**State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Executive Committee Meeting Minutes**

**December 5, 2024**

**4:00 - 6:00 pm EST**

**Attendees:**

* **Executive Committee Members:** Heather Wood (SRC Chair), Joe Bellil, Steve LaMaster
* **Massachusetts** **Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff:** Amanda Baczko, Kate Biebel, William Noone, Amy Karr
* **Others present:** Doug Mason, Jonathan Ozek (Hearing Loss Association of America), Sarah Wiles (Client Assistance Program [CAP])
* **Absent Executive Committee Members:** Naomi Goldberg

Please Note: This meeting was held remotely.

**The meeting was called to order at 4:04 pm by the chair.**

**Approval of Meeting Minutes:** Chair Wood called for a motion to approve the September 2024 Executive Committee minutes. Mr. Bellil motioned to approve the minutes. Mr. LaMaster seconded. Chair Wood asked whether there were any corrections to the minutes. The September 2024 Executive Committee minutes were approved with no corrections.

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**UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

1. Membership update – Sahara Defensor

Ms. Defensor was not available for this meeting. She did indicate there was no update. Chair Wood has met with one of the four current applicants and has appointments scheduled with two of the other applicants.

1. Bylaws reviews – Heather Wood

The final revised bylaws include so many changes that Chair Wood wants to review some of these. Chair Wood shared the final revised bylaws crosswalk. **(See MA SRC Bylaws Crosswalk Review 20240905.docx.)**

In section 9.01 specific language regarding meeting requirements, much directly from Open Meeting Law, was added. This includes the ability for a chair to structure public comment time in meetings, something the SRC has not been doing.

Chair Wood will continue to include bylaws review on the agendas for these meetings to highlight different sections.

1. Finalize 2025 SRC Meeting Calendar – Heather Wood

The members had received the revised version of the 2025 SRC meeting calendar. **(See SRC 2025\_Master Calendar v.11.21.2024.docx.)** It was decided to move the March Quarterly meeting from March 27th to March 20th to avoid conflict with the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts conference.

1. Vice chair discussion – Heather Wood

The position is still open, and Chair Wood will keep this item on the agenda.

**NEW BUSINESS**

1. MassAbility Update – Kate Biebel, Amanda Baczko

* Branding: MassAbility branding is being seen. There is a big push in November and December. We do not yet have data about whether this will result in an increase in applications.
* Contract with survey vendor: MassAbility- has finalized the contract with Market Decision ‑Research to continue the survey work through the next nine months. This is for the participant surveys and a survey for people who use Connect.
* Staffing: MassAbility is trying out a new kind of management role, an Assistant Director role in the Springfield vocational rehabilitation (VR) office. This office is very big, so we are trying to create some more management capacity, and new resources and support for staff, which will translate to participants. This role will be internal facing, while the Area Director role is a lot of external facing. It will be interesting to see if we can use this model at other offices. Maybe in early 2025 we can have a presentation about how it is working.
* Relocation: MassAbility is moving out of 600 Washington Street. It temporarily moved from the second floor to the first floor of that building and then will eventually leave that building. Then staff will be located at offices near them. The Boston VR office has officially moved to the Roxbury location so now both Boston and Roxbury are being served out of the Roxbury location.
* Disability forum: The next disability forum will be in January 2025. These will now be twice per year instead of four times per year. In the interim months newsletters will be sent out. The next forum is Wednesday, January 22, 2025. The topic is Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre‑ETS), which is relevant to the SRC. The forums try to do an overview of different MassAbility services at least once per year. SRC members will be receiving an invite within the next two weeks and are welcome to share it. It is a free event.
* Let Go of Disability Stigma: On Tuesday December 10th MassAbility will be hosting a “Let Go of Disability Stigma” pop‑up event in front of City Hall from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. It has been advertised in multiple places. Staff and disability leaders will be there. People visiting can write messages on the installation, which will be a human‑sized cube.

Questions/comments for MassAbility:

* With the possibility of lower state revenues and with likely upcoming federal changes, is MassAbility doing any planning and strategizing?

Regarding state funding, MassAbility has a sense of the FY26 cut. We feel it is manageable. Federal funding is the big question. We do not know any specifics yet. Commissioner Wolf received an email from the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), a professional association, about a plan to break up the Department of Education and bring education back to the states with the new administration. The email said it would likely take at least a year to have traction; changing such a large system will take time.

* There is already a waiting period when people apply for services through Connect. MassAbility’s rebranding and marketing will likely increase the rate of applications. The effects of budget cuts could make things worse.

MassAbility is mindful of this. We have been able to do some hiring for staff in that space. We will be launching the artificial intelligence (AI) mechanism that will help with volume. The rebranding needed to happen, but it will cause an uptick in applications, and the timing is unfortunate. There will be upcoming federal changes. MassAbility did not get the reallotment funds requested, which in the past have been used as a buffer, especially around staff salaries. The goal of VR is to help those with the most significant needs. MassAbility will have to consider Order of Selection. It is the big tool that is available to address our available funds concurrently with the number of people applying for services.

1. Planning for the December SRC Quarterly meeting – Heather Wood

Review of FY25 recommendations was added under Unfinished Business. A presentation about trends seen by CAP and the Ombuds was added under New Business.

1. **Committee Reports**

* Business and Employment Opportunity (BEO) Committee – Steve LaMaster

The committee last met on October 10th. There has been no update since the November Executive Committee meeting.

Before the next BEO meeting, Mr. LaMaster will email Paula Euber and Rachel Reyes to see if they can attend and provide updates and/or brainstorm about self-employment. Mr. LaMaster also would like Joe Reale to attend to discuss the Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC) now that the name change to MassAbility is done. Mr. LaMaster will provide updates about these issues at the December Quarterly meeting.

The next committee meeting is on December 12th at 1:00 pm.

* **State Plan Committee – Joe Bellil**

The October 21st committee meeting was canceled. The committee has not met since August 21st.

At the next meeting the committee will review the FY25 recommendations and will discuss the new process of working with MassAbility to develop recommendations.

The next State Plan Committee meeting is on December 18th at 11:00 am.

* **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) Council – Doug Mason**

At the last meeting it was decided that council membership term limits would be 18 months. The number of open membership slots is not known currently because some current members have not yet committed to serving another 18-month term.

The December DEIA Council meeting was canceled. The next meeting will be in January 2025.

* **Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee (CSNAC) – Heather Wood**

The committee last met on November 18th. At the meeting the committee discussed the most recent results of the Consumer Experience Survey.

At the next committee meeting there will be a follow-up discussion of the staff survey. Results of that survey were discussed at the September CSNAC meeting.

The next committee meeting is on January 27th, 2025 at 5 pm.

**Questions/Comments for Chairs:**

There were no questions or comments for the Chairs.

1. Open Mic

Chair Wood welcomed Jonathan Ozek. He has hearing loss and is a member of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA), which is a national organization. He is an advocate for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. He is trying to educate himself about how to help people with disabilities find jobs and to otherwise advocate for them. He thinks the leadership of the Boston chapter of HLAA would love to collaborate with the SRC.

A member spoke proudly about the accomplishments of his teenage daughter.

A member announced that the study she is working on in her job has finished recruitment. About 45 of 90 eligible students agreed to participate. They were randomized into three groups. She will have a group of 20 students. She is excited that she will begin working with the students in January. The study is overseen by the American institute of Research.

The next Executive Committee meeting will be on January 2nd from 4:00 to 6:00 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:58 pm.