**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 18, 2021**

**Members Present**

**Al Sylvestre, Chairman, Katherine Guzman, Samuel Pride, Beth Rival, Mary Silverberg, Stephen Thal, Andrea Giudice, and Randa Utter**

**Members Absent**

**Eileen Akers, Astread Ferron-Poole (representing the DSS Commissioner), and David Gregoire**

**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, Lori St. Amand, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Catherine Summ, Education Supervisor, Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor, Mairead Painter, ADS Long Term Care Ombudsman, Margy Gerundo-Murkette, Program Manager, ADS Unit on Aging**

**Public Present**

**Alan Gunzburg**

**Welcome and Introductions**

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

**Public Comment**

**Mr. Thal raised the concern that BESB clients age 60 and older may be adversely impacted by the decline in approved low vision providers. Mr. Sigman reported on the efforts to secure low vision providers, including outreach to the Connecticut Association of Optometrists. Mr. Sigman will raise the shortage issue with the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB).**

**In response to Mr. Thal’s inquiry about the role that the Bureau’s Rehabilitation Technologists have in website accessibility, Mr. Sigman clarified that BESB Rehabilitation Technologists can provide some limited technical assistance where a client is experiencing work related accessibility issues with their employer’s website. However, BESB’s Rehabilitation Technologists are not website developers and it is the responsibility of the entity with the website to address the accessibility of their sites.**

**Mr. Sigman stated that BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation Program is part of a five state collaboration that is developing a grant proposal that would focus in part on some of the scripting issues that make it difficult for speech access software to interact with employer based software.**

**Mr. Gunzburg offered to be of assistance pertaining to the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.**

**Old Business**

**Minutes from September 17, 2020 and December 10, 2020**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Silverberg, seconded by Ms. Rival, to amend the agenda to allow action on the draft minutes from September 17, 2020 since there was some confusion about which set of minutes was the correct version. Motion carried to add this agenda item and to approve the September 17, 2020 draft minutes as amended.**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Silverberg, seconded by Ms. Rival, to approve the draft minutes from the December 10, 2020 meeting. Motion passed.**

**New Business**

**Bureau Update**

**Mr. Lassen provided an update on the Adult Services Program. Of the two Social Worker trainees who started work in late March of 2020, Margie Santos is fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), is experienced in tactile sign language and covers the northwest part of the state (while serving all ASL users statewide). Jaime Ortega is fluent in Spanish and serves greater Hartford, while assisting clients who speak only Spanish in the northern half of Connecticut.**

**Orientation and Mobility Instructors have been providing outdoor lessons quite regularly for the past six months. Adult Services have recently conducted interviews for two additional Mobility Instructors. The Rehabilitation Teachers are continuing to provide most of their training remotely. Daily living aids are being mailed to the clients with instruction in their use provided remotely. The Rehabilitation Teachers and Mobility Instructors also completed a series of instructional videos that were posted to the ADS YouTube channel.**

**Ms. St. Amand reported that since the onset of COVID-19, most of the volunteer services have been provided virtually. However, there have been some situations where in-person services have been provided, such as assistance with grocery shopping or transportation to medical appointments, following COVID-19 safety protocols. Ms. St. Amand also noted recent comments from a consumer who was very complimentary about the timeliness of services and receipt of her daily living aids. Volunteer recruitment, screening and matching continue uninterrupted. Thus far, since January 2021, there were 33 volunteers matched.**

**Children’s Services**

**Ms. Summ reported on the Children’s Services Program. Staff have been working remotely via email, phone, text, and video. Some in-person lessons and assessments have taken place this year. 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. The Orientation and Mobility Instructor vacancy was reposted this week. Children’s Services has conducted a variety of virtual online Expanded Core Curriculum related events this school year. In addition, Children’s Services is already planning potential summer 2021 programs, which will probably be virtual. A variety of camping options, taking into consideration the health and safety of our students, are also being explored with Channel 3 Kids Camp.**

**COVID-19 UPDATES**

**Mr. Sigman reported that 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. It is not known yet when the staff will be returning to the office space setting. The agency is keeping current on the protocols and requirements that are in effect for businesses, social gatherings, and activities. Updates can be found on the website address** [**ct.gov/coronavirus**](http://www.ct.gov/coronavirus)**. In regards to vaccinations, March 19th starts the open sign-up for ages 45-54. April 5th is the tentative open sign-up date for individuals age 16 to 44. The vaccine appointment assistance telephone line is 877-918-2224. Infoline 211 can also be utilized for COVID-19 information and assistance.**

**Blind Americans Equality Day**

**MOTION: Ms. Giudice made a motion, seconded by Ms. Rival, to add Blind Americans Equality Day to this agenda. Motion passed.**

**Chairperson Sylvestre offered the opportunity for members to consider serving on the 2021 Blind Americans Equality Day workgroup. Discussion will take place at the next Advisory Board meeting to determine who the volunteers will be. This event could also be combined with pedestrian safety and employment events organized by other groups, so the members could work in collaboration with others.**

**State Unit on Aging Services**

**Ms. Mairead Painter, the State’s Long-Term Care Ombudsman and Margy Gerundo-Murkette, Program Manager from ADS Unit on Aging each provided updates on the programs and services that are offered. Ms. Painter provided an overview of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (LTCOP) which works to improve the quality of life and quality of care of Connecticut citizens residing in nursing homes, residential care homes and assisted living communities. All Ombudsman activity is performed on behalf of, and at the direction of residents. All communication with the residents, their family members, or legal guardians, as applicable, is held in strict confidentiality. The LTCOP responds to, and investigates complaints brought forward by residents, family members, and/or other individuals acting on their behalf. Ombudsmen offer information on consultation to consumers and providers, monitor state and federal laws and regulations, and make recommendations for improvement. The program also recruits, trains, and supervises Volunteer Resident Advocates who assist residents in resolving concerns. To contact the Ombudsman’s office, call their statewide toll-free number** **1-866-388-1888** **or** **860-424-5200** **or email at** **ltcop@ct.gov****.**

**Ms. Gerundo-Murkette provided an overview of the State Unit on Aging which ensures that Connecticut’s elders have access to the supportive services necessary to live with dignity, security, and independence. The unit is responsible for planning, developing, and administering a comprehensive and integrated service delivery system for older persons in Connecticut. More specifically, the unit administers Older Americans Act programs for supportive services, in-home services, and congregate and home-delivered meals. It also administers programs that provide senior community employment, health insurance counseling, and respite care for caregivers. The State Unit on Aging works closely with the aging network partners to provide these services. Partners include Connecticut’s five area agencies on aging, municipal agents for the elderly, senior centers, and many others who provide services to older adults. Should you need to reach their office, their email address is** **aging.sda@ct.gov****.**

**Chairman Sylvestre requested that the information provided by Ms. Painter and Ms. Gerundo-Murkette be added as an addendum to these minutes so that members of the public could access this information.**

**Budget Update**

**Mr. Sigman reported on the Governor’s two-year year proposed budget for FY 2022-23. $300,000 is proposed for transfer from the Employment Opportunities funds to Vocational Rehabilitation for maintenance of effort (MOE) relief. Children’s Services would go from $4,384,075 to $4,508,985. Community inclusion funds for individuals who are deafblind would go from $265,269 to $239,891 in FY 22 and to $240,628 in FY 23. The current expenditures through March 1, 2021 for community inclusion services reflect the challenges in providing these services during the pandemic. Only $67,215 out of the $265,269 appropriation has been expended so far in the fiscal year. The Business Enterprise Program will be receiving approximately $315,000 through the Randolph-Sheppard Financial Relief and Restoration Payments (FRRP) Appropriation to assist vending facility managers in offsetting losses to their business in 2020 that resulted from the pandemic.**

**Legislative Proposal**

**Mr. Norton reported that the Governor released his two-year budget. Public hearings are being scheduled remotely. The date for the legislative session to end is June 9th. The agency resubmitted 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. Another bill proposes to change statutory references from “guide dog” to “service animal” as defined in federal law. The bill is intended to align state terminology with federal terminology.**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**Ms. Rival reported that NFB is hosting the Bell Academy virtually once again this year. There will be three two-week classes in June, July, and August. Registration is open for ages 4-12. People are encouraged to register as soon as possible.**

**Chairperson Sylvestre encouraged members not to get intimidated by comparing last year’s successful Blind Americans Equalities Day events from volunteering for this year’s workgroup. He stressed the importance of having voices heard and getting the word out with something as simple as a joint statement to recognize importance of Blind Americans Equality Day.**

**Ms. Rival stated that individuals should register with the airlines in advance to complete the necessary forms when flying with a service animal and need to list any specific items they need when flying. She also stated that the on-line site to sign up for the COVID-19 vaccines through MyChart is not accessible and neither are the forms when traveling from state-to-state. Individuals are encouraged to call 211 or 1-877-918-2224 to schedule vaccination appointments.**

**Mr. Thal extended invitations to presenters who have topics of interest to be shared on CRIS Radio. He is in his 29th year volunteering for CRIS Radio with interviews. Chairperson Sylvestre commended Mr. Thal for his devotion.**

**Ms. Guzman reported that Connecticut is being sued by a disability rights group for not prioritizing people with disabilities to get the COVID-19 vaccine.**

**MOTION: On a motion by Ms. Silverberg, seconded by Mr. Pride, the meeting adjourned at 12:06 p.m.**

**Next meeting – 17 June 2021, 10:00 a.m.**

**Addendum**

**What Is the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program?**

**The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (LTCOP) works to improve the quality of life and quality of care of Connecticut citizens residing in nursing homes, residential care homes and assisted living communities.  All Ombudsman activity is performed on behalf of, and at the direction of residents.  All communication with the residents, their family members or legal guardians, as applicable, is held in strict confidentiality.**

**The LTCOP responds to, and investigates complaints brought forward by residents, family members, and/or other individuals acting on their behalf.  Ombudsmen offer information on consultation to consumers and providers, monitor state and federal laws and regulations, and make recommendations for improvement.  The program also recruits, trains, and supervises Volunteer Resident Advocates who assist residents in resolving concerns.**

**What Does the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program Do for Long-Term Care Residents?**

**RECEIVES and looks into complaints and assists residents in resolving problems.**

**EDUCATES residents and families about their rights.**

**EMPOWERS and supports residents and families to discuss concerns with nursing home staff.**

**PROVIDES information regarding long-term care programs and services.**

**ADVOCATES improvements in state and federal laws and regulations.**

**REPRESENTS residents’ interests before governmental agencies.**

**IDENTIFIES and seeks to remedy gaps in facility, government, or community services.**

**RESPECTS the privacy and confidentiality of residents.**

**Our services are free and confidential.**

**Contact Information**

**To contact the Ombudsman’s office, call our statewide toll-free number**

**1-866-388-1888** **or** **860-424-5200**

**You can also e-mail us:****ltcop@ct.gov**

**Follow us on Facebook:**[**www.facebook.com/CTLTCOP**](http://www.facebook.com/CTLTCOP)

**For a list of the regional ombudsman and the towns they serve, click**[**here**](https://portal.ct.gov/LTCOP/Content/Contact-Us/All-Regions)**.**

**For a map of the regional ombudsman and the towns they serve, click**[**here**](https://portal.ct.gov/LTCOP/Content/Contact-Us/LTCOP-Regions-Map-Page)**.**

**For a Downloadable Map of Regional Ombudsman Territories, click**[**here**](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/LTCOP/PDF/Regional-Ombudsman-Territory-Map.pdf)**.**

**Overview of State Unit on Aging of Department of Aging and Disability Services**

**CHOICES/Area Agency on Aging regarding programs and services: 1-800-994-9422**

**State Unit on Aging 866-218-6631 and email:** **aging.sda@ct.gov****.**

**The State Unit on Aging (SUA) administers and manages about a dozen programs including home delivered meals, congregate meals, caregiver support, health and wellness promotion, senior employment, health insurance counseling, Alzheimer’s Respite care and elder abuse prevention.  The SUA is charged with providing administration, programs and services under the federal Older Americans Act (OAA). We receive federal OAA funding, along with some state funding, to provide these services as directed under the federal OAA.**

**The State Unit on Aging is required under the OAA to have a State Plan on Aging. Our State Plan is our road map for aging services for the future. We just completed our new, three-year State Plan on Aging, which begins October 1st this year and addresses 3 goals: long term services and supports, healthy aging and elder rights.**

**There are 5 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) in our state, who receive the bulk of our funds, per the direction of the OAA. We pass funds through to the AAAs. The AAAs provide some services directly but most of their funds are passed through to local community providers for services. The Coordination of the programs is at the state and AAA level.**

**It is important to note that Aging and Disability Services is one of many state agencies that provides services to older adults here in CT.**

**Highlights of some of our programs:**

**The Elderly Nutrition Program is our biggest program- it provides nutritionally balanced meals, reduces hunger and food insecurity and promotes socialization for older adults.**

* + **Our nutrition program provides both home-delivered and congregate meals at sites like senior centers**
	+ **The program provides almost 2 million meals each year to 21,000 individuals**
	+ **During the pandemic, congregate sites closed to the public and our partners shifted services and provided grab and go meals from these sites or provided a delivered meal to someone who used to go to a site for much or all of the past year.**

**Our CHOICES Program helps older adults and persons with disabilities with Medicare understand their Medicare coverage and healthcare options and offers enrollment assistance. And with its network of professionals and volunteers, CHOICES counseled more than 27,000 Medicare beneficiaries last year. Our busiest time is during Medicare open enrollment in the fall, when people are making a choice about their Part D plans and their supplemental or managed care plans.**

**We have two programs that specifically support caregivers: CT Statewide Respite Care Program and National Family Caregiver Support Program. Family or Informal Caregivers are those who help their loved ones - an older parent, spouse, friend, or neighbor - so they can stay at home longer. Both programs have a respite component – respite is a brief break in caregiving.**

* + **The Family Caregiver Support Program is designed to offer caregivers a variety of services when caring for their loved ones at home, including Respite.**
	+ **The Statewide Respite Care Program focuses solely on Respite services to families with a loved one with Alzheimer’s disease or related dementias. The program offers relief to often stressed caregivers by providing support, in-home assessments and services.**

**It isn’t important that a caregiver know which caregiver program they fit into for services – they would contact the Area Agency on Aging in their area and the staff there would make the determination based on their needs and situation.**

**Senior Community Service Employment Program serves low income adults age 55 year and older and assists them in re-entering today’s workforce. Participants are placed in temporary subsidized training assignments where they receive valuable on-the-job work experience and training needed to gain meaningful employment. The program provided services to 100 low-income older workers.**

**The State Unit on Aging is part of several groups regarding aging:**

* Coalition for Elder Justice in CT - A group of stakeholders working together to prevent elder abuse and protect the rights, independence, security, and well-being of vulnerable elders.
* Age Well Collaborative – which includes various aging network partners- has a vision of an age-friendly Connecticut – a great place to grow up and grow old.
* CT Healthy Living Collective – dedicated to healthy aging in communities. A key initiative of CHLC is their public education website.
* Reframing Aging campaign – rethinking what we know and say about aging – to be less ageist.