# Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

# Rehabilitation Council Minutes

The quarterly Meeting of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Rehabilitation Council was called to order by Chair Brian Switzer at 1:02 PM. There were 15 participants as of 1:12 P.M. The meeting was held remotely using the Zoom conferencing platform.

Roll call:

Members in Attendance: Brian Switzer Chair; Jerry Berrier; Rebecca Davis; Jennifer Harnish.

MCB: Commissioner John Oliveira and Priscilla Ngome.

Regrets: Jennifer Whittemore; Martha Daigle; Naomi Goldberg.

A quorum of five out of 9 RC voting and non-voting members was present at the mid-point of the meeting. There were four out of the seven voting members present at that time, so a vote was held to accept the March RC meeting minutes. The vote to do so was unanimous.

The Chair welcomed Jeanne Perrin from the Massachusetts Office on Disability (MOD) Client Assistance Program (CAP) to the meeting.

## Commissioner’s Update

The Opening ceremonies and soft skills training for summer internship program have occurred. There are almost 60 interns, with some positions hybrid, some virtual and many in-person. The Closing ceremony in August will be held in person at the State House.

The Reverse Job fair continues in the planning process. It will be held virtually. The employer education component is being planned for this event. During the event, consumers are invited to give an elevator speech to the potential employers, who have resumes and cover letters for the applicants.

The Commissioner met with members of National Industries for the Blind (NIB) to discuss the self-employment initiatives including options for providing more training, options for delivering the training, and possible new initiatives. MCB held a presentation to potential consumers for the third cohort of the self-employment program. About 14 participated in the initial discussion of the program. None though chose to continue with the process. There are still individuals from prior cohorts moving forward.

MCB, Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) and the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) met to discuss Comprehensive integrated employment services that they purchase from vendors. MRC has a vendor who will be compiling information on the program to support improvement of the services being provided. These services include evaluation, training, job development, job placement, and post-employment services.

MRC and MCB are collaborating on developing an application for a grant regarding the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) cliff. This project will look at SSI recipients to see if there are ways to remove some of the financial barriers to pursuing employment without losing benefits.

## Budget update

MCB was level funded in the State FY25 budget as of the date of this meeting. Budget process going forward with a new one ready once signed.

MCB received the balance of the federal funds that can be used through September 30. These funds are for grants including the Older Independent Blind, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Supported Employment. MCB was also able to use a substantial amount of FY 2023 budget to cover FY 24 budget shortfalls. The CFO met with budget directors to see what funds might not be needed, meaning they could be released to meet other needs. The MCB CFO is leaving for another opportunity. The position has been posted with 28 applicants thus far, and interviews are beginning. The departing CFO will assist with the transition. A Deputy Commissioner candidate is going through the HR process.

In response to questions, the Commissioner noted that funds from previous fiscal years that had not been spent were reverted/returned to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). The maintenance of effort penalty due to matching funds from the early 2020’s was taken out of the FY24 budget. Due to proper matching of funds in FY23, that budget was able to be stretched into March/April of this calendar year, resulting in use of FY24 funds starting at that time. As a result of the careful management of funds, he does not think that there will be any problems with any reduction of services or staffing. Also, He also said they anticipate another problem that RSA might notice although projected to be much less than this one. Availability of earmark funds will not be known until the State budget is passed and signed. New RC applicants should be in the background check phase. MCB continues to look for qualified applicants for posted staffing positions for Rehabilitation and Assistive Technology teaching staff.

## MCB All-Consumer survey Update

Nathan Skrocki noted that the survey results are now posted on the MCV website. A high satisfaction rate of 85% was noted and MCB will continue to look for ways to improve consumer satisfaction. They are looking at reaching out to identify underserved communities, and how to communicate to them. Such communities include underrepresented race and ethnicity groups as well as younger individuals. MCB is also considering whether to reach out to consumers who in the past did not respond to calls for explanation of services and also those who declined services when reached. Potential consumers would hear again about services and how to reach MCB. New registrants receive a packet of information about MCB services.

## Dashboard Update

Nate reports that they are looking at coding methods for moving from making manual updates of the Dashboard to automating the updates. Work on the possibility of using a single report rather than multiple reports is occurring to increase efficiency. Target date for completion is this September. One goal is to update the dashboard monthly; there is flexibility to change the frequency or content areas. Current numbers: screen share of Dashboard was presented; Nate will email out an electronic version. He said the numbers are on-line with last year’s numbers of registrations. Registrations are being processed in one or two days. No backlog over the last 1.5 years. There has been a slow uptick in both open SR consumers as well as Open VR cases over the past six months. Specific numbers available in the online Dashboard. There have been 150 successful closed VR cases and 86 non-successful closures so far this calendar year. There are close to 2000 referrals to training support services (e.g., Orientation and Mobility, Rehabilitation Teaching and Assistive Technology). One person could have referrals to more than one service. For auxiliary services, over 3000 legal blindness certificates have been provided, over 500 ID’s, 157 applications to EDP xx and 37 parking placards.

In response to questions from the RC, the Commissioner clarified that consumer support services are oversaw by MCB staff and also by vendors that MCB has contracts with. For youth that might include the Carroll Center, Perkins, the Polus Center, and ViAbility to name a few. Nate clarified that nonsuccessful closures occur for many reasons such as a consumer not yet reaching their goal; RSA uses the term, but many of those cases are still successful in other ways such as building new skills and most cases open again such as with a new vocational goal. The MCB Case Manager is the point of contact for consumers needing services; the Case Manager is the one who makes the referral to the appropriate service provider. Additional vendors can be brought in to provide needed services.

## WIOA State Plan: Performance towards Goals

The WIOA State Plan has been approved by the RSA Commissioner. Shared by screen share. Distributed to RC in advance of the meeting. The content is below with information from the current RC meeting added.

### Recommendation #1:

Work in coordination with Department of Education and Secondary Education (DESE) to ensure MCB’s social services and vocational rehabilitation staff can fully participate in IEP meetings for children and youth. Nate noted that when MCB staff are at IEP meetings they can advocate for the child, increase success goals, sometimes educate on MCB’s responsibilities and DESE’s responsibilities. Also to be there for the family.

Progress: having meetings with DESE on the best way to set this up. The past communication document with DESE is also being updated. MCB case managers are already attending IEP many youths’ IEP meetings.

### Recommendation #2

Continue to advocate for digital accessibility including state and local government portal systems, including all applications for services and all documents posted on these portals as well as address the inaccessibility of online job applications.

Progress: Nate notes that this is already being done and will continue.

### Recommendation #3

Leverage the results of the 2023 All-Consumer Survey to identify communities in need of targeted education of the services that MCB provides and how to access them.

Progress: Meetings have occurred with all regional directors to identify strategies for reaching out to such groups.

### Recommendation #4

Work with state and community partners to strengthen the quality of candidates applying for positions with MCB and its partners. This would include exposing students to fields needed to support the vocational service program directly and indirectly.

Progress: The Commissioner has been bringing entities to the table to do this. Expanding beyond colleges in MA already providing such education to other states to recruit more people into the field.

### Recommendation #5

Review transportation accessibility and its impact on the ability of consumers to pursue vocational objectives. Increase exposure to telework opportunities and skills training to help mitigate the barrier of transportation especially in rural areas.

Progress: MCB is working to improve transportation opportunities, and skills for doing tele-work are being taught. Nate has spoken at autonomous vehicle summits as well.

### Recommendation #6

Better leverage state agencies and partners to assist in providing wrap-around services to consumers to assure stability in all areas as they pursue their vocational goals.

Progress: Case Managers review potential needs such as financial, support services, building independence; this could include referrals to services outside of MCB.

### Recommendation #7

Continue to explore data available to help forecast needs in services and budget. RC and partners contribute to the creation of an informational dashboard that is updated regularly.

Progress: see comments on Dashboard project earlier in the meeting. Also, Nate notes that data is good and being used to guide decisions moving forward. Reviewing what can be pulled from the case management system and how to better leverage the data.

### Recommendation #8

Review MCB’s implementation of WIOA and current State Plan objectives.

Progress: MCB will continue communicating with the RC and others on progress towards goals and internally as well. Progress will be reviewed during RC meetings and will be part of the Chair’s report at the end of the year.

## Clarifying Title 2 impact on digital accessibility.

The Commissioner noted the new State digital accessibility committee formed by the Governor. The Commissioner is on the committee Vendors are likely up to date on this as well. Challenge can be when something breaks within an accessible website so the regulations will support continued progress in this area. The Chair suggested having the Digital Accessibility Committee present their work to the RC in the future.

## New Business

Jerry Berrier presented on behalf of the Bay State Council of the Blind on the letter BSCB is proposing to send to the Governor regarding the past Executive Order impacting the composition of the RC. The letter identifies many points. Some key points: The order conflicts with the Rehabilitation Act and its regulations. Also, it was issued without input or knowledge of the Rehabilitation Council. Number of terms, term limits, how RC is constituted, how quorum occurs, term expiration dates, support for increasing diversity of the RC; these are all concerns arising from the Order. The BSCB letter will be sent to the Disability Law Center (DLC) for collaboration then on to the Governor. The letter has been provided to RC members for them to read and share DeAnn Elliott, the lead on this BSCB letter spoke and shared that the goal is to have the language align with the Federal language. She recognized Kira Sweeny, formerly of the DLC as a strong resource for BSCB’s letter, to make sure it is asking for changes that are legal.

## Public Comments

Nona Haroyan (who is on region 2’s RC) asked about the MCB Strategic Plan and whether MCB plans to seek input from the regional RC’s and the community. Nate said that the plan is still in the development stage and that it will soon be going out to partners for their input once MCB staff have finished looking it over. Nona also thanked Nate and the Commissioner for providing information that she requested at the March RC meeting.

## The meeting was adjourned at 2:22 PM.

Next meeting: Wednesday, September 4, 2024, 1:00 - 3:00 PM.