**Massachusetts Commission for the Blind**

**Rehabilitation Council Minutes**

**For December 8, 2021**

The quarterly Meeting of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Rehabilitation Council was called to order by Chair DeAnn Elliott at 1:02 P.M.

**Member & Guest Introductions**

Chair DeAnn Elliott wish Happy Holidays to all in attendance.

 Attendees (by Zoom)

DeAnn Elliott (Chair); David D'Arcangelo (Commissioner); John Oliveira (Deputy Commissioner); Patricia Hart; cheryl Scott; Jennifer Harnish (secretary); Jerry Berrier; Naomi Goldberg; Cory Kadlik (left at 2:00); Martha Daigle; Rebecca Davis; Priscilla Ngome;Brian Switzer; Jenifer Whitmore; Lauren Lang; Regina DiMarzo.

Regrets: Richard Curtis

Sarah Wiles introduced herself as an interested future RC member representing the Client Assistance Program.

The Chair reported that this was the last day for Richard Curtis, RC member for the past six years. He was recognized (in absentia) for his many years of service as the Business, Labor, and Industry Representative for his work with the Job Fair, and his years of work with interns at State Street and more recently the Department of Transportation.

The Chair also reported that Charles Curti chose to step down after not yet being contacted by the Governor’s Office to confirm his appointment to the RC after four years of service. She recognized this as a loss due to the experience he brought as a Senior Human Resources Professional at Radcliffe and Harvard; his work with the job fair including organizing it when held live at Radcliffe; and his role as a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion specialist on a Presidential task force. The Chair recognized him (in absentia) as a Business, Labor and Industry Representative and noted the importance of this role. She noted reaching out to Health and Human Services, The Director of Boards and Commissions, and the State House ADA Coordinator with no progress in getting his appointment and others remaining to be contacted to consider their nominations. She noted the impact on employers in terms of their giving up employee time to volunteer on the RC but without any official confirmation. Also, the impact on MCB and to blind consumers due to this lack of contact and confirmation. Corey Kadlik expressed his concerns over this matter as well and noted that he has yet to be contacted by the Governor’s office for his nomination.

Rebecca Davis has been sworn in as an official RC member.

Based on the above numbers, there is an absence of quorum. The past minutes cannot be voted on.

**Massachusetts Rehab Commission RC orientation**

The Chair reported that MRC hosted an orientation and training for their new RC members. She thanked Inez Canada for her role in organizing this training and other MCB RC members for attending. Jerry Berrier attended and spoke positively about it, also noting that the MRC RC had faced the same problems with confirmation of nominees, resolved after an audit and contacting the right people. He also noted that he does not think the reason people are not being contacted is because of not being qualified or being ruled out. He and Corey both expressed their concerns about the loss of Charles Curti as a member. Naomi Goldberg recommended that the MCB RC consider hosting a similar training so that new members can learn, for example, about what VR is within MCB. Cheryl Scott agreed with the value of the training and DeAnn said that Inez is considering holding another such training in the Spring.

**Number of voting members**

The chair reached out to an attorney who works in state government but outside of the Executive branch for a review of the discrepancies that exist about how many voting members the MCB RC should have. Their reading of the documentation is that the MCB RC is supposed to have 21 members. DeAnn noted that the RC can reach out to Health and Human Services to request a change in this number if this was felt to be reasonable to do. She asked for interest in putting together a membership subcommittee that would put together information to guide whether any change would be requested and to work to expand our outreach for recruitment of a diversity of new applicants. Naomi noted the need for individuals newer to being a VR consumer. Sarah Wiles, Brian Switzer, Jennifer Whitmore, and Rebecca Davis all expressed an interest in being part of this subcommittee.

Cheryl Scott noted that the election of a new Governor in the coming year might impact ability to make changes in a timely manner. The Chair asked if she would agree to assist with gathering potential individuals for the three Business, Industry and Labor seats currently open on the RC given her role as Director of the Mass Hire Workforce Board. Cheryl agreed to assist with this.

**Combined State Plan**

The RC committee has met throughout the Fall on this topic and hopes to finalize its recommendations for the state plan by mid-December. DeAnn referred to documents shared with the RC summarizing the goals and priorities the RC established in 2019 and goals for the coming two years. These latter set of goals consider continuation of the past goals as well as the impact of changes that have been occurring that might lead to creating new goals and priorities. Impacts on goals might include the transition during the Covid pandemic to remote work for consumers and the MCB staff transition to remote work then into a hybrid model. The Taskforce asked the RC to address Three questions: does the draft MCB recommendations from 2019 capture the input of the RC over the past two years; what would you add or delete if different; and what VR goals would the RC in collaboration with MCB have for the coming two years. A meeting was held on December 1 to solicit feedback from the public on the Plan. Naomi Goldberg, Chair of the Committee guided a discussion on goals and priorities the RC and meeting attendees would like to contribute.

Comments received by the committee included consideration of increasing the Randolph Shepard program; request for VR counselors to have more specialized experience with employment and job placement to address needs of mid-career consumers looking for level entry and re-entry into careers; increase consumer knowledge of resources for employment such as Mass Hire; importance of connecting with benefits counseling earlier so that consumers have accurate information to guide their job search; who at MCB handles benefits counseling; importance of discussion of benefits counseling throughout the process as opposed to only at the beginning; giving examples would help; consider holding monthly discussions of benefits counseling topics; observation that caseworkers are responding to their consumers in a timely way; suggestion for services focused on helping consumers understand their aptitudes, interests and skills as part of career counseling needs; education on accessibility options for job technology to prevent leaving a job; request for an MCB staff person to direct consumers to advocacy resources regarding reasonable accommodations; what is realistic in terms of career expectations; lack of accessibility of a payroll program used in many businesses. RC members who spoke agreed with these recommendations. Need to increase amount of contact a VRC has with their consumers during their job search to check in on problems consumer is experiencing where they might need supports; being sure consumers have the contact info of their VRC and that consumers know they can always reach back out to MCB for more assistance even after their case is considered a closure to prevent job loss or leaving a job due to need for more training that is not addressed. The importance of gathering data on processes that are happening is important to making accurate recommendations was also noted.

John Olivera answered a question regarding caseloads of VR counselors noting that they vary based on region with a range of 40-70 or so. Western and Central MA regions tend to have lower caseloads and the other four regions have the higher loads.; supervisors and regional directors shift numbers as needed. Most counselors are under the Union requirement. He noted that they haven’t seen the issue of impact of higher caseloads given the resources staff can access if support is needed. He noted that interest or need of consumers for frequent contact from their VRC varies depending on their status; for example, college students might only need contact at start and end of semesters. Use of email by consumers as their preferred mode of communication means quick exchanges occurring multiple times when needed, reducing the need for more frequent in-person meetings. He commented that the Union has not noted concerns about caseloads having a negative impact and he does not recall any requests for caseload decrease over the past 4-7 years. Adjustments are made whenever noted as well as if consumer requests change in their VRC. He explained that the change to counselors having MCB-supplied mobile phones for work needs increases contact efficiency as well as does email. Text messaging is becoming common with this mobile phone access. He reminds counselors to return calls and check emails and that he has not had consumers reach out with concerns about contacting their counselor. Office phone voicemails are still available and forwarded to counselors. Need for full signature lines on MCB staff emails that includes mobile phone was recommended and John said this has been communicated to the staff. He said he and Carla Kath will follow up with counselors to be sure they have needed contact information on both their laptop and mobile phone emails. Carla said a Communications plan was just rolled out in October to hold all accountable for communications and branding consistency, with a training held in November. Jennifer extended thanks for receipt of contact information for MCB staff that includes new mobile phones. Send an email to MCBinfo@mass.gove or contact the VR or SR supervisors to receive this contact list.

Public connects were asked for by the Chair who also said they can be emailed to her at a later point. DeAnn.Elliott@gmail.com Patricia Hart can also receive such comments. Over the next few days.

**RC Annual Report**

It is due December 30, 2021, and a draft was included in the email sent to the RC prior to this current meeting. This report needs to be sent to the Rehabilitation Services Administration to document work of the RC over the past year and progress towards goals. The Chair shared the items she was recommending be added: the August 9 return to some in person work of MCB; the increase in RC meeting participation due to use of the remote conferencing program (Zoom); availability of meeting recordings; development of the RC landing page ; making progress with sharing of concrete information with the RC such as the SAB Dashboard with financial information provided by the Commissioner; updates needed to RC Membership section; the absence of quorum during all RC meetings in 2021; and the pace of registrations needs to be discussed. The Annual Report will be finalized in the coming weeks.

**Commissioner’s Update**

Commissioner D’Arcangelo Reports that employment opportunities continue to increase with actual numbers of closures still being calculated. The potential for Massachusetts to be one if not the state with highest number of closures was noted. Strong vaccination rates and hopeful trends to continue upward will lead to opening back up throughout the Commonwealth thus increasing the opportunities for consumers. Stakeholder meetings, town hall, internships program, and job fairs will continue with addition of more such meetings some -person, hybrid, and remote being offered in 2022. The Deputy Commissioner stated that closure number was about 158 as of June 30, 2021, an increase of 25% from the previous year. The Reverse Job Fair held in October had each consumer presenting a one-minute pitch to a panel of employers who could then contact consumers they were interested in speaking with. There were confirmed interviews that followed the event, and any hires are not yet known. Although a job fair is typically not a high placement event, it gives opportunities for consumers to apply their interview skills and learn more about companies.

The Commissioner also shared about Reallotment projects including the presentation to the SAB on the success of the What’s Your Vision campaign. The VR Reallotment page on the MCB website will contain information on outcome of projects. The departure of Mary Otiato Chief of Staff and director of registration Unit will impact MCB reallotment projects; for example, Mary was slotted to be Program Manager of several projects that are coming up.

He described a new RFR in the development phase to create a VR Welcome Kit which addresses consumer and RC feedback discussed earlier in the meeting. The Chair mentioned some consumer feedback that the $500,000 allotted for this project with only 900 active cases seems very high. The Commissioner noted that in the RFR process, the guidelines mean MCB needs to be vague in what is shared until the RFR enters the public comment phase. He welcomes comments during that phase. Carla Kath, Project Manager for this RFR stated that it was just finalized yesterday (December 7) and will be entering the public comment phase shortly. She described higher cost items of the project including components such as language access, accessibility formats including Braille, audio, digital, and video. Input from RC and the public is welcomed said the Commissioner. He mentioned the contributions the RC made to the What’s Your Vision campaign as an example of MCB bringing projects to the RC for input that was very important to the success of the project. The Chair suggested that in the future, MCB consider a path for consumers to share their ideas for reallotment projects. The Commissioner identified that such input is already presented at staff meetings when counselors share their ideas and those expressed by their consumers. The Commissioner also said that MCB’s Project Manager bandwidth is quite stretched which impacts the ability to pursue projects of interest.

The Chair recognized Mary Otiato leaving MCB for a job at MRC. Recognizing the contributions, she has made over her years with MCB and as an active participant in RC meetings.

**Registration Procedure Update**

The Commissioner reported they were up to date with registrations until Mary left. They are getting caught back up. MCB held a Town Hall with the eye care community to overview the new registration system. MCB is adjusting to the faster rate of registrations coming in with this migration to electronic submissions. He reported on work they are doing to increase staffing and for supporting the Central Registry. VR consumers are being prioritized to keep such consumers engaged and prevent job departures where possible. Sue Lavin has been brought in as a contractor to assist in the Central Registry and he expects Mary’s replacement to be hired within the coming week. A new position has also been created for an additional Central Registry staff member

**Deputy Commissioner update**

The Randolph Shepard director starts December 13, 2021; the individual has almost 18 years of experience managing within the program.

Pre-its committees have started to meet regarding the early Spring conference being planned. January is starting month for identifying consumers for the summer internship program. There has been an increase in number of VR consumers using Mass Hire Centers, a resource VR counselor have been sharing with consumers.

The Chair spoke highly of White Cane Day, especially with the focus on consumers.

**Return on Investment Study**

The Deputy Commissioner refers to attachment provided by the Chair to RC members regarding this project. Criteria used include literature reviews, focus groups, RSA data, and tax records. Results include consumers receiving less public support after returning to work, less use of Medicaid and reduction in family support. Wages increased about 6.5% after case closure. Earnings average was about $35,000 combining both part- and full-time earnings in the average. Hourly rate average was $22.76, which he identified as a livable wage and well above minimum wage. When based on age the average consumer would be working an additional 18 years, resulting in total earnings, and buying power of $500,000,000. He noted that this can be marketing information to companies about the spendable income of those receiving VR services. Return on investment was $11.02 for every dollar spent on VR services for federal dollars and $51.74 ROI for state dollars. Other benefits included increase in health, well-being, self-confidence, level of independence, mental health capacity, feelings of lack of isolation, living and traveling independently, and greater skills on accessing networks. Education impacts included achievement of degrees from high school to PhD, meaning more viable and employable in careers.

Counselors are being discouraged from using the term “closure” rather an individual is always part of MCB unless they no longer qualify for services (e.g., no longer legally blind). Rather that status with MCB has changed upon employment and that MCB is always there for services with just a phone call.

The Chair recognized responsiveness of MCB to recommendations of RC such as use of focus groups and qualitative data and the likely role of the Employment Now Initiative in employment.

**Other business**

Landing page discussion has not yet occurred due to other commitments. The Chair will send invitation to a one hour zoom meeting on January 19 4-5pm for RC members and community members to share recommendations on content ideas for the page.

Recurring zoom link for the RC meetings in 2022 will be sent out by Regina and added to the landing page as well.

Lauren Lang offered to join the Membership committee and to work with state departments on nominations and membership process.

**Public Comments**

A request was made for information on the RC and what the landing page is.

Suggestion that landing page link sent to consumer organizations, so they have the choice to post it on their websites.