

December 14, 2023 minutes

Statewide Rehabilitation Council

Business and Employment Opportunity (BEO) Committee

1:00 – 2:00 pm

Attendees:

- SRC Members: Steve LaMaster (Committee Chair), Joe Bellil, Naomi Goldberg, Christine Tosti¹, Heather Wood
- MRC staff: William Allen, Paula Euber, Joseph Reale, Rachel Reyes, Amy Karr
- Absent members: Dawn Clark

Meeting was held remotely.

Meeting called to order at 1:03 pm.

1. Introductions and announcements (as needed)

Agenda time of 2 hours is a max time. For the December meeting we have 60 minutes slated.

2. Approval of October 2023 minutes

Ms. Tosti had noted that a statement she made at the October BEO committee meeting was omitted and requested that it be included in the minutes. Mr. LaMaster proposed that the following text be added:

“Before the conversation concluded, SRC Member Christine Tosti stated that, as a disabled person, she’s uncomfortable that she’d have to “bribe an employer” with a tax credit to be hired. She stated her discomfort with that payment structure is that it doesn’t offer a financial incentive to the disabled person.”

Ms. Tosti thanked Mr. LaMaster for the addition, and also stated that she does not want to have to ask to have her name included in the minutes.

Mr. LaMaster asked whether there were any additional corrections to the minutes. There were no additional corrections. The October 2023 minutes were approved with the noted addition.

3. Review of DETC Implementation Progress since from October 2023 meeting - Joseph Reale

Mr. Reale was invited to provide any updates about the Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC) and to discuss how MRC will educate the public about the DETC.

A few years ago, the Massachusetts legislature passed a bill to incentivize employers to hire people with disabilities. The first time employers will be able to submit for the credit is when submitting taxes for this year, 2023. Word about the credit is getting out. People with disabilities are applying to get the needed certificate. Information about this should go out to employees and also to the employment community. Access to the DETC will be streamlined. Information about it is available on the MRC website and also through social media. It is being internally marketed to MRC vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors.

¹ Upon request, members’ names are used when they contribute to the discussion.

The Department of Revenue (DOR) is responsible for creating instructions and a submission form available for employers filing 2023 taxes. DOR currently has draft instructions. The instructions will probably be improved, and then the form will need to be updated and disseminated. There is also a contact phone number to obtain information about the DETC. The number is 617-887-6367. The contact center is open Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 4 PM. It is important to get this information out there right away, because W2s will be sent soon.

There was discussion about how the SRC can help educate the public about the DETC. The information should be disseminated to those providing services and disability advocacy organizations. MRC has emails ready to send to employers about this. MRC will proactively reach out to the employers it does business with. Mr. LaMaster stated that he will direct his clubhouse staff to bring up the DETC during conversations with employers.

Ms. Tosti asked how people with the DETC certificate find employers willing to hire them. She is upset that the tax credit goes to wealthy employers, and that the credit means less taxes are collected to support people with disabilities. Will the tax credit also be used by small business, and business owned by members of the LGBTQ+ community, women, and people with disabilities?

The certificate does not contain employment opportunities. It verifies that the company does employ a person with a disability. People with disabilities can hand their certifications to employers, and those employers can apply for the credit. A tax credit is a financial mechanism used by the government. It lowers the tax burden by a nominal amount. Checks are not being written to companies. It is similar to the Child and Family Tax Credit. Small companies might benefit more from the DETC than larger companies, because it will have a bigger impact for small companies. Ms. Tosti asked if any employers have used this. None have used it yet because they have not filed their 2023 taxes yet.

Mr. Reale stated that he will send updated materials to Mr. LaMaster when they are available.

4. State Plan Recommendations Discussions:

The committee has three recommendations to work on – advising MRC on the roll out of the DETC, partnering with MRC regarding survey interpretation and dissemination, and working with MRC towards increasing support for consumers seeking self-employment.

- **FY 24-6: The SRC will work with the MRC to assess and potentially enhance current strategies and mechanisms to support Job Seekers in pursuing self-employment vocational goals.**

There was discussion about obtaining information about what MRC is currently doing regarding self-employment goals.

- What do we know about what current strategies exist? How does MRC currently serve consumers interested in self-employment?
- If we do not gather enough information at this meeting, what else can we do to learn more about what MRC is currently doing and what tools VR counselors use with the consumers seeking self-employment?
- How do we get the best information about the needs of people with self-employment goals from the point of view of the VR counselors? Is there a way we can learn from them, and find out what help they do provide and what they need?

Ms. Reyes and Mr. Allen were on the scoring committee for MRC Requests for Response (RFRs) dealing with four areas. One of the areas is about increasing the systems and supports to assist people with self-employment goals. MRC will be bringing in nationwide experts and experts from other states. In addition, MRC will partner with a consultant who will be a comprehensive resource

both for consumers seeking self-employment and MRC Area Directors and VR counselors. MRC's current resources regarding self-employment are relatively minimal. There are some free resources for VR counselors. Part of the RFR is about increasing the self-employment resources.

Ms. Tosti feels that it is important that MRC talks to consumers about this. She was originally discouraged from pursuing self-employment. Her employment consultant discouraged her from applying for grants. She does not think MRC wants to pay a consultant to tell her to give up. MRC is paying money for someone who is not providing the help that she needs. Her consultant has never had her own business. There is much free information about self-employment available. Ms. Tosti shared three documents in the chat. **(See Small business certification info sheet.pdf, MA Business Dev Assistance Orgs.pdf and MRC - Business Plan.docx.)**

The Client Assistance Program (CAP) has dealt with a number of people working on self-employment. It is great that MRC is getting a business consultant for self-employment. Running a business is different and more complex than just having skills to do things. Financials and many other things must be in place. There should be a robust orientation about what will be needed, not to create barriers but for success.

It was noted that not all businesses require the same level of complexity. Establishing successful microbusinesses may be less complex. If there are non-profit organizations that support the development of microbusinesses, MRC should partner with them and work with them. It is possible that many consumers seeking self-employment are hoping to augment their benefits through micro enterprises.

Ms. Tosti stated that if MRC can justify spending money on rebranding, then MRC should also spend money helping consumers market and advertise their business. She herself has no idea about how advertising works.

Can a consumer who is looking for marketing services post something to look for a consumer who wants to provide marketing services? There was a previous discussion about pulling together people with disabilities who do have business and self-employment experience and expertise to create a network to help other consumers who are seeking self-employment. This could almost be like a mentorship program. Consumers could work with people similar to themselves who have gone through what they are going through.

Ms. Tosti shared the following link in the chat:

<https://www.sba.gov/federal-contracting/contracting-assistance-programs/sba-mentor-protege-program>

At the Disability Community Partnership Forum on December 19th, there will be a live presentation about self-employment. The preregistration link:

https://massrehabcommission.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_QBt9jUJ_Rgmg-tSQGdltXw#/registration

Starting all businesses is complex. Perhaps part of the solution might involve looking at the existing resources designed for people seeking self-employment. Mr. LaMaster mentioned Laysha Ostrow, who has worked with Temple University and the Human Services Research Institute (HRI) in Cambridge. She is particularly interested in people with mental health issues who are seeking self-employment. We might want to connect with Ms. Ostrow with the consultants MRC is bringing in. Ms. Euber has her contact information.

What can we do before the February BEO committee meeting to flesh out what we know about currently available resources? Currently MRC has a Word document about what is needed to start a business, including recommendations to work with SCORE or the Small Business Administration (SBA). It is hoped that the vendor will improve the available resources.

MRC does not keep track of the number of consumers seeking self-employment, so that cannot be provided in a report. Mr. Allen and Graham Porell may have data about consumers' goals, what they want to do, but not specifically about self-employment. The available data are not organized well enough to be queried in a valid way.

Ms. Tosti noted that different consumers may want to do different things, such as selling things or providing a service. Much peer creativity can come from this. For example, making short videos about consumers' businesses. People with ADHD do not want self-employment to be a pipe dream; they need help with this.

- **FY 24-2/5: SRC will actively partner with the MRC in the interpretation of survey data and strategies regarding dissemination.**

February's meeting will offer an update on this recommendation from MRC Staff

5. Open Mic

Mr. LaMaster announced that Heather Wood is the newly elected Chair of the SRC. He wished everyone rest and peace going into the holidays.

Ms. Wood hopes everyone will attend the December SRC Quarterly meeting later today.

The next BEO meeting is on February 8th at 1:00 PM.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:59 pm.