# Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

Rehabilitation Council Minutes

For September 6, 2023

The quarterly Meeting of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Rehabilitation Council was called to order by Chair Brian Switzer at 1:02 p.m. The meeting was held remotely using the Zoom conferencing platform.

The number of participants in the meeting was not recorded.

## Roll call:

Members in Attendance: Brian Switzer Chair; Naomi Goldberg; Jennifer Harnish; Jerry Berrier.

Ex officio: Priscilla Gome

Regrets: Rebecca Davis; Jennifer Whittemore; Martha Dagle; Devon Meyer

MCB: Commissioner John Oliveira

There were not enough voting RC members to conduct official business.

June meeting minutes could not be approved due to absence of quorum.

## MCB Dashboard Update

Nathan Skrocki reviewed Dashboard Numbers with the RC. General summary: registrations were up last year due to coming out of Covid and for the current fiscal year they are on pace with expectations. MCB is up to date with processing registrations. VR and youth registrations are up slightly. No change in demographics of consumers. Up-tick in certificates of blindness being processed over the past couple months, which he said is not unusual due to increased need for them for uses such as tax abatements. During that time. There is though a slight decrease from last year potentially due to consumers now being able to use MCB ID for verification in town assessor offices in place of certificates. Placard and phone applications tracking at expected numbers. In general, he notes no surprises in the numbers. A new Dashboard will be created with input from the RC and others . See Commissioner report for more details.

## Commissioner report

Employer awareness seminar being offered re MCB supports for consumers who might be hired. Includes new and returning employers. This was streamed live at a Boston neighborhood community station, and on zoom as well. Use of the channel will increase exposure. The annual reverse Job Fair will be held online with employers observing each job seeker giving a two-minute pitch about themselves. White Cane Day preparation is occurring for the October event. MCB Media channels and the MCB website provide additional details. Media campaign has the MCB ads back on local radio and TV broadcasts , web sites and billboards; they are aimed at potential employers, educating them about what Blind consumers bring to the workforce. The Bay State Council of the Blind submitted a reallotment project proposal to create a fully accessible Dashboard . RSA approved this project. MCB will be gathering information from internal and external groups on what kind of content would be helpful. This will be available for anyone to check out with data posted in real time. He noted that blindness is low incidence, so the numbers tend to fluctuate less than might be found in agencies representing higher incidence disabilities. The RFR will be put out after information has been gathered. This will be the only reallotment project for this fiscal year. $125,000 was received and 15% has to go to pre-employment transition services. The remainder will go to the vendor.

On the fiscal side, MCB has a new CFO, Sheila Tunney, who is attending the RC meeting to learn about how MCB works, and how it gets input from its consumers. She is working with the fiscal team on the spending plan as well as some issues with RSA. $132,000 had to be returned to RSA from the Federal FY 2020, funds that were not spent during that time. These funds had to be moved quickly to avoid being in non-compliance. Other issues from FY 2021 and 2022 are being addressed and plan to be resolved by end of September. These issues are related to not providing matching funds from the State before The State fiscal year was closed out end of August. There were funds not used that must be reverted back to the State; numbers still being confirmed. Federal FY23 funds that remain will be put towards initial FY 2024 needs. The Commissioner explained that the unspent funds are for SR services and due in part to many homemaker programs not being able to get enough staff to meet the demand of purchase orders that were in place for specific consumers. Another is the Deaf Blind Extended Support Services where programs are open but not fully staffed so cannot meet the full needs of consumers. The amount fully spent is also impacted when consumers get sick or pass away, thus not being able to use the full amount of encumbered funds. MCB tries to move such funds to other consumers, but there might not be the opportunity or individuals waiting for such services. Over 90% of such funds are allocated to vendors, not to personnel costs of MCB. Reversions for personnel costs occur if say a position remains open for an extended period although such funds might be consumed by higher salary for the new staff filling open positions. Deaf Blind Extended Supports has a $15 million budget so having $125,000 left over is a very small amount.

Timeline for the Dashboard reallotment project is that the funds have to be used by end of September 2024.Executive Office of Health and Human Services is working on a strategic plan project called Strategic Mapping where MCB will devote significant personnel time to this project.

Some funds reverted from FY21 might impact FY2024 funds; the Commissioner has filed a waiver to request that this not occur. The number is not yet finalized but appears to be just over $1 million. . Other areas that describe the waiver are social security reimbursements received when consumers return to employment. Those funds offset the million, and he predicts it to be$400,000 to $500,000. Stretching FY 23 funds into FY 24 will shorten the amount of time that the FY 24 funding has to cover. He notes that the impact on consumers will be minimal if at all, because MCB would look to reduce non-client funds if needed. If RSA accepts the waiver request, then there will be no issue.

Regarding a question about any benefits or challenges of MCB staff having a 2-day remote work option the Commissioner said that the 3-day in person/2-day remote has been practiced at MCB since before he started working there. Field staff spend a portion of time on the road, and a portion in the office. With staff now having laptops and direct cell phone lines, they can spend the 2 days at home doing the office work that would have been done at MCB offices. All they need to access is in the cloud so can be done on their laptop. Clients can reach them directly using their new work cell phones and they can check office voice mail as well. Consumers are provided with mobile phone numbers. Agency main number is being answered and that person can supply consumer with appropriate work phone numbers and messages are also supplied. He said consumers often prefer to text their counselors rather than email, so they now have that choice. Zoom and Teams are also used in place of face-to-face meetings if consumers prefer. There are touchdown spaces in New Bedford and Worcester as an option for face-to-face meetings and places like libraries or consumer homes are also used based on consumer preference. This has provided increased flexibility for consumers and staff. For training, all needed reports are available on the laptop. Staff can use MCB office space cubicles and desks still exist and laptops can be plugged in. Commute time, cost of parking is saved. Managers and supervisors are in the office a few days per week and VRT’s come in to get supplies.

## Executive Order and impact on RC

 Jerry Berrier presented on the draft letter that the Bay State Council of the Blind and the Disability Law Center are finalizing so that it can be submitted to Governor Healey asking that the previous executive order reconstituting the Rehabilitation Council be rescinded. The letter details language from the Executive Order that conflicts with wording in the Rehabilitation Act and that the Order was created without consultation from the RC or consumer groups. The BSCB is concerned that the language used will interfere with the work of the RC. The letter was provided to the RC in preparation for the present meeting. Feedback from the RC is requested to be submitted using the communication link on the RC landing page within two weeks so that the letter can be submitted in the Fall. Concerns specified in the letter include that the language could impact the ability of the RC to carry out its functions. Concerns relate to quorum, potential Governor veto power, term lengths of members, appointment of the Chair, and the official name of the Council. The current Executive Order came out of Governor Baker’s office, and there was no prior notification to the RC of it being issued. An RC member said that the Client Assistance Program would have wanted to know about it. The statewide RC is also trying to change their order to come in line with the and it was recommended by a meeting member that the General Council of the SRC be consulted, as well as a Technical Assistance circular issued by RSA regarding holding over of member terms.

## New Business

No new business was shared.

## Public Comments

Inez Canada announced that she is Leaving MOD for a new position so will no longer be able to attend RC meetings.

## Next RC meeting is December 6 at 1 P.M.

The meeting was adjourned at about 2:22.