MCB Statutory Advisory Board Minutes

November 12, 2021

**Present SAB:**

Joe Abely, Chair

Susan Foley

Amy Ruell

Kim Charlson

**Present MCB:**

David D’Arcangelo, Commissioner

Loran Lang, MCB General Counsel

Regina DiMarzo, Assistant to the Commissioner

Patricia Hart, Policy Development

Approximately 20 members of the public also attended.

Joe asked the SAB to approve the October meeting minutes, as amended, and they were approved.

The meeting was recorded with local recording permission.

**Review of FY22 Budget “Dashboards”**

David sent the SAB an Excel spreadsheet that showed actual spending to date and shared it during the meeting. Of the $28 million dollar budget, $6.2 million has been paid out. Much more has been encumbered but not yet paid. Joe asked whether we are on track with overall spending. David answered that he thinks we are. Staff have been told that we have ample funds and to consider that when planning services for consumers. We will know more soon. The current spending actually just reflects a few months because of lags in allocation, scheduling of services, and payment procedures.

Joe said that information on the encumbrances is what the SAB needs, for example, whether the $850,000 allocated for SR assistive technology services has been spent. Loran said that she is unsure of the extent that that information can be made public or whether the SAB would be allowed to review that information in an executive session. She said that she will review the legal issues, consulting the CFO about specific purchasing information. Joe said that the SAB does not need specifics but does need high-level data. David said that about $59,000 from that account had been encumbered as of a few weeks ago.

Joe asked David whether MCB has the staff needed to spend the earmarked funds and the ability to identify consumers who need the services. David answered that we do have the staff and that we are optimistic that we will be able to interest consumers. Vendors are publicizing the availability of services and MCB is working closely with the vendors to identify consumers who can benefit from devices and training. One obstacle is the difficulty of persuading some consumers to try new technology such as the Alexa Dot or Alexa Show or the Google devices. Consumer choice of devices has also been expanded. MCB has also been retiring and replacing some very old CCTV’s.

Susan asked whether the spreadsheet includes state and federal vocational rehabilitation funds. David said that it does include state VR funds but does not include either federal VR or VR reallotment funds. Susan asked whether MCB has spent all of its FFY 2021 federal VR and reallotment funds. David will send the SAB the information.

**Issues Surrounding Difficulty in Consumers Registering and Reaching Counselors by Phone**

Amy said that MCB consumers have difficulty finding out whether their cases are open or closed and who their case worker may be. A list of the cities and towns covered by each office would be helpful. Kim agreed. Both said that professionals should be able to obtain a list of regional supervisors. They added that referral to the agency website does not meet the needs of many consumers, especially those who are elderly or have multiple disabilities. They also added that the telephone system continues to be a major problem for consumers. David asked Regina to send the list of supervisors to Amy and Kim.

Regina reported that the MCB receptionist has been provided with new remote technology and is now able to answer the phone live again during business hours which should help as she is able to transfer calls to the appropriate person.

David updated the SAB on the agency’s search for an improved telephone system. We are in the process of putting together the requirements since the needs are specialized. Amy pointed out that special attention should be paid to the Spanish language option; the current system offers Spanish, but that feature does not work, and Spanish language does not happen.

Susan offered the information that the Nebraska VR agency website has a “Find an Office” facility and recommended that MCB develop a similar facility. She also suggested that MCB request information on accessible telephone systems from other agencies for the blind

**Update on the Worcester and New Bedford Touch-Down Spaces**

David reported that these touch-down spaces now have an increased supply of consumer aids and devices. Shelving has been ordered; mailing stations are being installed; and conference space for private meetings with clients has been obtained.

**For-Profit Business Employing the Blind.**

David said that the project under consideration is more of a self-employment opportunity for the right consumers than a large business. We are looking at some of the current Randolph Sheppard vendors to participate since most of them have been severely impacted by the pandemic. David reported that he recently met with staff of National Industries for the Blind and that representatives are coming to MCB’s next VR Committee meeting to describe to the VR counselors the training services that NIB offers for consumers.

**Dashboard for Tracking MCB Performance**

The SAB briefly reviewed the dashboard. Susan asked for a definition of “support services”. Rehabilitation Teaching, Assistive Technology, and Orientation and Mobility are considered to be support services by both MCB and RSA.

Susan asked that MCB settle on one definition of “year” in calculating the dashboard statistics. The use of calendar year, state fiscal year, and federal fiscal year for different metrics causes confusion.

David was asked how Mary Otiato will be replaced. David said that it will truly be difficult to replace her, and she will be missed. The many things she did fall into four areas: policy, Central Register, ombudsman, and chief of staff. During the next quarter, he will be looking to obtain a Central Register manager and a data analyst. A posting has already been released for an additional staff member in the Central Register who is versed in data analysis.

Currently, the Central Register is reporting directly to David. Relative to certificates of blindness, David said that there is now only about a backlog of about 50 requests, a great improvement. He also reported that MCB has had a good dialogue with the assessors’ association about the possible development of agreements for electronic transmission of certificate information directly to the cities and towns. There are legal and technical issues to be resolved.

**The “What’s Your Vision” Campaign**

David sent the SAB the report on measurable outcomes of the internet phase of the campaign and Regina also shared the report on the screen. Several SAB members remarked that the number of views and impressions is impressive, for example 650,000 views on Facebook. David said that the broadcast data should be available for the next meeting. Susan wondered if Marketing Doctor can break down the views by age to help us to determine the extent that the campaign has reached youth.

Kim and Amy noted that one PDF document provided was not readable.

**Reallotment Funds**

David was asked how MCB plans to spend the $1.3 million FFY 2021 reallotment funds that were recently awarded. David said that RSA has recently approved expenditures for projects in the following areas:

* Technical skills surveys
* The impact of Covid-19 on VR services
* A VR welcome kit
* VR predictive surveys

Joe asked about the VR welcoming kit and David explained that MCB needs more consistent branding and consumer information. Carla will be preparing the scope of the project over the next few weeks. Susan suggested that pilot testing be included in the scope. David agreed and said that the Rehabilitation Council will also be consulted for ideas and recommendations.

**Public comments**

* One attendee endorsed the need for the provision of lists of towns and regional staff to other professionals and provider partners.
* One consumer recommended that consumers be given a list of available services.
* One consumer asked whether the $850,000 earmarked for assistive technology services will be available in the future. David answered that it is available until June 30, 2022 but that there is no guarantee beyond that date. Governor Baker will release his FY 2023 budget proposal during the third week of January.
* One consumer asked whether MCB is now using NFB Newsline to convey information to consumers. Both David and another consumer confirmed that Carla has been posting to Newsline and that the information is up to date.

Next meeting: December 6 at noon.