**Massachusetts Commission for the Blind**

**Rehabilitation Council Minutes**

**For March 3, 2021**

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. Quorum was not established.

Note from secretary: the audio recording made of the meeting was limited by interruptions of screen reader speech and lesser quality recording of some participants due to their audio quality/connection. In reviewing the audio, the Chair and this Secretary noted that a Zoom recording would have been of higher quality thus allowing for more thorough and accurate minutes.

**Attendees (by Zoom)**

(the list of participants that Zoom generates was not available from the secretary’s digital recording so the below is based on names heard when individuals joined and from memory.

DeAnn Elliott (Chair); Nora Nagle; Mary Otiato; Deputy Commissioner John Oliveira; Commissioner David D’Arcangelo; Jennifer Harnish; Karen McCormack (secretary); Patricia Hart; Carla Kath; Regina DiMarzo; Jerry Berrier; Cory Kadlik; Leslie M. Leslie; Naomi Goldberg; Cheryl Scott; Richard Curtis; Martha Daigle;

Regrets: Jenifer Whitmore; Charles Curti; Nancy Trzcinski; Priscilla Ngome.

A total of 43 participants (including RC members were on the call as of 10:05 A.M. as reported by Regina DiMarzo, Executive Assistant (Zoom host)

**Member & Guest Introductions**

Chair DeAnn Elliott welcomed all in attendance and noted that there was quorum. A later review by the chair and secretary revealed the absence of quorum.

Minutes from the December 2, 2020 RC Meeting were accepted under a roll call vote as drafted. Due to the absence of quorum, this action will be postponed until a meeting where quorum is present.

The chair recognized Karen McCormack and Nora Nagle for completing their terms on the RC. Karen and Nora thanked the members for the opportunity. Their departure adds two more vacant seats to the board. The RC has had no new confirmed nominees since 2017, and none of the five nominees with applications pending had heard from the governor’s office since December. The chair expressed concern and asked the commissioner for assistance. She noted that other Rehabilitation Councils in Massachusetts which report to Health and Human Services have also reported delays in confirmations , and they will work together.

**Commissioner’s Report**

Commissioner D’Arcangelo reported most services are being provided virtually. In-person services will resume when safe, possibly this summer. Case closures are slightly lower than pre-pandemic levels. It remains to be seen what will happen to the Springfield regional office.

**New reallotment projects are keeping MCB staff busy including the launch of the “What’s your Vision” media campaign.** they met with RSA and are in good standing. There will likely be five reallotment projects in the coming year. Two have been approved and three are out for bid so cannot be discussed. The Deputy Commissioner said the Return on Investment project is one of the two.

The Chair asked about how the funds saved by office closures would be used. The Commissioner explained that the funds can’t just be moved from one line item of the budget to another. A transfer would be needed and they have started doing this. Since the FY21 budget wasn’t enacted until December, MCB’s budget planning and targets were delayed. MCB is spending less, not due to cost reductions but because programs and vendors were closed. Utilization under COVID is the reason.

The chair asked how MCB communicated with its vendors about the $750,000 that was available in the budget. The Commissioner said it was an earmark that He said gets backed out of the budget. The Chair said that she didn’t believe the $750,000 was an earmark but rather that it was part of the budget. The Commissioner said he wasn’t sure what she was referring to. Communication with vendors continued and they are kept in the loop. Closure of the Carroll Center for a couple months meant less money was spent, and MCB cannot pay vendors for money that wasn’t spent. Referrals to CCB and other vendors are increasing. The Chair noted that she understood about VR accounts and that her question was about SR account.

The Deputy Commissioner explained that funds for MABVI come from Elder Blind money.

(Content unintelligible due to background noise.)

The commissioner felt MCB was in a good place with the governor’s budget. MCB got a small $50,000 Cares Act for Assistive Technology for elders. This is being used to purchase magnifiers and Alexa devices.

MCB issued a public notice for a $100,000 study to assess the return on investment for VR services provided over a 5-7 year period. These funds would come out of reallotment funds. The chair raised concern that the RFR indicated a date of March 2020 and the RC was hearing about it a year late. The Deputy Commissioner said he was sure the date of March 2020 was a typo and he will look into it with the contracts department. MCB hopes to learn what services consumers used to get employment, average wages, amount of time before becoming employed, etc. The Chair questioned the timing, given the financial impact of the pandemic on 40% of MCB individuals, MCB staff vacancies, union unrest, office closures, etc. The Deputy Commissioner said the impact on consumers was at 8% not 40% and consumers will hopefully be coming out of being furloughed or having their hours increased as the economy improves. He said there is only one staff vacancy that was in process of being filled. The Chair requested the updated statistics on employment impact on MCB consumers from what was noted in June, 2020.

In response to a consumer question about whether the AIM Library would be under the control of MCB, the commissioner said that the Carroll Center had the RFR for the Library and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) decided they wanted to work it as an Interagency Service Agreement with MCB . They’re working out details.

A consumer asked how MCB would inform the consumers who would have used the regional offices that were closed, specifically consumers who cannot connect remotely. The Commissioner said MCB would use the telephone, Braille and large print. By adding Twitter, YouTube, a blog, and an updated webpage, MCB has increased engagements.

MCB receives more funds as more individuals are added to the Deaf Blind Extended Supports, but the budget per individual has not increased. They’re working to get more funds available for families thru respite support resources.

**Election of new secretary**

Jennifer Harnish was unanimously elected in a roll call vote to fill the seat vacated by Karen McCormack. Due to the absence of quorum, this action will be postponed until a later meeting when quorum is present. Jennifer has agreed to take minutes informally until the issue is resolved.

**Deputy Commissioner report**

In 2021, MCB will offer job fair, soft-skills program and internship ceremonies online.

MCB is holding Visions of Collaboration a day-long conference for TVI’s to update them on MCB services with a variety of speakers and topics. The Soft Skills training will occur on Zoom and use recordings made from a past reallotment project. Summer internship program begins June 10 ending in early August. Job fair the first week in October. This will also include an employer seminar to offer education and training on working with blind employees. All via Zoom. College Information session for high school students is held in April.

A virtual job shadowing opportunity is being offered for Pre-ETS consumers and those new to vision loss. MCB staff are identifying the content of a Rehabilitation Kit that rehab teachers would take to consumer homes. Items would then be ordered and on next visit instruction would occur. Items will also be kept in designated demonstration areas for consumers to try.

**Electronic Signatures**

MCB’s client case management program now offers an electronic signature that will allow the consumer to sign their rehabilitation plan remotely. Consumer will get an electronic copy of the plan. An e-signature is also being developed for the central registration system.

(note due to secretary getting a work phone call on the recording device being used, a portion of the presentation on the registry is missing from the minutes)

Mary reported that the change to electronic registration procedures will include reporting being done thru the website with oversight from the registrar. The registrar puts that information into the Case Management system with the push of a button. This project is called the Electronic Registration Integration project. Registration of new consumers to the system will go from two to three months to 48 to 72 hours.

**Public questions & answers**

A BSCB representative expressed concern about the VR ROI study and the absence of an opportunity to give input on its conceptualization. Data from it could be misleading if only based on a cost/benefit analysis. Qualitative studies would generate more information.

Mary said that MCB is doing a social return on investment which does look at other factors. The commissioner said the RSA wants information about under employment and it will be part of a broader study .

The Deputy Commissioner referenced $200,000 that is available for Alexa devices and similar technologies for seniors and those not working. Other adaptive equipment too just not computers. Interested SR consumers should call their social worker.

A Worcester consumer requested MCB to send an email to consumers who were served by the regional offices that were closed, as some consumers were still not aware three months later of the office closings and she hadn’t yet received a letter herself. MCB is working to contact consumers to see if they want to opt in to receiving MCB emails. There was an email that went out with the information on the office closures. large print USPS mailing. Carla said that because they were not in the office it couldn’t be done at this time but would hopefully be able to do that soon

A consumer noted that internet isn’t sufficient, and paper mailings are still important. Deputy commissioner said that it was being communicated because consumers have been getting devices and training.

The next meeting of the RC will be on Wednesday, June 2 from 1:00 to 3:00. The RC Meeting was adjourned at3:33.

Respectfully Submitted by Jennifer Harnish, Secretary, and DeAnn Elliott, Chair

These minutes are for informational purposes only.