# Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

Rehabilitation Council Minutes

For June 7, 2023

The quarterly Meeting of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Rehabilitation Council was called to order by member Jerry Berrier at 1:04 p.m. The meeting was held remotely using the Zoom conferencing platform.

The number in attendance at 2:15 was 14.

Members in Attendance:

Martha Dagle; Jennifer Harnish; Jerry Berrier; Brian Switzer;; Cheryl Scott. There were enough voting RC members to conduct official business.

Ex officio: Acting Commissioner John Oliveira and Priscilla Gomes

Regrets: Rebecca Davis; Naomi Goldberg; Devon Meyer; Jenifer Whitmore

March meeting minutes were approved with two changes: first made in writing by past chair, DeAnn Elliott, is that her resignation occurred in March rather than May. Cheryl noted that her first name should be spelled with the letter “C” in the minutes.

Extension of the ruling that permits remote and hybrid meetings to continue through March 31, 2025.

## Commissioner Report

Acting Commissioner John Oliveira shared that the Opening Ceremony for the internship program is being held in one week in person. There are over 60 interns. Closing Ceremonies will be held in August, returning to an in-person event at the State House. The National Industries of the Blind program continuing with the second group. Program has included more components and several other states participating. The first group continues to prepare to generate revenue; there were ten individuals initially interested in the program with four deciding to participate, then one dropping out mid-way through and two switching to different business models. The MRC Next Gen program continues with 15 MCB consumers which includes higher level of peer support, mentoring and counseling which can be supportive to participants who have secondary disabilities.

In terms of the budget, MCB was level funded with additional funding through earmarks and amendments. The FY 2024 budget is currently in the conference committee process. . management staff have been submitting budgets for their regions. John has reviewed them, and they are being entered into the fiscal system. Once the new budget is signed, the numbers will be reviewed and adjusted where needed. One example is the earmarks in the budget are not yet in the system but will be added if kept in the budget. An amendment providing additional funding to hire more social rehab staff will also be added once officially in the final signed budget. Directors can adjust their budgets if, for example, situations change within areas such as an increase in college students from what was anticipated.

The What’s Your Vision ad campaign has resumed. One change is providing a phone number that connects to an answering service 24/7 with MCB staff returning calls on business days. There is also a tracking system in place to see if responses to the campaign increase from prior years. The primary goal of the campaign has been to add new employers as well as educating consumers on the availability of MCB services.

The spreadsheet shows that 90% of funds have been encumbered as of the date of the meeting. Updates on remaining budget dollars hope to be provided during the September RC meeting. There were some CFO candidates, but their financial asks could not be met. Position has been reposted with some new candidates. John continues as Acting Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, and acting CFO. College enrollment numbers were not on hand to be reported on, but he noted that they appear to be similar and with more students converting from on-line to in-person learning. Specific numbers can be provided in September.

In response to a question on how the RC can best support the Commissioner, John shared that bringing ideas and acting as a sounding board are both helpful. He reports that MCB staff are coming up with ideas that he can share some with the RC in September. Also, to continue asking good questions. A lot of personnel changes are occurring at MCB. Discussions of the future of work plan continues and when rolled out, RC input will be helpful. Communication and collaboration between MCB and the RC are key.

A recent survey funded by State PAC money allocated to MCB last year and allowed to be rolled over to FY 2023. Nathan reported that this survey went out to all registered consumers. Close to 3000 people responded, double what Mass Inc, who conducted the survey expected. An initial peek at the responses appears to be positive, such as with consumer satisfaction. Final report of the results due by June 30.

## Statistics Dashboard

Cheryl Scott reviewed the most current version of the dashboard and generated a few questions. First, the ethnicity breakdown does not allow for a difference between race and ethnicity. They are combined in the spreadsheet. Nate noted that he thought we the RC wanted those two categories to be combined but that he could change it back to two separate items .Cheryl noted that separating the two would for example allow for an individual to mark themselves as Black and Hispanic or White and Hispanic as opposed to just the race. Second, Nate explained that registrations are new consumers of the agency. A glossary of terms might be helpful, noted Cheryl. She also asked if the year-to-date number of registrations was lower than previous years. Nate said that last year was on the higher side because people coming out of Covid were able to see their medical providers. Current numbers are trending towards 1800 for the calendar year which he said is in line with what would be expected. The overall trend has been decreasing over the years, likely due to modern medicine resulting in fewer individuals being diagnosed as legally blind. Registration includes both SR and VR consumers. Cheryl wondered if the number of VR unsuccessful closed cases is on track. Nate stated that the numbers are likely higher due to the impact of Covid on increased availability of tele-work opportunities which eliminated transportation barriers. VR numbers were up as tele-work opportunities expanded but now the numbers are leveling out. Reasons for unsuccessful closures might include not being able to meet training needs, change in health status, change in direction of goal, decline in opportunities. MCB is looking at potential employment opportunities that will be more prevalent and some going away resulting in career changes. Cheryl suggested a future RC meeting explore this further. She also requested a breakdown by employment for open cases. Jerry said the sheet was very readable by a screen reader.

## Executive Order 598

This order changed the make up of the RC. BSCB sought guidance from the Disability Law Center (DLC) who recommended that a letter be drafted to Governor Healey about what a new Executive Order might look like. John offered to check with MCB’s legal counsel, Loren Lang, on this issue.

## Election of new RC Chair

Brian Switzer is the only person putting his name forward. He referenced his resume and cover letter. He said he is a member of the Deaf-Blind community and has received services from MCB and the Deaf Blind extended support team. He is currently the Chair of the Advisory Council for the Deaf Blind Community Access Network which is funded by MCB. He holds two master’s degrees, one in public policy and also has a TVI special education degree. He works at Perkins with the transition-age students developing vocational training. He has past experience as a public high school math teacher. He is a published author of two books related to deaf-blindness and one on having a guide dog. His goals for the RC include continuing collaboration with MCB, increasing diversity of the members, and filling the open seats.

There were no nominations from the floor for Chair of the RC. The roll call vote was unanimous for Brian becoming Chair. Brian expressed his thanks and reiterated his goals for the RC. There were no questions from meeting attendees. He also noted that he is working with former chair, DeAnn Elliott to learn about documents and guidance she can provide.

Jerry noted that no one expressed interest in the Vice Chair position yet.

He asked for individuals, and no one stepped up.

## Reallotment Funding

John said that if RC wanted to give ideas for projects, they had to be in by June for consideration. In Late June or early July, RSA sends an email asking for submission of project proposals ; these have to submitted by early August. Ideas can be submitted to the RC chair or John directly. Projects need to vocational based and MCB needs to have contract managers at MCB willing to take on the projects which involve a significant amount of work.

## Old business

The Consolidated State Plan lead will be Nathan Skrocki .

New business

Jerry asked Martha about proposed amendments to related to secondary and elementary school special education with regard to teachers for Blind individuals. Martha said a letter from May State Council of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind of MA as part of public comment period Martha noted that the Braille Literacy Advisory Council said they plan to submit an e-mail in support of the letter. The change would allow educators with a license in special education , a teacher with an initial or professional license can get a provisional license in a specific special ed area, which most impacts English as a Second Language students and Blind students. These educators would still need to meet the requirements of the provisional license but there is a statement that when applying that you have experience and meet the requirements without having taken courses. She referred questions to the e-mail licensureregs2020@mass.gov. Martha said that some of the requirements that would be needed include how to teach braille, knowledge of special education laws, history of special education for the Blind, knowledge of assistive tech, and basic understanding of services for those who are visually impaired. More information can be found on the DESE webpage under licensure. The public comment period ended on March 2.

The Carroll Center for the Blind awards ceremony will be held at CCB on June 15 at 3 P.M. Jerry noted that one recipient will be Sarah Wiles; she has been active in RC meetings over the past year.

## Public comments

There were none.

## Next RC meeting is September 6.

The meeting was adjourned at about 2:22.