# Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

# Rehabilitation Council Minutes September 4, 2024

The quarterly Meeting of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Rehabilitation Council was called to order by Chair Brian Switzer at 1:06 PM. The meeting was held remotely using the Zoom conferencing platform.

## Roll call:

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

MCB: Commissioner John Oliveira and Priscilla Ngome.

Regrets: Jennifer Whittemore; Martha Daigle; Rebecca Davis.

The Commissioner clarified that the Deputy Commissioner is not included in quorum. She is an MCB staff member attending the meeting.

A quorum of 6 out of 9 RC voting and non-voting members was present. Three out of seven voting members voted to approve the June minutes with one abstention. So, the minutes will be deferred until the next RC meeting.

## Boards and Commissions Manager introduction

Brian introduced Phillip Duarpe, the Boards and Commissions Manager for the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, overseeing among other things the appointments to boards, councils and commissions. They are working with Brian to moving forward to review and approve RC appointments and reappointments to the RC now that the new Executive Order has been signed by the Governor. They hope to have them completed by the end of September.

## Deputy Commissioner Introduction

Welcome to our new Deputy Commissioner, Justine Muir. She is in her sixth week in this role. Previous career roles include in the field of blindness as well as more recently as a TVI in the public schools and then in special education administration. Also, Director of Pupil Services including with transition age youth. She also worked at the Carroll Center early in her career in the Education Services department. A former student of Justine’s also shared positive feedback and welcomed her. Brian noted that her experience in the education system is a strong fit for our state plan goals.

## Commissioner’s Update including budget update

He shared that the CFO and Budget Director roles are vacant. Also, an update to the MCB internal fiscal system in June over a few days meant invoices submitted during that time were not aware that they had been paid. MCB was able to get those payments in, so FY 2024 was closed out fiscally. He is now working on the MCB spending plan which details how appropriations will be distributed including to specific activity codes for services MCB provides. The plan is now awaiting approval from DHHS so that it can be submitted to ANF. The FY 25 budget is being opened after using a 1/12th budget after the State budget was signed at end of June. Some fine tuning is being done.

Open MCB positions continue to be posted including CFO, Budget Director, some service level positions have been filled. They are seeking to hire two Rehabilitation Teachers with one of the positions close to being filled.

For the CFO position, preference is for someone with knowledge of the State fiscal system as well as understanding of grants and contracts at a State and federal level. Understanding the activity codes and vocational and Social Rehabilitation services is important as well so as not to hinder what the direct service providers are trying to provide to consumers. He notes that the current fiscal team and in his experience as Deputy Commissioner brings the knowledge of having worked with past CFO’s. The Commissioner has continued in his work with the current fiscal team to manage a $40 million budget.

Deputy Commissioner report

The Summer internship Program has concluded with 45 interns. Powerful testimonials were shared at the closing Ceremonies on August 14. Riverside Community Care received the employer partnership award. Next week MCB hosts the Visions of Employment webinar. This webinar equips employers with knowledge and resources to support them in creating supportive workplaces. The ways that MCB can assist will also be explained. Two Reverse virtual Job Fairs will be held in September and October. Legally blind job seekers have the opportunity to present a pitch to potential employers. MCB is also holding an information session for students planning on transitioning to college. It will include a panel of current college students and a recent graduate. MCB staff will cover topics like transition to college from high school, orientation and mobility services, and the role of assistive technology in enhancing the college experience. October is National Disability Employment Awareness month; several MCB staff members will be attending the event at the State House October 23 hosted by the MA Commission on the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

## Dashboard Update

Nathan Skrocki presented on the Dashboard project. It is close to completion with test launch mid-September. He shared a draft preview on screen share. The present dashboard has been tested for accessibility with screen readers and ZoomText. The Dashboard includes open SR and VR cases. Each chart has a descriptive paragraph of what the chart displays including rounded data numbers. A descriptor is then included which in the case of the example on the screen explains that the chart shows number of cases across age groups. They are now combining number of pre-ETS youth with number of Youth in Transition calling them VR Youth, because the number of youth in transition was quite low. The charts can be clicked on to magnify them. Registration information, demographics, age groupings program groupings, certificates of blindness and MCB IDs are additional charts with similar descriptors and ability to magnify. A soft launch will include having charts posted on the web site by the end of September.

Currently no breakdown by region although those numbers can be provided by Nathan at any point. Youth in transition is someone in transition age but not in the school system.

Reviewing the numbers: just over 1100 total registrations which is a bit slow likely due to the time of year. No cases not yet processed. 855 children, just over 1095open cases in deaf blind extended services. Less of change in open VR cases. Overall minimal change in case loafs. 1600 closed SR cases during the calendar year. 41 successful VR closures and 20 unsuccessful VR closures since start of FY 2025 (July 1). Almost 3300 referrals to support services. Certificates of blindness and Blind IDs are in line with previous year. Auxiliary services numbers are likely to exceed last fiscal year.

## Comprehensive Needs Assessment Survey (CNAS)

Nate presented on this topic. A link was sent to Consumers, including active and recently closed VR cases (about 1500 consumers). Separate ones were sent to staff, service providers, and partners. One is just being sent out to executive staff and leadership. Synergy is collecting and analyzing the data. Late September is the goal for having the data for MCB to review. Then November or so for presenting to the general public.

## WIOA State Plan: Performance towards Goals

The Commissioner reviewed the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 including updates over the years to strengthen the Act. The Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA which is pronounced using those individual letters not as one word) passed in 2014 which amended the Rehab Act. Every several years the State has to provide RSA a plan that identifies what the agency is striving to do to support the vocational goals of VR consumers with the ultimate goal of employment; a key of WIOA is that government agencies should be working together and sharing resources to best support VR consumers in achieving their goals. The Rehabilitation Services Administration Reviews State Plans. Nathan shared the State Plan goals for the 2025-2027 plan. The MA plan is posted on the RSA website where you search our state to bring them up. Specific steps MCB has taken thus far towards our goals include monitoring the MCB budget including distributions to support consumer goals; regular meetings with regional directors to look at caseloads and present to leadership services and activities needed; guiding consumers with employment goals such as self-employment including partnering with NIB (National Industries for of the Blind) to offer training for example; key is the goal of self-sufficiency and success; implementing the Dashboard and conducting the CNAS to assess effectiveness of services and better identify underserved populations; educate and advocacy with consumers and public officials on factors that might impact travel to employment such as white cane law, audible pedestrian signals, and public/para transportation; increase access to assistive technology devices and training and accessibility resources for VR consumers; identify and work with employment partners on accessibility; MC intranet being used by staff for access to materials including employment-related policies and uses of AI for access to materials. The Commissioner in response to a question noted that they will be reporting on the numbers for VR consumers receiving tech training and devices after enough time has gone. Executive Order Comments presented by Jerry Berrier on behalf of the Bay State Council of the Blind

The Bay State Council of the Blind appreciates Gov. Healey’s new executive order for the SRC at MCB and welcomes it as a meaningful improvement over the previous executive order. We disagree, however, with the revised definition of quorum. Our understanding is that federal law requires governors to make appointments to fill 15 seats on this consumer advisory board. Historically, long delays in gubernatorial appointments have contributed significantly to fragile quorums. We believe that BSCB members are best served by timely appointments and robust stakeholder representation, and that relaxing the definition of quorum, even in an attempt to be helpful, is a step in the wrong direction. We look forward to continuing to work with MCB and the governor’s office to clarify this single issue.

In response to a question from the RC, the Commissioner said that the current individual (Phillip Duarpe) whose role it is to evaluate and work on council appointments has only been in this position for about seven months and was not provided with information on past RC appointment issues when he started. The Commissioner suggested that we wait and see how it goes and revisit submitting the request for revision to the Executive Order if appointments continue to be a problem. Jerry noted that the primary concern was that a vote could occur with a small number if members if the total number of appointed members is still so far below 15 and if the quorum guideline is not revised such that a vote would not be able to occur unless more members were present. The Commissioner suggested that the RC consider tabling a vote if not enough people are present and also to encourage attendance when a vote on a critical matter will be occurring. The Chair said that there are currently eight individuals up for appointment and three for reappointment.

## New Business

None

## Public Comments

None.

## The meeting was adjourned at 2:28PM.

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