstentions.**

**Budget Update**

**Mr. Sigman reported that in Congress, the House passed a bill to keep the federal government open until December 18th and that the Senate is expected to take up the bill in time to avoid a federal government shutdown that would otherwise occur on December 12th. Like most of the other Vocational Rehabilitation Programs across the country, due to the pandemic, it is unlikely that BESB-VR will achieve Maintenance of Effort requirements for federal fiscal year 2020 and a waiver request will be necessary. Due to the deficit in the State budget, there continues to be a hiring freeze for state funded vacancies. The Bureau has resubmitted requests to refill several vacancies and is awaiting updates on whether any of these positions can be refilled.**

**Legislative Proposal**

**Mr. Norton reported that the State is currently projecting a $4.3 billion deficit for the 2021-2023 biennium.  The Special Transportation Fund is also projected to be in deficit within three years.  In February, the Governor will submit his two-year budget and we will know then his specific plans for addressing the situation. Mr. Norton reported that the agency plans to resubmit the same ADS agency bill as it did last year since that proposal had not been acted upon when the legislature shut down because of COVID-19. The bill would only make technical changes to the statutes including the deletion of duplicate sections of the law that date from when the bureaus of ADS had been separate state agencies.**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**Ms. Akers acknowledged a positive article in Bookshare regarding one of BESB’s rehabilitation technologist, Jolene Nemeth.**

**MOTION: On a motion by Ms. Utter, seconded by Ms. Akers, the meeting adjourned at 12:00 p.m.**

**Next meeting – 18 March 2021, 10:00 a.m.**