MCB Statutory Advisory Board Minutes

October 8, 2021

Present SAB:

Joe Abely, Chair

Susan Foley

Amy Ruell

Kim Charlson

Present MCB:

David D’Arcangelo, Commissioner

Carla Kath, Director of Communications

John Oliveira, Deputy Commissioner

Mary Otiato, Director of Policy & Strategic Initiatives/Ombudsman

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 July and September meeting minutes, as amended, and they were approved.

The meeting was recorded with local recording permission.

**Discussion of the MCB FY 2022 budget**

Joe noted that the SAB has not received the requested August monthly report of budgeted vs. actual expenditures. David shared the screen of the Comptroller’s dashboard for the current period. Amy pointed out that blind persons cannot see the dashboard. David apologized and said that an accessible version will be provided in the future. Joe requested said that the dashboard and an accessible version be provided to the SAB two or three days in advance in the future.

David said that MCB is on track to spend its appropriations because payments lag behind authorizations. Joe disagreed and said that he would need to see encumbrances to judge. David said that the MCB legal counsel has advised him that he should not publicly share that information. Joe asked for the reasons for her opinion and David said that Loran will be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

**Review of dashboard for tracking MCB performance**

The SAB again reviewed the dashboard that Mary has developed with Susan’s and Judy’s help. Mary said that an updated dashboard showing numbers through 9/30/21 will soon be available for the SAB review. Susan requested that monthly registration numbers be added to the dashboard since the SAB is still concerned that counselors may see a marked increase in caseload size. There was a discussion about caseloads. John explained that some caseloads such as those of children’s workers and DBES workers include substantial numbers of consumers who are followed on a long-term basis although they are not currently receiving active services from MCB. He also said that he does not have any concerns right now about either lack of case workers or funding to meet consumer demand. Susan said that it would be useful for the SAB to be able to monitor both new registrations and new applications for services.

**Status of $850,000 included in the FY22 Final Budget in account 4110-1000**

Joe asked about the earmark for the provision of accessible devices, assistive software and equipment and supportive technology training and services by qualified private providers and whether MCB has developed plans to spend it. John said that MCB has released a Request for Response (RFR) for vendors who can provide these services under contract. Five providers submitted bids. All of the bides were well-done and all five are expected to sign contracts within days. John intends to meet with MCB SR staff in a week to brief them on the contracts and ask them to begin to make referrals to the approved vendors. One potential issue is that a few of the vendors will have to hire new staff to meet the demand for services and that qualified assistive technology instructors are hard to find. Four of the five potential vendors will offer assistive technology training. One vendor offers residential training while the others offer community-based training. Vendors may reach out directly to consumers to encourage them to apply to MCB for specific services. John also said that MCB may reach out directly to consumers whose cases have been closed within the past year. It’s hard to know exactly what the pace of demand will be since often services are delayed by consumers’ scheduling issues and requests. Amy asked that MCB provide an update on this issue at the next SAB meeting.

**Other updates**

* Joe asked David for an update on the situation at the touch-down spaces for the Worcester and New Bedford offices. David said that postage machines, supply cabinets, and shelving units have been ordered. John added that MCB offices are now ordering supplies quarterly rather than for the whole year and that that practice is lessening the need for storage.
* David updated the SAB about the new reallotment projects that MCB has planned for this fiscal year. The federal Rehabilitation Services Administration has approved our proposed projects and they will now be prepared as RFR’s to go out for bid. All of the proposed projects are related to vocational rehabilitation. Some address marketing and the development of guides. MCB requested $1.3 million for these projects and received that amount.
* Joe asked about the certificates of blindness that were sent out recently. Mary said that 24,000 certificates were sent out; 5,000 were returned by the post office; 3,200 were successfully re-sent. Mary has reminded consumers at MCB Town Halls that they should inform MCB of changes of address. Amy said that she still hears consumer complaints that it is difficult to obtain certificates. She asked whether MCB will send out more certificates later in the year. Mary said that the Registration Unit intends to send out another 24,000 certificates in March for the spring tax season and another batch next summer.
* Joe asked if the clerical error relative to some addresses that occurred a few months ago has been resolved and was told that it has been.
* Joe asked for an update on safety protocols for MCB employees. David reported that employees are required to file an attestation about their vaccination status or request for exemption by October 17 and that MCB is following all EHS and Human Resources guidance relative to masks and other safety protocols.
* Joe also asked for an update on the proposal to start a for-profit enterprise. David said that there is currently a one-page concept paper that discusses e-commerce opportunities and the need for potential consumer participants to possess certain skills and traits such as entrepreneurship. He also said that MCB’s public use law may be an avenue for such a business to initially obtain contracts. The National Industries for the Blind (NIB) has a fulfillment center that may play a part. MCB needs to consult with the federal RSA before developing the plan further. Amy suggested that MCB outreach to consumers for ideas about such a project. John said that focus groups may be an avenue for that kind of outreach. Joe did ask why MCB would take this on when the non-profits generally run NIB related businesses. Joe would like to continue the discussion at the next SAB meeting.
* John reported that he met recently with United Health and MRC about six consumers that we had referred for possible job placement. United Health hired one of the six to work remotely as a benefits counselor. Susan asked about MCB’s use of benefits counseling for consumers and John replied that we regularly refer consumers to benefits counselors at both MRC and Work Without Limits and that the services are very valuable to our consumers.
* Carla gave the SAB an update on the “What’s Your Vision?” campaign. She sent the members a report for the month of August and will soon send a full report of the digital portion of the campaign which ended on September 30. A full report on the entire campaign can be expected at the end of December. Joe asked for another update at the next SAB meeting. Carla reminded the SAB that the White Cane Awareness Day celebration will be held virtually on October 15.

**Public comments**

* One person questioned why MCB will do several mass mailings of certificates of blindness. Mary replied that the agency is trying to balance the needs of both consumers and city/town assessors. Assessors do not all request certificates from consumers by December; some request them in the spring or summer.
* One consumer said that she appreciated the agency’s recent Virtual Town Meeting on the MBTA. She said that transportation must continue to be a top priority and that the focus of MCB’s liaison and efforts must go beyond the MBTA to other paratransit systems in the Commonwealth. These agencies belong to the Massachusetts Association of Regional Transit Authorities.

Next meeting: November 12 at noon.