

February 8, 2023 draft minutes

Statewide Rehabilitation Council

Business and Employment Opportunity (BEO) Committee

1. Introductions and announcements

- SRC Members: Steve LaMaster (Committee Chair), Naomi Goldberg, Sarah Wiles, Ellie Starr, Joe Belil
- MRC staff: William Allen, Allyson Morin, Amy Karr
- Guest: Laysha Ostrow
- Public: Amelia Dillon, Karen Moore
- New administrative assistant Amy Karr was introduced and welcomed.

2. Approval of December 2022 minutes

The December 2022 minutes were approved as written.

3. Update: Results of self-employment initiative and next steps

Laysha Ostrow, who presented at the committee in October 2022, returned to present the results of the six-month pilot study of the platform Reclaiming Employment. This is a self-employment initiative for people with mental health disabilities.

The three components of the platform are:

- Online courses
- Resource library
- Online forum where users can communicate with each other

In June the pilot study enrolled users for 6 months for free. Data was collected in December 2022. Laysha went over the data presented in the report sent previously to committee members. The preliminary data can be found here:

<https://livelearninc.net/s/FINALREPublicReportv100-Jan-2023.pdf>

Laysha has just submitted a grant to expand the platform. There will be a three-arm randomized controlled trial. The goal of the six-week intervention is for participants to complete a business plan. Only those in the planning stage of self-employment will be enrolled into the study. The three arms of the study are as follows:

- Main intervention group includes online coaching/mentoring. In addition to the platform, which can include peer support through the online forum and outside of the online forum, the participants in this group will receive one-on-one with coaching.
- The second group receives access to the platform without the additional one-on-one coaching.

- The third group is the control group; participants receive a list of available business resources such as SCORE.

Laysha's current grant runs until August 2023. That funding will be used to determine the cost of running the platform and to come up with a curriculum.

Steve said a piece of the committee's work is discovery and learning about innovations. The committee can decide if they want to further explore this and whether information gleaned can be used to formulate recommendations to MRC.

Steve opened the discussion up to attendees for questions and comments.

- Laysha would like to see VR counselors working through the platform with clients. Counselors may not have business development knowledge but with the platform can help clients they may be able to help clients through this process.
- Karen wondered why approximately 30 participants in the pilot study did not get started (did not use any of the platform). Laysha said that a survey going out in February contains a special message to ask people who didn't participate why they did not participate.
- Naomi noted that VR does not know about the nuances of different businesses and how to assess if a client is in the right stage to begin. How does VR make recommendations about whether clients should pursue self-employment? Laysha says there are no assessments about self-employment targeted for people with disabilities. Laysha's frustration is that starting a business is difficult for everyone. However, if a person with a disability has difficulty starting a business it is easy to pin that on the disability. The overall failure rate of new businesses is high. One result of learning about and preparing to start a business through either the platform or VR may sometimes be realizing that it is too much work.
- Steve asked how this might be used by VR. VR has a process to get to successful closure. VR counselors may lack exposure to self-employment, which may be why they don't prioritize self-employment. From MRC data, two areas, Worcester and Greenfield, have relatively high percentages of successful closures resulting in self-employment. One helpful way to create a link between Laysha's resource and VR is to learn from the VR counselors in those two areas: What resources did they use, how did they screen clients to determine eligibility for self-employment assistance, etc.
- Karen asked whether VR counselors know about eligibility for the PASS plan, a way the SSA can support people to become self-employed. Laysha replied that her platform has a course for using those supports and that the participants had access to that course.
- Karen stated that VR has a multipronged approach, but there are limitations. VR needs to know the resources available. CAP has info about what's not working. She stated that Laysha's platform is laying new groundwork and wants to hear a follow-up.

Laysha was thanked for returning and providing the synopsis of her work. She will share her presentation with the attendees.

There is no reason the committee could not meet next month (March), although normally it meets every two months. The committee needs to make recommendations for FY2024 and needs to get them to Joe in draft form by May 1. Steve feels useful to gather data from the consumer needs survey and other survey data. At the April meeting there can be a discussion about what the committee has learned and what recommendations to prioritize for the State Plan. Steve may send out an invite to a brainstorming session in March to give more time to prepare recommendations. For the recommendations they might consider needs of VR for consumers who want to become self-employed and learn from CAP (Naomi and Sarah) about what those consumers are not getting.

Next BEO meeting April 13 2023 1:00 PM.

The meeting was adjourned.