**February 27, 2025 minutes**

**Statewide Rehabilitation Council**

**Business and Employment Opportunity (BEO) Committee**

1:00 – 2:00 pm

**Attendees:**

* + **SRC Members:** Steve LaMaster (Committee Chair), Joe Bellil
  + **MRC staff:** John Maruyama, William Noone, Graham Porell, Amy Karr
  + **Other individuals present:** Amelia Dillion (Open Sky), Milo Plass (Client Assistance Program – CAP)
  + **Absent BEO Committee Members:** Dawn Clark, Naomi Goldberg

The meeting was held remotely.

The meeting was called to order at 1:04 pm.

# Introductions and announcements (as needed)

The agenda time of two hours is the max time. For the June meeting, we have 60 minutes slated.

# Approval of meeting minutes

The June 2024 meeting minutes and August 2024 meeting minutes were approved with no corrections.

# State Plan FY25 Recommendations Discussions

**FY25-5: The SRC will work with MassAbility to involve stakeholders in presenting its findings and discuss a future MassAbility self-employment strategy to support Job Seekers with disabilities in pursuing self-employment vocational goals.**

Presentation of current self-employment data across MBY Areas and discussion

Mr. Maruyama shared the self-employment data. **(See Self Employment FY24-25.xls.)** This is baseline data that we will be able to use going forward to observe trends.

Roughly the same number of people sought self-employment in their plans as those who had achieved self‑employment at close. However, there is not a complete overlap between the two. There are a few people who said they had self-employment as a goal who did not ultimately end up with self‑employment at closure. And then there are a few who did not have self‑employment as a goal but did end up self‑employed at closure. There were 33 individuals who had self-employment on their IPE (Individual Plan for Employment) at the beginning of services and 39 who had achieved self‑employment at closure. Roughly the same number of men and women sought self-employment on their IPEs and achieved self-employment at closure.

The majority of people who had self-employment on their IPE did get closed successfully. This amount of closures, 39, is small when compared to the total amount of MassAbility Consumer Services closures, which were about 2,800 last year. Historically the number of those seeking self-employment is a small number. However, a very high percentage, 38 of 39, had successful closures. It was noted that the overall successful closure rate, or employment rate, for Career Services overall is about 45-50%.

So, what is different about the people who seek self-employment? Do they tend to be self-changers versus needing more MassAbility support? Are their goals more clear and thought out? Are their desired self-employment goals more customized to their own personal desires and more accommodating for their challenges? This is something we should want to learn more about.

Mr. Porell looked at the data regarding those who had self-employment on their IPEs but were but were not self-employed at close. These individuals generally still had better employment outcomes, with higher wages and better hours than regular employment seekers. Maybe it is personal qualities, training or their goals that lead them to have more investment in their employment, because it is quite noticeable how they do much better overall. In the past CAP in particular has noted that some participants seeking self-employment do not appear to be well prepared, but data is suggesting that they are prepared.

Mr. Porell also noted that there may be people who consider self-employment but do not put it in their goals. In previous needs assessments MassAbility wanted to ask participants about what occupational areas they were looking for and compare that to what was showing up in their goals. Generally, it was consistent. When self-employment was included specifically as an option, 10-15% of respondents indicated that they would be interested in self-employment. The people who put self-employment on their IPEs is a much smaller percentage.

The commitment to the process of developing a business plan may help individuals seeking self-employment. MassAbility counselors will generally not have much experience facilitating the development of business plans. In the past there was an area director in the Somerville office who used to run a business plan program, but he retired and left. While that program ran there some very successful self-employment outcomes. Resources such as the Small Business Association and chambers of commerce may help provide a written plan but do not provide mentoring and guidance. A question that was raised by Rachel Reyes and Paula Euber was about whether MassAbility should contract with an outside vendor to do that. What is the best way to build that capacity? That is probably an ongoing question for MassAbility.

Finances for a small business are complex. The counselor helps the participant estimate what their take‑home pay will be. The participant will need the sophistication to track expenses and revenues generated. It was suggested that MassAbility put a proposal out seeking someone to advise MassAbility about a process of how to prepare a participant who wants to start their own business.

Of the participants whose cases were closed with employment, what types of jobs did they did have? Mr. Porell said they should be able to get that information by looking at occupational codes.

Given the successful closure rate of people with self-employment goals, and the small number of these people relative to all the people MassAbility serves, Mr. LaMaster suspects that if self-employment was heavily promoted as a viable option through MassAbility, there would be a much higher number of people who self-select self-employment and whose cases are ultimately closed unsuccessfully. Is there a way to market the self-employment option without decreasing the number of successful closures? Given the number of successful closures of those who seek self-employment, it would be useful for people with disabilities to know that in limited circumstances MassAbility can help with the achievement of a self-employment goal. However, if the self-employment option is promoted heavily, many people may choose a self-employment goal without thinking it through as thoroughly as the people in the data likely did. Mr. Noone noted that the program that was previously run by the Somerville office was a counseling and guidance program to help participants understand what is involved in developing and running a business, as well as helping to focus on the type of business of activity they wished to participate in. If during this process participants discovered that they were not interested in self-employment they could then switch to another employment goal.

Mr. Porell thought it was interesting that the hours worked were lower than he expected but were in line with the overall average number of hours worked among MassAbility participants. The hours worked can vary greatly in self‑employment, based on the business and also based on the other commitments and needs of the individual. Part of the reason at least some participants sought self‑employment may be for the flexibility to take care of other priorities.

Estimating earnings can be difficult. Selling goods or providing services may be temporal or seasonal. It may be interesting to see how the earnings vary month by month. Calculated underestimated taxes may be the best way to calculate earnings, but that is not being done for this data.

Thinking ahead to the next fiscal year and the next state planning year, what questions and next steps might this data suggest?

* Is there a better way to calculate income?
* Can we learn more about the types of businesses?
* Can we learn more about the characteristics of the people of the 38 of 39 people successfully closed? Some might be demographic such as location, type of disability, level of disability. But some will be pre‑service education and pre‑service employment. The more we can learn about these individuals, the more useful this data is in suggesting whether there is some veracity in MassAbility deploying a percentage of its very limited resources to enhance and strengthen its self‑employment efforts. What are the best ways to really learn about how these 38 people succeeded and does that give us clues into the best ways for MassAbility to allocate its limited resources.
* Learn more about self-employment opportunities available, such as cyber jobs where people get contracted my different companies to do things such as monitoring images or feeds on a laptop from home. Are there opportunities to link up with companies that hire such contractors? Almost like programs MassAbility currently has but for self-employment opportunities.
* What are the other unseen supports that are really fundamental to a person maintaining self‑employment over time? The case may be closed successfully, but if the person cannot save receipts and deal with downstream impacts such as increased cost of health insurance or loss of housing voucher, how will that impact their long-term success?
* In self-employment, you need to sell yourself and your product or service. That could be another type of training program to help participants become prepared for what that entails, like there is training for other job seekers to prepare for interviews.
* Where is the market? If MassAbility is going to approve a certain amount for the training or education of someone with a self-employment goal, how do they make sure the person’s goal business can be borne by the market?

Mr. LaMaster asked Mr. Porell, Mr. Noone and Mr. Maruyama about what in the data makes them the most curious or where they would take the data. They want to look at the types of self-employment obtained, and characteristics of the people beyond the data already provided. Perhaps a focus group. And all of this data will be used as a baseline for future analyses.

There is an RFR to hire a consultant to look at what has been done up to this point in time. A potential second phase could be to have the consultant facilitate a plan to develop a few business people among MassAbility staff to build MassAbility’s capacity to handle self-employment goals. While resources are limited, planning can still be done. MassAbility can also consult with Colorado. However, Colorado presented data about the number of participants and types of jobs, but did not provide data about outcomes.

The FY25 data was not discussed in detail. It is not a whole year yet. So far it looks similar. We will look at this in August or October.

Mr. LaMaster will talk with Mr. Bellil before the April State Plan Committee meeting talking about possible self-employment recommendations that are relevant to MassAbility’s current priorities and efforts.

During the process of developing its recommendations the SRC should be talking to MassAbility so that we do not create recommendations that are completely rejected.

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The next BEO meeting is on April 10th at 1:00 PM

The meeting was adjourned at 1:50 pm.