# Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

Rehabilitation Council Minutes

For March 1, 2023

The quarterly Meeting of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Rehabilitation Council was called to order by Chair DeAnn Elliott at 1:03 p.m. The meeting was held remotely using the Zoom conferencing platform.

The number in attendance at 2:40 was sixteen.

Members in attendance: DeAnn Elliott (Chair); Naomi Goldberg; Jerry Berrier; Cheryl Scott; Priscilla Ngome; Jenifer Whitmore; Brian Switzer; Devon Myer; Commissioner David D'Arcangelo.

Regrets: Jennifer Harnish; Rebecca Davis; Martha Daigle; Filomena Tripp.

Attending Ex officio RC members: none

MCB guests: Deputy Commissioner John Oliveira; Lucy Evangelidis (Zoom host); Nathan Skrocki; Lauren Lang (General Council).

Other Guests: Inez Canada; Name unclear/unknown, Technology Partner working with UTSS (United Technical Support Services,) and other MA state agencies; Myra and Carol (no last names given when introduced) who were Identified by the Commissioner as community advocates.

There were eight out of 12 voting members in attendance which did meet quorum.

The chair welcomed the new executive assistant to the Commissioner, Lucy Evangelidis; She serves as the administrative liaison for the RC.

Commissioner noted that Robert Jones of DHHS who has attended past RC meetings left his role December 2022 or January 2023 and Gabe Cohen is now performing much of his role about Boards and Commissions. The Commissioner noted that this may change with the incoming Secretary of Health and Human Services (who is meeting with the Commissioner in early March) so the RC will be updated if changes occur. The RC chair requested that the Commissioner email her his email address so that she could invite him to the June 2023 RC meeting.

The Chair has reached out to SILC (State Independent Living Centers) who are in the process of identifying a new individual for their position on the RC. She also reminded RC members that under the by-laws they are asked to attend all if not most of the RC meetings, but this has not been enforced due to the need to fill open roles. Members who cannot attend should contact the Chair in advance of the meeting to let them know of this and that if someone misses a few meetings, steps should be taken to identify a replacement who can be in attendance. She also asked that when speaking, first state your name for benefit of all attendees who may not know your name from your voice and so that minutes can accurately attribute statements being made.

Approval of Minutes

Jerry Berrier RC member ran the roll call for approval of the December 7, 2022, minutes . Sheryl Scott moved to approve the minutes and Brian Switzer seconded that motion. Devon Meyer, Brian Switzer, Sheryl Scott, and DeAnn Elliott all voted yes. No attendee raised discussion or changes to the minutes so the motion to approve the minutes passed. Approved minutes will be given to Lauren Lang for addition to the documents on the RC landing page.

DeAnn asked if there was an update to the remote meetings being allowed in terms of whether that will be extended after March 31, 2023, when scheduled to expire. The Commissioner replied that the legislature and Governor have not yet provided such information . An update will be sent once a decision by those has been made. Jerry noted that he thought the House was voting on a two-year extension of the date of this current meeting which would then go to the Senate, but the Commissioner said he was not aware of whether this was occurring today. Lauren noted that updates will be posted on the Attorney General’s website, and she also said that individuals can contact their legislators on this issue if they would like to. Sheryl stated that she is also checking in on this issue. About the RC landing page, DeAnn has been discussing it with Michael. She recognized him for his quick responses to requests for changes and additions and noted that the page looks far more detailed than it was a year ago. The Commissioner put the link to the page in the Chat rather than sharing his screen so that all could access the page using their preferred method of information access. (Note from the Secretary that Zoom Chat information is not included in the Zoom recordings posted on MCB YouTube page, thus not available to be added to the minutes.

The Chair noted that the button used to expand the section listing RC members and their roles was not operable when using Jaws or NVDA and that there is a contact link that is not operable either. Clicking the link does not seem to work, however a work-around is to copy and paste that link into the email To field. The Chair mentioned the need for position descriptions to be added.

Nate submitted the RC Annual Report to RSA (Rehabilitation Services Administration) and a copy was also sent by email to RC members.

## Deputy Commissioner report

MCB Visions of Collaboration Conference on pre-ETS youth will be held in-person in May ; with over 100 registrants . The internship program is underway. It includes in-person and virtual training and work sites to support a broader distribution of internship opportunities. There are thirty applicants thus far and two confirmed placements; numbers will continue to rise as college students are home for Spring break, meeting with counselors and interviewing with internship sites. The partnership with the National industries for the Blind has the first group of three participants having started and the second group has four individuals interested in having E-Commerce sites. NIB has expanded the program , offering self-employment/entrepreneurial business opportunities and business skills training. The first training module, and intensive computer training, will be starting later in March. The NextGen program continues with recruiting individuals for the grant-funded program overseen by MRC. MRC staffing issues for this specific program continue as the number of participants increases. Outcomes likely available by January of 2024 for this multi-year program.

## Commissioner’s Report

Commissioner D’Arcangelo said that VR services were going strong although there were challenges when a number of key staff were out or left for other opportunities. Thelma Williams is the new Chief of Staff. He said the VR numbers are strong including Number of opportunities and closures as noted in the Annual Report. He stated that on a macro-economic level, people with disabilities are faring better according to disability statistics.org website. The numbers there show that people with disabilities are making greater gains than those without disabilities in the general workforce. This is consistent with numbers seen in Massachusetts including information provided by MRC (Massachusetts Rehabilitation Council”). Two factors contributing to the numbers are the Labor Participation Rate and the Unemployment Rate. He summarized this by stating there are more opportunities in the labor market for VR consumers and that MCB is getting good closures and satisfactory results. Nate concurred that our numbers are stable or improving since Covid onset and The Commissioner referenced the 9-11 report as support for this information. The Commissioner said that if looking at gains on a year-by-year basis, this can be misleading due to individuals who left the job market when Covid impact began; some of those individuals may be returning to the workforce.

The Commissioner stated that the FY 2024 budget has not yet been released, and MCB does not have the proposed budget. Although it should be coming out later in the day or the next day. There is an MCB stakeholder call with the incoming Secretary (of Health and Human Services) later in the day. He noted that based on the indications MCB has gotten, the budget for MCB is likely to be status quo ; he does not expect a major change in either direction but that it will be a number that MCB can rely upon. He read the spreadsheet , noted by the Chair as not accessible to screen reader users, which was being shared in Zoom. Column A has the line-item number for the appropriation. The first account is 4110-3010 is the “State appropriation” or State match. 4110-3021 is the federal grant MCB gets allotted. Column B notes these descriptions. Column C is the FY 2021 budget with overrides. The total is $10,908,520. FY 2022 and FY 2023 were each $10.5. He noted that the numbers are different because the Governor’s budget does not include earmarks that are added by the legislature. Column G has year to date expenditures. The State fiscal year ends June 30 and federal fiscal year ends September 30. MCB’s numbers show that at about half-way through the fiscal year they have spent just over half of the budgeted amount, about $5.6 million. The final two columns show the encumbrances and then the total committed funds. He said they expect to spend nearly all of the remaining money.

Regarding employment numbers at MCB, the Commissioner stated that they are near full employment: they have 130 FTE’s with a cap of 133. Four or five hires are in process, which will put them over the cap. He noted that if they are more than one or two over the cap, they will dialogue with the various Secretaries such as Department of Health and Human Services . One example he gave was the Orientation and Mobility Unit where they used to have six professionals but three of them were not one FTE (Full Time Equivalents, someone who works 37.5 hours per week is one FTE. When adding up the partial FTE’s of the three part-time professionals, they totaled 1.5 FTE’s. When back filling those three positions, they hired three full-time staff members, meaning a total of three FTE’s. This cuts into MCB’s FTE cap. This happened in a number of other units. Also, in the past, the Chief of Staff position was part of the HR Liaison position. Now MCB has a stand-alone Chief of Staff at one FTE in addition to still having the HR Liaison position. The numbers show MCB is spending all their money.

MCB did a federal reallotment project related to assistive technology. The report on this project has been written and delivered, but a decision has not yet been made on how the report will be disseminated. Delay is likely due to the change of administrations with certain things taking longer to be signed off on, or people changing roles. He is optimistic that they will be able to get the report to the RC in advance of the June meeting so members can review it. Plan is to release it first to staff, then to stakeholders including the RC, then posting it to the MCB website. He notes that the outcomes of the report are interesting and illuminating and will guide programming and focus taken on assistive technology.

He stated that overall, MCB is doing well with the new administration, with Covid further behind us; for example, new programming is occurring from outside entities, along with replenishment of the MCB workforce. He said he believes in his team and consumers, including another good crop of internship candidates, who are all doing a great job. Other events occurring are an Eye Care provider event, and a stakeholder event at the Carroll Center in May that the RC will be invited to, which is convening leaders from blindness organizations. In addition, a CSA-VR meeting is in April which is a meeting in Bethesda, MD, of VR agencies including blindness agencies; the Commissioner will attend the first three days of this meeting.

About the Randolph-Shepard program, He mentioned that some vending sites are back and doing well including Ashburton Place, and the Post Office. A micro-market vending system is being installed at the State House. Out of 28 locations, about 20 of them are closed or not doing well , due to the impact of Covid on foot traffic reduced with those in such locations working virtually at many locations. The hope is to introduce micro-markets which are automated and serviced a few times per week, serving to inject innovation and business into the program. In response to a question regarding an audit that came out of the Auditor’s office regarding supervision of Randolph-Shepard vendors, one of the most substantive findings of the audit was about the record keeping regarding not having paperwork from before the late 80’s. MCB Lauren Lang said MCB’s response to the audit report should be up on the auditor’s website. The auditors also wanted clearer written policies and procedures. She said that no money was attached to the audit. The Commissioner said that MCB will be working closely with the Committee of Blind Vendors to overtly and modernly present the policies and procedures. He noted that what had happened was that the Committee had been having meetings but not keeping the minutes; Lauren Lang then stated that this was not a finding of the audit. He said the committee was doing voice votes and not codifying their meetings like they should have been doing. When he asked Lauren about that statement, she replied the statement was better. She said that the minutes were not as spelled out as you would want them to be such as voice votes and quorum numbers. He said that the Randolph-Shepard program is challenged right now not by anything the vendors or MCB are doing, but because of the decreased foot traffic. MCB is exploring new locations including at the MBTA’s Oak Grove and Davis Square stations. He said that other blindness agencies and departments are finding the same thing with reduced foot traffic meaning fewer customers. . The Chair said that one item on the audit report that stood out to her was the need for regular monitoring of the stands. She will send out the audit to RC members . In response to a question about the nature of the micro-markets, the Commissioner said they were more sophisticated than vending machines with far more robust choices; the micro-market vendor was chosen because of the back end and the front-end accessibility of the markets. He offered to invite Jim McManus, the head of the MCB Randolph-Shepard vendors to explain the micro-market machine. Some of the machines might also have sundry type items in addition to food, including clothing and headphones. He also noted for disclosure purposes that he was appointed to the NIB Board so if any NIB business comes to MCB, the Commissioner has designated the Deputy Commissioner to handle that business to avoid conflict of interest.

The Chair shared the phone number and webinar ID for the call occurring after the RC meeting with Secretary Walsh of the Department of Health and Human Services regarding the Governor’s budget.

## RC Chair report

The Chair reminded the RC that her term is ending in June, so she is wrapping up some loose ends. She said typically the June 7 meeting would be her last one as Chair, she is ending in May in order to focus on her mother recently going into hospice. As well as dealing with her own personal health issues after being diagnosed with breast cancer last year (and now doing well). She has also accepted a position providing resume assistance at the Carroll Center a few hours a week in the Screen Reader User Tester Training program. This was cleared with the Ethics Commission given that her current seat on the RC is for a current or recent VR consumer of MCB. She expressed her gratitude to the Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner and the RC members and consumers. The Commissioner thanked her for her service and her diligence thru challenges with the onset of Covid, with no RC meetings being missed and that the RC led the way in showing other Boards and Commissions that if people with disabilities can have these meetings remotely, then everyone can also do that. He credited her with her service and expressed his sorrow for her mother and her personal health struggles and offered whatever help MCB could provide. She said she plans to resign in the next few weeks and pull together records and other information needed by a new Chair. The Chair encouraged the RC and MCB to reach out to individuals to fill her seat who may not be attending RC meetings to find someone who can bring diversity to the Board such as people representing communities of color and individuals , people representing areas of the Commonwealth outside of the Boston area. . She shared that she is still unhappy with the Executive Order regarding filling RC seats and quorum and that when no longer on the RC she may so some advocacy about that matter. She also asked considerations to be made as to individuals to become the next Chair and Vice Chair for the June elections. Brian Switzer stated his interest in running for Chair; his background with a master’s degree in public policy and education working with the Career Launch program at Perkins and having been a MCB VR consumer for many years. The Chair asked him to write up a few paragraphs expanding on what he has already said so that RC members could get to know him in more detail and forwarding his resume minus personal contact information that can be distributed to the RC before the June meeting. One role for the Vice Chair could be to oversee the RC work on the State Plan and that topics covered during meetings contribute to the Plan. Also, for that person to serve as a liaison with lucy to set up the public meetings, connect with RC members . She asked if any of the combined State Plan committee members (Naomi Goldberg, Jerry Berrier and Sheryl Scott) would be interested in the Vice Chair position. Cheryl said she would not be interested because she is moving out of her position because she now lives out of state. She will work with others who are part of the MassHire workforce board as well as her replacement to encourage one of them to apply for her seat on the RC. . The Chair expressed her appreciation for Sheryl’s work with the RC as did the Commissioner. The Chair encouraged the future Chair, Vice Chair and Secretary to meet in between meetings to plan the agenda for the next meeting. The Commissioner noted the need to meet with Gabe Cohen regarding applicants to the RC because there will be five open RC seats once Cheryl and DeAnn leave their seats.

## New Business

The Chair shared a report on 508 Accessibility Compliance that she received this past week for Federal agencies. That one out of five websites had consumer usage access problems as well as three out of five internal facing websites having accessibility barriers. The Department of Justice will be looking into this .

Cheryl Scott shared that the workforce program representatives were gearing up for the next State Plan.

The Commissioner offered to get the date for the Bay State Council of the Blind’s annual convention to the RC when it is set. He also noted that NFB of Massachusetts is holding their annual convention the weekend of March following the RC meeting date.

## Public Comments

Lucy said there were sixteen people on the call . No public comments.

The meeting was adjourned at about 2:50.

Note from the Secretary that the Zoom recording of the meeting can be found on the MCB YouTube channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_snnla8IncU>