**Statutory Advisory Board (SAB)**

**April 4, 2023**

**Minutes**

SAB Attendees: Howard Purcell, Chair, Colleen Moran, Blair Wong, Brian MacDonald, and Kathy Petkauskos

MCB Staff Attendees: John Oliveira, Shandra Gardiner, Loran Lang, Michael Saccone, Nathan Skrocki, Thelma Williams, Lucy Evangelidis, Evan Silver, Carolyn Ovesen, and Jim Badger

Meeting Held via Zoom; Recordings made available to public on MCB YouTube channel

Public invited to participate through Q&A made at end of the meeting.

Call to accept Minutes from the March 7, 2023 meeting.

**Moved and accepted.**

The Chair informed the Board that he was contacted at 10:25a.m. and told the Commissioner is unable to join the meeting due to illness. The Chair asked John Oliveira, Deputy Commissioner, if he and Shandra Gardiner could give any typical updates.

The Chair asked Shandra to give the financial status of the Commission. The Chair said that many of us were shocked by the Boston Globe article on Sunday, especially members of the SAB. The Board had no knowledge or background about anything that was written in the article. The SAB was hoping to hear from the Commissioner on this to discuss.

Shandra Gardiner: Chief Financial Officer at MCB

Shandra stated that she did not get any advanced notice on the article and was not interviewed for the story. She said that MCB is in great financial standing. Right now, we are waiting for the House budget to come out. She said that MCB proposed to use $690,000 of reallotment funds. MCB has until 9/30 to spend those funds. An update will be giving on those projects once we get more information from the Commissioner.

The Chair acknowledges the number of participants who have joined the call and understands that there might be questions the group cannot answer at this time, but asks them to stick around and the Board will try to answer what they are comfortable given their limited information at this time.

John Oliveira: Deputy Commissioner at MCB

He stated that everything is moving smoothly at the agency. He talked about partnerships specifically with the National Industries for the Blind (NIB). The Pre-employment Transitions Conference called Visions of Collaboration was held last week and had great attendance in person. He then discussed Next Generation, which is a program we are collaborating on with MRC. They received a $17M grant that also benefits MCB. We have been making referrals and consumers are receiving additional services. The internship program continues to move forward. Soft skills training for all potential interns will be held in May, virtual opening ceremony in June, and an in-person closing ceremony in August.

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Reverse job fair planning continues. Consumers can present themselves to a variety of employers. We also anticipate holding an employer education seminar in September. Earmarked funds are being utilized, and referrals are still being made. Services are still being offered, and we are hearing lots of good things from our consumers.

The Chair asked John to comment on the idea that certifications for the blind are being stopped and that the wait time for mobility, training, and supplies is very significant at this point. Deputy Commissioner said that Nate can address the registration issues. We are currently processing registrations within one to three days. Orientation and Mobility services are being distributed, and we continue to use our partnership with the Caroll Center for additional services. Depending on the geographic area, wait times might be longer due to staffing or the referral process.

Jim McManus: Director of Vending at MCB

The Randolph Sheppard Program started in 1936. It started to provide individuals with loss of vision with a path towards entrepreneurship. It is a great public/private partnership where we provide the equipment and, the manager with vision loss, is running their own business. Jim has been doing this for about 17 years now. When he started there were about 3,200 blind vendors operating throughout the country, and now there are around 1,200. There are more opportunities for the visually impaired in the workforce today. In Massachusetts, last year sales were $1.7M, which is down compared to pre-covid times. There are currently 16 open sites and one opening tomorrow. Covid has been devastating to the operation of these sites. The biggest challenge is the lack of return to work on both the federal and state levels. Jim talked about embracing new technology as a way to increase sales. Kathy Petkauskos asked if the long-term goal of the program is around training or long-term employment for these business managers. Jim said that very few people leave the program. Training is also an important aspect of the program. The Chair asked if Jim had the pre-covid sales numbers. Jim did not have those in front of him, but can pull a report and that information is all on-line as they report to the feds.

Questions from the Public

Nona Haroyan asked if she could know more about the gift and bequest program.

Shandra responded that the gift and bequest is a trust account also called the, “Special Education Purposes Trust Fund”. It is set aside to provide funding in emergency situations. MCB has an internal policy. Justin Heard asked what the internal policy is, and if it is available to consumers anywhere.

Shandra said it is an MCB internal policy and doesn’t know if it’s an outward facing document. She said she will speak with the rest of the team to find out if we have anything outward facing. Justin Heard asked for some examples from the past where the funding has been used. Shandra said the funds are used for consumers who have experienced an emergency. She said that she does not determine what the emergency is, or say yes or no, she is only the one who writes the checks if it meets the criteria. It is typically for a situation where there are no other means available. An example is people who need to move due to a catastrophic incident and cannot afford the first and last month’s rent. She stated again that this must be a last resort so if they have money in a savings account, they need to use that first or see if there are any other avenues where funding is available. She said she has also seen it used for bed bug remediation.

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Kestrell Verlager asked if Shandra had any information about outcomes related to the, “What’s Your Vision” campaign. Shandra said that is not something she does as CFO, but can get her connected with Mike Saccone. Mike shared a link to an on-line report related to the campaign.

Sharon Strzalkowski asked about the education component of the, “Gift and Bequest Trust”, and how it is being used for training, which she doesn’t believe was the original purpose. Shandra stated that there is no education piece. It was established as the, “Special Education Purposes Trust Fund”, but MCB has an internal policy that dictates how it can be spent.

Nona Haroyan asked who ultimately makes the decision on whether the money is granted to the consumer. Shandra said that the regional director makes sure it meets all the criteria, and then it goes directly to the Commissioner for approval. Nona asked for an estimate of how often the funds have been used in the period of a year. Shandra does not have that number with her right now. She then explained the process of how we receive deposits to this account and the average deposit and expenditure.

The Chair read a question from the chat asking what percentage of these requests are denied.

Shandra stated that neither she nor John would see them if they were denied. The Chair asked if she knows the amount that is currently in the trust and if it’s public record. Shandra doesn’t have that information in front of her, but says you can look on A&F’s website.

Justin Heard asked what happened with the comic book from and if any has any perspective on that.

The Chair said that is a question for the Commissioner, and he can hopefully join us to answer next month.

Bruce Howell said that the Globe article indicated that Shandra had resigned and asked her to speak on that. He also asked if it was solely up to the Commissioner to decide to use funds for the $500,000 advertising campaign. Shandra said she didn’t know the Globe article mentioned her name, and she is not sure who decided that would be the dollar amount for the campaign as she was just out for 4.5 months. The Chair also mentioned not seeing anything in the article about Shandra resigning.

The Chair read a question in the chat asking if the, “Gift and Bequest fund”, is made available to legislators or health and human services, and does it appear as a line item in the budget, if so, under what category. Shandra said that the Trust is not available to other agencies or entities. It does appear as a line item and is sometimes shown under trust accounts.

Justin Heard asked about the onboarding process for consumers and if there is now an on-line or email option. He also asked if there are plans to make it easier for consumers to register. Nate explained the registration process and that we do have an electronic registration option. They are processed in 1-3 business days. He checked this morning and there were zero pending registrations. Justin asked if he could use the same documentation that he used in Georgia to register for their services. Nate said that we follow the laws specific to Massachusetts. John said that there is a law in MA that an eye doctor must submit an eye report directly to our registry. It is a state-by-state situation. Justin asked what options he has for getting his Georgia eye report sent to MCB. Nate said he would encourage Justin to visit an eye doctor in MA. He said Justin can also submit the Georgia eye report to us

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to review. John also suggested getting an updated eye report from a doctor in MA if possible, but there is a way for us to manually enter an eye report from out-of-state into our system.

Sharon Strzalkowski asked about the case load issue specifically with rehab teaching.

No one could answer today, but the Chair said the Board has the same question.

Debbie M. asked if there is a big difference between the number of legally blind people in MA and those who register for services with MCB. Nate said that people are still registered with MCB, but some people decline services and reach out for them at a later time.

Mika Pyyhkala asked about the process following registration for VR services and the two documents you need to fill out, as well as their accessibility. John said the system we use is nationally used for case management. He said MCB will look into using DocuSign or another service to make it easier.

Nona Haroyan asked about the Board’s direct connection to the consumer community and if they have access to groups/talks within the community. The Chair said that all Board members come from the community that cares for this population. He explained that as an Advisory Board, they do not have any fiscal responsibilities to the agency, but are able to help to provide thoughts and ideas. He hopes to continue to hear from the public. He said they have many outstanding questions and look forward to the opportunity to have them answered. Brian MacDonald said he is new to the Board and was not totally surprised by the article. He has questions and hopes to make things better for the Board and the consumers. Kathy Petkauskos said she has had a decades long relationship with MCB through her daughter, who is legally blind, and through her work at UMASS. She thanks Shandra, John, Nate, and Mike for the information provided today. She was surprised by the article and would like to see data relating to the questions. Colleen Moran talked about her connection through the employment side of MCB. She was surprised by the article as it does not reflect her experience with the organization and has more questions. Blair Wong said it is an honor for him to be on the Board and is a consumer and advocate. He knew about some things in the article, and was surprised about many other things written. He is happy to be on the Board, encourages all to ask questions and to bring their concerns to him in the meetings.

The Chair thanks the members of MCB who joined today to field the questions.

The Chair stated that the SAB has additional questions and would like the opportunity to discuss those with the Commissioner.

Motion to adjourn.