BLIND PEOPLE DID NOT DO THESE THINGS

The National Federation of the Blind of Michigan has not stood by while services to blind people have continually gotten worse. We have steadfastly and proudly fulfilled our role as watchdogs on behalf of all blind citizens in our wonderful state. We have diligently, vociferously, and relentlessly called for and worked to achieve exemplary results from the Michigan Commission for the Blind. The Michigan Commission for the Blind, with $25 million to spend to help blind people get good jobs: we cannot expect less. With $25 million to spend on improving the employment of blind people we, blind people, have no recourse except to hold those who are mandated to provide those services accountable to produce the best services available. $25 million is a lot of money. Shouldn’t we expect a prompt return phone call, Braille documents, and freedom from fear of reprisals for speaking out about quality services?

Since 2008 the declining quality of management and services received from the MCB have been the subject of thousands, possibly tens of thousands of hours of meetings. We have attended Commission Board meetings, Consumer Involvement Council meetings, Elected Operator Committee meetings, Planning and Quality Team meetings, Services Delivery Design Team Meetings, College Policy Task Force meetings, Small Business Policy meetings, BEP Task Force Meetings, Training Task Force meetings, Maintenance Policy meetings and on the list goes. Blind people have taken an active role in working to develop legal and quality policies for the agency. We have demonstrated with our shoe leather, our sweat, our knowledge, our passion and freely-given volunteer time in meetings with well-paid state employees our commitment to creating the best agency in the country.

In return blind Commission employees have been illegally fired; blind Business Enterprise Program entrepreneurs have had their licenses illegally revoked. We have been met with negativity, rejection, attempts to close meetings, denial of documents in Braille and other accessible formats and ever-increasing levels of poor services from MCB as an agency.

This author heard, today, that a client from Detroit who moved to Florida more than a year ago received a return call from a counselor that she had placed over 2 years ago. This has to be a world’s record on delay in returning a call. It is only 1 example of the poor responsiveness to phone calls which have been raised for more than 5 years. It is routine for callbacks to take weeks and months.

We now have a strong and active Commission Board that has begun addressing these questions. For the first time in over 10 years there were legally mandated hearings on the Commission’s Rehabilitation State Plan. The Board convened a task force on training and the Board has asked for improved and strengthened training for MCB employees. The Board has set Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-Driven goals for the MCB Director. The Board gave an unsatisfactory evaluation in a chain of ever declining annual evaluations of the Director. The Board has asked for and begun receiving hard data on new cases, cases closed as employed and cases closed unsuccessfully. The Board has asked for the costs of successfully and unsuccessfully closed cases. In other words this board had begun to do as Governor Snyder has been advocating, creating a data-driven results-oriented agency.

Now, Governor Snyder has issued Executive Order 2012-2 that abolishes the Michigan Commission for the Blind. His order destroys the Michigan Commission for the Blind Board, thus eliminating any direct involvement of blind citizens in the policy development of services to blind citizens. If people who fish and people who like to shoot bunnies get input into the Natural Resources Commission or people who use our roadways get input into the Transportation Commission on the way the Transportation Department is managed, shouldn’t blind people with 70% unemployment get to say something about how $25 million is spent to help them get jobs? This Executive Order seems very contradictory to the Governor’s expressed goals. The people who are hurt are blind people, the same people who were being hurt by the poor management of MCB. Though the MCB Director job is abolished, there is no reason to believe the Director will cease to be employed in the management of the agency. This seems to be a prime example of rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic.

It cannot be said that blind people have not raised these issues to the new administration. It cannot be said that blind people have blamed or criticized the Governor for these long-standing problems. It will not be said that blind people gave up and went home after this rebuke. We will be on the streets, in the Cadillac Place Building, the Escanaba State Office Building, in the Grand Tower Building, in the Anderson Building, in the Farnum Building in the Capitol Building, in the newspapers, in the committee meetings of the legislature, in federal public hearings, and in arbitration hearings of the Business Enterprise Program until we get $25 million worth of quality services. We will not be told to sit down and shut up and be grateful for second-rate jobs, second rate services and second-rate citizenship. We will not settle for receiving services from the agency that provides food stamps, child protective services and the social safety net. We want jobs, not welfare.

Following is a letter written to Steve Arwood about a secretive video recording of a Commission Meeting. To their credit Mr. Hillfinger, Mr. Zimmer and Mr. Arwood met with some of our members following the receipt of the letter to assure us that this would not happen again. They understood the issue it raised. We were pleased that Mr. Arwood agreed to work with us to attempt to reduce the number of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. This effort got off to a good start, then Mr. Arwood felt it was no longer helpful, though progress was being made.

As the letter below shows, even though we were unhappy about the actions of MCB, we were not critical of Governor Snyder, his policies or decisions. Why did the Governor turn against blind people in this way? Blind people are not the culprits here. Why is our ability to affect our services being reduced?

Thu 7/14/2011

Dear Mr. Arwood:

I received the item below describing the recent video recording of the June Commission meeting from the National Federation of the Blind list serve to which I subscribe. I cannot imagine what people are thinking to spend this kind of money in these supposedly strapped times of state government. What in the world is going on?

First, this recording was made without the knowledge of meeting participants who were blind, though many of my sighted friends were aware and simply figured that we knew. I was not alone in my ignorance of this assault on my privacy. I attended this meeting and did not know until the following Monday that it was recorded on video. Why was it recorded? Why was it so important to spend this kind of money to make such a recording? I am dumbfounded that you and the other administrators of LARA would allow such a frivolous and extravagant expenditure for such a small event.

It is understandable that you are annoyed at the state of things with regard to citizen dissatisfaction with MCB. Can you imagine why blind citizens are outraged about the mismanagement of such an important agency? How can it be made any clearer: there is a 70% unemployment rate among blind people? Shouldn't citizens(taxpayers) be outraged when such offensive behavior as recording people in a public meeting by the government without those people's knowledge and then compounding it by spending more than $5,000 on top of it? This is money meant to help blind people get jobs. All this is carried out by responsible authorities? Five thousand dollars is about what it takes to get a blind person a job at MCB. Was that film worth a blind person's job? A job, a chance to be a first-class citizen, a contributing taxpayer, a part of the fabric of our community. What kind of priorities are these?

Mr. Arwood, I have heard that you are an experienced administrator. Since you are part of the Snyder administration, I would suppose you have some general tendencies toward sensibility. Despite the entire clamor, it seems that this Governor is doing a very good job navigating in very dangerous waters with the difficulties presented by taxation, unions, declining revenues, international bridges and on and on. Would the Governor think this incident at MCB fits his vision of how state government should be run? Taking advantage of blind people to basically spy on them and then spend money appropriated to help them get jobs seems like a surrealistic juxtaposition of events not up to the high expectations of this administration. I need to say it one more time: "use money intended to get jobs for blind people to insult and intimidate them?" It's amazing!

I hope you reconsider your approach to MCB and begin to consider that people like me with three decades of experience in government and an advanced degree in administration are not out in left field. After all, we are on the outside; the problems are from the inside. We did not illegally fire anyone. We did not mismanage the remodeling of the MCB Training Center. We aren't the ones who cannot fix the System 7 computer system after 10 years of effort and heaven knows how much money. We aren't the ones under-spending the budget on services to unemployed blind people while using this same precious money attacking those same people. We are not the ones violating the Rehabilitation Act. We are not the ones scheduling meetings in inaccessible facilities. We are not the ones paying $5,000 to spy on and intimidate blind Michigan citizens. We are not the ones making these problems.

We believe in the Rehabilitation Act and Public Act 260 of 1978. I believe in the Governor's abilities and motives. This problem did not arise on Governor Snyder's watch, it was inherited. The video recording did happen on his watch. I respectfully request an explanation, from you, of this seemingly insane event. I certainly hope it was an aberration and does not signal future attitudes and actions.

Sincerely,

Fred J. Wurtzel

Sent: Wednesday, July 13, 2011 3:58 PM

To: nfbmi-talk@nfbnet.org

Subject: [nfbmi-talk] Fw: FOIA Emails RE: J Harcz

----- Original Message -----

From: Farmer, Mel (LARA)

To: 'joe harcz Comcast'

Cc: Arwood, Steve (LARA) ; Brown, Melanie (LARA) ; Morrow, Mario (LARA) ; Cannon, Patrick (DELEG) ; Haynes, Carla (DELEG) ; 'sally.conway@usdoj.gov' ; Przekop-Shaw, Susan (AG)

Sent: Wednesday, July 13, 2011 3:31 PM

Subject: FW: FOIA Emails RE: J Harcz

Mr. Joseph Harcz, this notice is in follow up to my July 8, 2011 email response (enclosed) regarding your June 30, 2011 request for a copy of the DVD of the June 17, 2011 MCB general meeting in accessible format. As you were previously informed, the Department does not have the in-house capability to convert the DVD of this 6 1/2 hour meeting into the accessible format you requested; and, thusly, the Department must contract a private- sector vendor to perform this service. The vendor indicates that it does not expect to have the DVD conversions completed until the end of this week, or the first part of the week commencing Monday, July 18, 2011. Further, when the vendor provides the Department the DVD, the Department will need 2-3 days to add the audio description portion to it.

Also, in follow up to the Department's July 6, 2011 response to your July 2, 2011 request for records you describe as "a line item accounting of how much this video recording cost the taxpayers or any records related to costs such as inter agency transfers from the MCB/LARA or a third party vendor for filming the event to begin with", please be informed of the following:

--Filming Cost: At minimum, the wage/benefits of the Department's lowest paid employee capable

 of recording the MCB meeting (General Office Assistant 5) at $25.10/hr X 6.5hrs = 163.15

--Private Sector Vendor Cost: The vendor informed the Department that its actual charge is

 $3,750.00.

--Audio Description Cost: Estimated to take 2-3 days and cost about $1,200.00.

--Postage: Estimated to cost about $6.00

The total estimated cost to film and convert this requested DVD into the accessible format

requested is about $5,119.15.

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From: Farmer, Mel (LARA)