**Massachusetts Commission for the Blind**

**Rehabilitation Council Minutes**

**For December 2, 2020**

The quarterly Meeting of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Rehabilitation Council was called to order by Chair DeAnn Elliott at 10:00 a.m.

**Attendees (by Zoom)**

DeAnn Elliott (Chair); Nora Nagle; Mary Otiato; Deputy Commissioner John Oliveira; Jenifer Whitmore; Naomi Goldberg; Patricia Hart; Inez Canada; Commissioner David D’Arcangelo; Jerry Berrier; Karen McCormack (Secretary, left at 11:50); Jennifer Harnish; Priscilla Ngome; Leslie M. Leslie; Cory Kadlik; Charles Curti (10:20 a.m.); Carla Kath

**Regrets:** Cheryl Scott; Richard Curtis; Martha Daigle; Nancy Trzcinski

Approximately 15 consumers also participated.

**Member & Guest Introductions**

Chair DeAnn Elliott welcomed all in attendance. This was the largest meeting in several years, and a brief overview of the RC and its role was provided for nonmembers. The chair announced the meeting would follow the revised agenda, with the same content but different order to accommodate the schedules of MCB staff. Participants were encouraged to focus comments on VR issues and the impact of MCB decisions on consumers.

**Minutes Approval**

Minutes from the September 2, 2020 RC Meeting were accepted as drafted by consent. There was no recording available so minutes were reconstructed based on memory of meeting.

Secretary Karen McCormack’s RC term expires in March 2021. An election for a new secretary will be held at the next quarterly meeting. Jennifer Harnish volunteered to serve. Others interested in serving please contact DeAnn.

**Commissioner’s Update**

Commissioner D’Arcangelo said 24 reallotment projects ($2.5 million) have been completed. The projects represented a lot of staff work and can be found on Mass.gov/mcb. MCB Continues to adjust to Covid-19. There’s been no in-person VR meetings with consumers; O&M /Assistive Technology have been provided on a case by case basis. The leases for the Worcester & New Bedford regional offices came due and were not renewed . New laptops and iPhones have been provided for employees, and three of six regions have been operating remotely. Hiring has continued, and the agency is positioning itself for a time when services can be provided again in person.

DeAnn noted that the Commonwealth’s FY21 budget was released since our last meeting. The VR match fund appears to be $3.1 million, and the Federal $7.7 million. The commissioner said that MCB applied for and received $1 million in reallotment funds for projects for next year, and there are adequate resources for VR for next year. The FY21 budget looked much like previous years. For FY22, the commissioner said that Massachusetts has always been very good about matching federal VR dollars. One of MCB’s challenges is finding enough consumers to spend VR funds on. MCB has two years to spend grant dollars. Many of the MCB campaigns are designed to recruit more consumers. Current numbers have been affected by Covid-19 and fears about working in the community.

Matching is handled jointly with the Mass. Rehabilitation Commission (MRC.) Question was posed about whether MRC’s match situation was as healthy as MCB’s, and is MCB needing to share the overmatch with them?

The commissioner said that to his knowledge MRC is in great shape. The Deputy Commissioner said the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is allocated its federal funds for vocational rehabilitation based on a formula that is based on population, per capita income, and other factors. MCB receives 15% of this federal allocation to operate the agency’s vocational rehabilitation program for the blind, while MRC gets 85% for its program. Each agency is responsible for making its proportion of the required match for the grant.

**Consumer Feedback About Regional Offices**

On October 30th MCB announced it would close two of its four offices, including the regional offices in Worcester and New Bedford. The chair had received many emails and calls from consumers who were concerned about closing offices when so many are unemployed and seeking training.

Jerry Berrier, RC member representing a blindness advocacy organization, spoke on behalf of the officers and consumers in the Bay State Council of the Blind. Overarching concern is parity of service, so consumers living in outlying areas receive same level of service as those in Boston. He regretted there will no longer be a public presence in Worcester and New Bedford. Commissioner said this was untrue and presence will be enhanced, and suggested there could be a physical presence when COVID lifts. After Sept. meeting when RC was told offices might move, BSCB was stunned and disappointed to learn MCB was closing offices instead. Disturbed by apparent lack of transparency. The Commissioner said consumer visits to regional offices were in single digits over a month, and he believed this was best move for consumers and staff. Most work is done in client’s home or in community/over the phone. Many thousands of hours can be saved if counselors aren’t driving to the office, and time can be repurposed to serve consumers. MCB has demonstrated it can provide services virtually.

Jerry asked Commissioner D’Arcangelo to speak to issue of transparency, as office closings weren’t disclosed at September RC meeting. Commissioner attributed it to pandemic not lack of transparency. DeAnn said message in September was quite different from October, and while circumstances change, major decisions have probably been under consideration for some time.

Jerry asked several questions.

1. How will privacy be ensured in client sessions and paperwork?

Deputy Commissioner said 95% of contacts happen over the phone or in their home. Can meet in mutually-agreed upon place like library or restaurant. After COVID, it will be clearer. Documents are in case management system and case workers can access with laptop. MCB is developing an electronic way to sign documents.

2. How will accessible workspaces be made available for counselors and consumers? Public offices will be identified once we start meeting in person again.

3. How will closing affect potential MCB employment opportunities for blind professionals? MCB will be able to expand recruitment – remote work opens up opportunities.

1. How will storage and distribution of equipment be managed? In process with solving this problem now. Hoteling may be a possibility.

Call Commissioner D’Arcangelo’s cell with questions or comments: 781-789-4580 or call MCB main number or send email to Commissioner

Public questions & answers:

electronic signature will come through case management system and no special software training will be needed.

Karen McCormack suggested logging challenges that come up for consumers with remote platforms. The consumers being served could be included in decision making and feel like they are part of the process.

The chair said RC wasn’t consulted and she was uncomfortable with it.

Brian Charlson, BSCB president, said the lack of transparency was the most disturbing aspect of the process. No direct communication with RC or SAB. “Nothing about us without us”- no effort made to reach out to Bay State Council in advance of the announcement. Consumers were shocked, which is a communications issue. Felt MCB should up their game in how they communicate with the community at large. He worries about minority of consumers for whom this doesn’t work.

Commissioner asked about all the people who were pleased with the decision. Said MCB had rolled it out very well.

Former CT resident said other states sometimes don’t have offices. Arguments for closing make sense as long as there’s not a plan for consolidation of agencies in future.

Worcester resident expressed astonishment that commissioner was willing to remove 50% of agency’s footprint. Asked why a public hearing wasn’t held with consumers who would be affected. Said some consumers couldn’t receive services at home and asked for guarantee that physical space would be explored.

MCB staff responded that new leases would cost possibly double current rate, office closings are only tangentially related to VR so not clear there was a need to inform advisory councils, fiscal reality. MCB will look into office space for private meetings after COVID.

DeAnn said consumers can understand fiscal reality when line items are shown and may reach same conclusion, but figures not provided. MCB seems to be saving about $120k by closing offices. Concerned that transparency issues may affect trust that consumers feel towards MCB in future.

**Deputy Commissioner’s Update**

In 2021, MCB will offer job fair, soft-skills program and internship ceremonies online. MCB is developing a college prep program for high school seniors via Zoom. All data from last five years moved over to new Case Management System. Records back to 2009 are accessible electronically and pre-2009 in hard copy. No data was lost. No reason for a counselor to print anything or maintain records at home – it is discouraged. Paper files from regions will be packed and stored at MCB’s Boston Office, 600 Washington Street.

**MBTA Transportation Issues**

Dan Mueller from the MBTA spoke about “Forging Ahead,” an initiative to deal with budget shortfalls during COVID. Want to find savings but maintain essential services to transit-critical populations including passengers with disabilities. Detailed overview of recommended changes to services was shared. For paratransit, 1.1% pre-COVID Ride services shifted from ADA to premium bracket. Don’t anticipate fair increases. MBTA will add back services in response to ridership demands. Seeking feedback. Public comment closes this Friday.

**Membership status &Meeting Times for 2021**

Jenifer Whitmore from the Polus Center was nominated and unanimously approved by roll call vote for one of the RC’s Business, Industry and Labor seats. Jenifer runs an employment program for individuals with visual impairments at the Mass. Eye and Ear and has experience as a small business entrepreneur.

The meeting time of the new Workforce Unemployment Development Board impacts three RC members who need to attend both meetings. The RC agreed to meet on Wednesdays from 1:00 to 3:00 in 2021 and 2022.

The RC has five candidates waiting for confirmation from the governor. The chair has been following up on the delay. The Business and Industry representative from Radcliffe shared that he submitted his paperwork three years ago and has not yet been confirmed. It’s an insult to consumers in Massachusetts that there is no movement on this in the governor’s office. A consumer said they’d been approved for another board two months after applying. A representative from the Mass. Office on Disability said the Statewide Rehabilitation Council at MRC is having the same issue and suggested we partner with them.

**Review of Draft for RC Annual Report**

The RC’s annual report is due to RSA on December 30. Please read the draft and make comments by email to the chair by December 11th.

**Viewing of new MCB Public Service Announcement, “What’s Your Vision?**

RC listened to 60 second video with audio introduction.

**Meeting Adjourned**

The next meeting of the RC will be on Wednesday, March 3rd from 1:00 to 3:00. The RC Meeting was adjourned at 12:12 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by Karen McCormack, Secretary, and DeAnn Elliott, Chair

(Note: It was later determined that quorum was not met at this meeting. Dispensation of minutes will be rescheduled for the soonest date in which there is quorum.)