#  Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

# Rehabilitation Council Minutes

# For March 3, 2020

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

## Attendees

In person: Vice Chair DeAnn Elliott; Commissioner David D’Arcangelo; Joe Buizon(MCB); Deputy Commissioner John Oliveira; Darren Black; Mary Otiato (MCB); Trish Hart (MCB); Secretary Karen McCormack; Richard Curtis (arrived at 10:20 a.m.); Naomi Goldberg; Alex Scarlis; Nora Nagle; Cory Kadlik; Jerry Berrier; Chuck Curti;

; and Jennifer Harnish (guest) Phone was not available for this meeting so no one attended remotely.

## Minutes Approval

Vice Chair, DeAnn Elliott asked if anyone had any changes to the December 4, 2019 RC Minutes. Minutes were accepted by consent as drafted.

## RC Update:

Members were invited to contact the RC Chair, Bruce Howell, and Commissioner David D’Arcangelo to express their interest in becoming the next Chairperson for the Rehabilitation Council as Bruce Howell is terming out June 2020. There have been a couple of suggested candidates for this position, but not an obvious decision currently. MCB employees are not eligible and the four pending members of the RC cannot be considered as chair. Current serving members who are eligible to apply are: Cheryl Scott, Naomi Goldberg, Martha Daigle, Nora Nagle, Richard Curtis, Karen McCormack, Nancy Mader, and DeAnn Elliott.

It was requested that a RC Chair job description be circulated amongst members of the council.

Mary Otiato reported on the RC members pending appointment from the governor. She is in weekly contact with Robert Jones from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. There is a back log, but RC members have been elevated, but some current RC members are terming out before they have even received an approval on their 2017 applications. A member asked about calling our state senators directly to help address the backlog and inordinate waiting time? It was suggested that pending members should maybe call the governor’s office directly.

## B.L.I.N.D. Legislative Event Reminder - Vice Chair:

B.L.I.N.D. is slated for March 31, 2020 at the Statehouse from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. Priorities are increased funding in the Community Services line item budget, and slightly increased funding for Perkins Talking Book Library. Meetings with Legislators are scheduled from 12 p.m. - 1 p.m. Those planning to attend are encouraged to RSVP on the Perkins School for the Blind website. Commissioner D’Arcangelo is unable to attend, but the Deputy Commissioner will be there.

## Forum Discussion with American Institutes Research (AIR) and Concepts Incorporated teams:

MCB applied for $4 million in re-allotment funds and was awarded $2.5 million

Monies will be used on projects to support VR.

American Institutes Research (AIR) and Concepts Incorporated (CI) responded to an MCB Request for Responses and were awarded the bid. The RFR related to a media campaign to raise awareness about MCB’s Vocational Rehabilitation Services, ”Project Pep Talk Campaign,” which will be a $400k project.

Members of the AIR and CI team presented information about the direction of the campaign and campaign goals. Their development process includes using evidence-based research and meeting with stakeholders. Today they wanted to ask questions, and hear responses from, members of the Rehabilitation Council.

Rebecca Skipper from CI shared that this would be a video and social media-based campaign. It is the 100th Anniversary of VR. She shared that they were here to ask some questions but were willing to let the conversation go in whatever ways would provide insights to them.

The research questions they had for the Rehabilitation Council were:

1. What are MCB’s VR strengths and weaknesses?

Strengths, as shared by RC members were as follows. Chuck Curti said “Staff, commitment, dedication and hard work.” Richard Curtis said “Innovation, focus on employment, exposing clients to working community, and long-term employer partnerships of trust.” DeAnn Elliott said “Solid future.” Karen McCormack said, “Funding employment initiatives for youth.” Cheryl Scott said, “Accolades for their collaborative efforts and partnerships, and working on WIOA State Plan.” Further, she added “Lots of progress in communication and referrals.” Alex Scarlis reminded everyone that the RSA Monitoring report lists strengths, so he encouraged them to use that to capture strengths, too.

1. Weaknesses/ Areas to Improve?

Alex Scarlis mentioned “Outreach, peer mentoring program, ambassadors program, folks are isolated.”

Conversation meandered from here. A member of the RC asked for an explanation of the rationale behind using a video format as it is so visual. It was explained that a part of the Request for Response (RFR) was to use video that is scalable and accessible. Commissioner D’Arcangelo responded that “it takes a village” so engaging audience, family members of consumers through a video format, while providing excellent audio description, a “universal design is baked into the format.” He assured the RC that the audio descriptions will be 508 Compliant. There will be three target audience components to the campaign: the influencers in client’s life, employers, and eye care professionals.

The RC recommended to the producers that they look at MCB consumer surveys. Only 15% of consumers have email addresses. The campaign should also place some focus on successful peer role models.

Deputy Commissioner John Oliveira commented on the Comprehensive Needs Survey Assessment. The previous database system did not have the capacity to collect client emails. Gathering this information for VR consumers is also slowed if someone has changed their address or placed out.

DeAnn Elliott suggested that the researchers should look for patterns and placements; do greater outreach to communities of color to ensure there is diversity in the success stories being shared for this campaign. This includes diversity as it relates to age, ethnicity, and race. There are a variety of stakeholders MCB represents, so the campaign needs to reflect that diversity.

The Commissioner stated, “We’re looking for results”, there will be a survey and report in the fall about what was achieved with this project.”

Another question that was posed to the RC: Who are the influencers that connect consumers with MCB?

Members stated that “friends, families, employers, and healthcare providers” can encourage consumers to seek MCB VR services.

However, it was also shared that medical professionals can sometimes also be a barrier, too. Some RC members shared personal accounts of what had been conveyed to them when newly diagnosed with vision loss/blindness. The referral process to MCB has historically been very slow, sometimes resulting in months of delay. Medical professionals are neutral at best and negative at worst; they don’t project enthusiasm about outcomes; “prepare for the worst” mentality.

Other comments shared were that parents are not always very optimistic. Suggested ideas offered included reaching out to employer communities, obtaining endorsements from large employers, and doing outreach to educators of children and adults

It was further expressed by members of the RC that employers need to know how to connect with employees to discuss support and disability disclosure, getting potential VR consumers heading towards employment before they “get to the couch.” There was then some discussion about the decision to pause on the Job Fair this year and have an Employer Sessions, instead.

The Commissioner also disclosed that Work Without Limits was awarded the MCB “2020 Challenge” RFR.

1. What are trends that are impacting MCB?

Answers from RC members included:

* Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI)
* Fewer people who are blind without other kinds of disabilities.
* Employment trends like working from home options, automation, change of skill set

Other challenges and suggestions for the campaign noted were:

* recruiting consumers who may not want to identify as someone with a visual impairment
* Getting the word out about Pre-ETS programming and families having the expectation that their child work
* Technology opened up the world but it is also becoming difficult to keep up
* Parents can be critical for recommendations prioritization to educators
* Technology can be challenging for some consumers i.e. email
* Average age of MCB consumer is 45, significant numbers over 70, there is a 97 year old consumer who is still bookkeeping
* Include general information about what people who are blind can do in the media campaign

The RC asked how the success of the campaign will be evaluated? AIR & CI will measure the response and engagement with the videos, and use their analysis to provide quantifiable results. They will gather data during the summer & fall, and come back to MCB with their report in September/October

## Overview of MCB Proposed State Plan Process & Related Public Hearings, with a DOL Rep and MCB Policy

Trish Hart reported on RC’s part of the State Plan. It establishes the goals for the next four years. She acknowledged that RC members already provided some valuable suggestions to her via a RC subcommittee that worked on the reports; if anyone else wants to weigh in, please be in touch with their additional comments ASAP.

Cheryl Scott reported on the State Plan. A final refinement of the latest draft was completed in February.Meetings were held in seven regions including one virtual. 250 people provided feedback. On February, 26 2020 a full draft of the Plan was submitted, and it is open for comments for thirty days. Trish Hart isolated and shared the MCB section of the State Plan - the full plan is 600 pages.

Cheryl Scott recommended reading the Strategic Elements Section for a broader overview of the State Plan.

Mass Hire State Workforce Board voting on Monday to support the State Plan- approved plan projected to start July 1 then move on to implementation of plan. Cheryl encourages everyone to read the State Plan and weigh in.

## Employer Survey Results Recap

Deputy Commissioner Oliveira and Joe Buizon provided information obtained from employers at the October, 2019 event, and shared with the RC members.

## Other Business

* Joanne Dubray has resigned from her position with MCB, so she is no longer the RC liaison, Regina DiMarzo will be the MCB liaison going forward.
* DeAnn Elliott shared that RSA announced homemakers will be shifted to Centers for Independent Living
* A discussion ensued about recent changes in MCB offices. The Worcester MCB office move is in process as the current location lease is up without an offer to renew, An RFR was issued to find a new location. Some RC members expressed concern about a possible move to Southborough, because consumers have shared that they feel this office location would not be very accessible. Commissioner D’Arcangelo stated that this space was rarely used for meetings with consumers.

## Meeting Adjourned

The RC Meeting was adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Karen McCormack, Secretary