MCB Statutory Advisory Board Minutes

February 11, 2022

**Present SAB:**

Joe Abely, Chair

Susan Foley

Dr. Howard Purcell

Amy Ruell

Kim Charlson

**Present MCB:**

David D’Arcangelo, Commissioner

John Oliveira, Deputy Commissioner

Loran Lang, MCB General Counsel

Carla Kath, Director of Communications

Nathan Skrocki, Director of Policy and Compliance

Patricia Hart, Policy

Approximately 25 members of the public also attended.

Joe asked the SAB to approve the January meeting minutes and they were approved.

The meeting was recorded with local recording permission.

David introduced Dr. Howard Purcell, the President and CEO of the New England College of Optometry (NECO), who has recently been appointed by Governor Baker as a member of the SAB. Dr. Purcell explained his background, noting that both he and his father are graduates of NECO. NECO is the oldest, continuously operating institution of its kind in the United States. He said that former MCB Commissioner, Janet LaBreck, had recommended that he join the SAB and speaks very highly of the SAB. Dr. Purcell continues to have a private practice and said that he knows about the results of MCB’s services from many of his patients. He was warmly welcomed by the other SAB members.

**Review of staffing and caseloads**

David provided staffing numbers. The agency staffing cap is set by the Department of Administration and Financing at 133.45 FTE’s for FY 2022. The current staffing is:

10 FTE – Turning 22 (DBES) account

71.5 FTE – Social rehabilitation (SR) account

44.3 – Federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) account

4 – Federal Older Blind Independent Living (OIB) account

Amy said that she is still getting many calls from consumers who are having problems with getting timely responses from MCB workers, so she has asked representatives from the Local 509 union to speak at the meeting. Commissioner D’Arcangelo excused himself from that portion of the meeting out of respect for the collective bargaining policies and laws of the Commonwealth.

Jim Badger introduced himself as a Rehabilitation Teacher in the MCB Boston region and as a Chapter Board Member of Local 509. He has also been an MCB consumer for many years. Carolyn Hjelte also introduced herself. She is the President of the MCB chapter of Local 509 and has been a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at MCB since 2015.

Carolyn presented a snapshot of current caseloads in two regions: All of the Rehabilitation Teachers have caseloads a little under 100; the Social Workers have caseloads that exceed 100. One Social Worker has a caseload of 125; one Rehabilitation Teacher has a caseload of 90. The union contract calls for average caseloads of 70 for both Social Workers and Rehabilitation Teachers. Carolyn said that the union is currently working with the Commissioner to address hiring and staffing cap issues. The staffing cap has been repeatedly lowered over the years by the Department of Administration and Finance in response to attrition and past fiscal constraints at MCB.

Jim said that the union has learned that between 2016 and 2020, MCB has lost 19 positions (members of SEIU 509) through attrition that have remained unfilled due to staffing cap issues. MCB currently has 129 employees. He pointed out that teaching consumers to use current adaptive technology requires more time than in the past and that the pent-up demand (due to the pandemic) for training and the need for remote learning in many instances has made it even more difficult to provide timely services.

Amy asked the union representatives whether they have personal protective equipment (PPE). They said that have been provided cloth or paper masks but have requested fitted N95 masks for Rehabilitation Teachers and Orientation and Mobility Specialists. It is Jim Badger’s understanding that a contract was being signed to enable workers who had been approved to be provided with N95 masks to be fit-tested; he does not know any further details. He said that it is the Union's stance that all staff who do not qualify for the fitted N95 masks should be provided with KN95 or N95 masks to keep everybody safe.

**Dashboard for Tracking MCB Performance**

Nate explained the dashboard that had been sent to the SAB members reviewed registrations complete, registrations in process, and length of registration process. While the registration process has improved with the new electronic registration process, there are still a number of handwritten reports which delay registration when the information is illegible, and staff must call the doctor to verify the information. Nate said that he is now receiving daily statistical reports from the registration unit and will be able to make forecasts from them in the near future.

Nate added that currently about 75% of the registrations are done electronically and about 25% are still faxed. A faxed registration takes about 45 minutes to enter into the MCB system while an electronic registration only takes three minutes. MCB intends to conduct training for eye doctors on the electronic registration system.

Joe asked Nate to send the SAB the registration numbers for 2019.

Amy brought up a case of a consumer whose doctor faxed a report a while ago that was not received by MCB and asked if faxes are being picked up in the office. Nate said that they are picked up and that the situation she described should not be happening.

Dr. Purcell said that over the past three months, the volume of patients at the NECO clinics has returned to normal and that MCB registrations should increase. He also mentioned that NECO has seen a growing trend in telehealth usage by patients and offered to make a presentation to the SAB about it at a future meeting. The SAB and MCB expressed appreciation and interest.

**Financials Dashboards**

Joe said that the dashboard did not include encumbrances from vendors like the Carroll Center. It was explained that services provided under a blanket contract do not show as encumbered because the whole amount of the contract is set aside for the vendor and payments are issued as services to an individual are completed. Joe said that the SAB will make a specific written request for the encumbrance figures related to the earmark.

Joe asked how the transition to the new fiscal purchase order system has gone. David said that the rollout has been completed and that the new system is working very well. Both vendors and staff seem to be pleased with it. Amy said that the system is not fully accessible. David asked her to provide information on the specific problems she is having so that we can address them. Evan Silver of the MCB Assistive Technology Unit can provide her with a training link or, if necessary, individual training.

Joe also asked about the FY 2023 MCB budget. David said that the House will have hearings next week. Funds have been shifted among accounts in the Governor’s proposed budget but there are no substantial cuts from the budget the Governor proposed last year. Joe suggested that MCB could request increased funding, but David said that he believes that the agency currently has ample funds.

Amy asked for an update on the project to procure a new communications/telephone system. David said that we are in the stage of gathering the requirements with the help of Konica Minolta Business Systems (KMBS). The kick-off meeting is being held today. Amy urged the involvement in the process of stakeholders such as consumers, employees, the National Federation of the Blind, and the Bay State Council of the Blind. David said that stakeholders will have input. Amy suggested a telephone survey to gather this input.

**Proposed Regulations on Release of Information to City or Town Assessor’s Offices**

David discussed the project for data-sharing with city and town assessors’ offices to streamline tax abatement verification for consumers. David explained that the proposal assures excellent security. The security system developed by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue for other secure communications with cities and towns will be used. The only information that will be provided is the names and addresses of consumers 18 years of age and older who live in that town. No medical information will be provided.

Kim said that she appreciates the convenience for consumers seeking abatements but would like to see an opt-out provision for consumers. David said that a public hearing on the proposed regulation will be held on February 18 at 12 noon.

**MCB Statute**

Joe asked about the project to update the MCB statute. David said that this project is on hold right now since MCB has recently been involved in so many special projects.

**Public Comment**

One consumer commented that it makes no sense to her that there is a staffing shortage at a time when the agency hopes to register and serve more consumers.

One consumer who became legally blind in 2018 said that it took a long time for her to being to receive services in 2018. She also said that she is currently waiting for an Alexa device and a talking blood monitoring device to be delivered.

Next meeting: Monday, March 28 at noon.