

State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Executive Committee Meeting Minutes

December 7, 2023

1:00 - 3:00 pm EST

Attendees:

- State Rehabilitation Council Members: Heather Wood (SRC Chair), Joe Bellil, Naomi Goldberg, Steve LaMaster, Doug Mason (Ex-Officio), Christine Tosti¹
- Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff: Amanda Baczko, Kate Biebel, Emily McCaffrey, William Noone, Graham Porrell, Amy Karr

Please Note: This meeting was held remotely.

Meeting was called to order at 1:03 pm by the Chair Wood.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: Chair Wood called for a motion to approve the November 2023 Executive Committee minutes. Mr. LaMaster motioned to approve the minutes. Mr. Bellil seconded. Chair Wood asked whether there were any corrections to the minutes. The November 2023 minutes were approved with no corrections.

OLD BUSINESS

a. Request for Response (RFR) Update – Heather Wood and Amanda Baczko

MRC is using reallotment funds to support the ongoing effort to operationalize the SRC. Work requested of the chosen vendor will include refining procedures for orientation of new members and the SRC Chair, creating tools to help ensure adherence with Open Meeting Law (OML) and reviewing the previously created Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEI-A) Strategic Plan and deploy a workplan to address priority objectives.

The scoring committee met to review the two bids and to choose a vendor. The chosen vendor will likely be announced at the December Quarterly meeting. The SRC will come to an agreement about what work the vendor will perform to support the SRC. The vendor will be with the SRC until October 2024. The reallotment funds are exactly designed for these efforts to build infrastructure.

Ms. Tosti asked about whether there was any consumer input in crafting the RFR or scoring the applications. This particular RFR was based on the previous RFR for DEI-A work. Chair Wood was on the scoring committee, and she is an MRC consumer in addition to being the SRC Chair. The scoring committee for this RFR did not include other consumers.

Before disbursing funds prior approval from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) will be needed. Because the reallotment dollars are from the federal government, the federal government does need to approve how the money is spent. This is not anticipated to be a problem.

Ms. Tosti expressed concern about the SRC not using the DEI-A information and plan provided by the vendor from the previous SRC RFR. The new vendor will help the SRC to implement the previously created strategic plan. It is difficult for a volunteer board such as the SRC to find the time to do this.

¹ Upon request, members' names are used when they contribute to the discussion.

b. Finalize 2024 SRC Meeting Calendar – Heather Wood

At the last Executive Committee meeting, committee chairs were asked to confirm committee meeting dates, which they have done. The dates for the July Executive Committee meeting and the December Quarterly meeting still need to be determined. They can be rescheduled or cancelled.

The July Executive Committee date would fall on July 4th. It was decided to cancel the July meeting rather than reschedule it.

The December Quarterly meeting would fall on December 26th. To avoid conflict with holidays, it was decided to reschedule the December Quarterly meeting to December 12th.

There was a discussion about the membership lists for each committee. Committee chairs were asked to send their committee lists to Chair Wood and Ms. Karr, so their lists can be compared to the committee membership lists Ms. Karr maintains. Maintaining accurate committee membership lists is not a new problem. It was suggested that a procedural document be created to outline how to track meeting attendance and committee membership.

Each SRC member must be a part of at least one committee. Perhaps a survey asking members to choose one or more committees on which to serve should be sent after the December Quarterly meeting. This has been done in the past, most recently at the end of 2022.

NEW BUSINESS

a. Refresher on MRC Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and Pre-ETS – Heather Wood

Chair Wood has a passion for transition services, for preparing high school students for post-secondary life. At her school students with disabilities receive some services, such as assistance with studying the driver's manual to obtain a learner's permit, and help with obtaining job skills. Chair Wood wants the SRC to refresh its knowledge on VR services and also Pre-ETS. Supporting these young people may have an effect on their need for MRC and VR services for the long term.

Pre-ETS services consist of:

- Job exploration and counseling
- Workplace readiness training
- Work-based learning experiences
- Counseling on post-secondary education or training
- Self-advocacy and peer mentoring

The following link with information about Pre-ETS services was shared in the chat:

<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/pre-employment-transition-services-pre-ets-0>

There was a discussion about what the SRC would like to know about Pre-ETS services.

- How are Pre-ETS services funded? Does the financing come from RSA, WIOA, other sources?
- More information about projected outcomes, how many participants proceed directly to work, how many do not need MRC services after high school and how many do. It would be beneficial to hear from providers about their outcomes.
- How does MRC control for quality among the various vendors providing Pre-ETS services? The quality of services provided can be variable, and depend on the vendor. What does MRC get as compared to what MRC expects?

- At the end of Pre-ETS, are the people who are eligible to receive MRC services in a better position to participate with MRC? Many people that age do not know what they wish to do. Does MRC collect statistics about this? It is reasonable to see if data is collected, to find out if there is evidence that Pre-ETS is actually saving money in the long term.

Jessica Cimini, an MRC Area Director who also supports the Pre-ETS contractor, may have good information. Ms. Baczko, Ms. Biebel, Mr. Porell and Mr. Noone could help identify good speakers.

Questions, comments, or concerns

Ms. Tosti stated that she had a great internship on the Regional Environmental Council, where she worked with high school students. The youth program coordinator there, Stacie Brimmage, was great, and Ms. Tosti recommended her as a speaker. It was suggested that the SRC should start with presenters within MRC to find out information such as what MRC is currently doing and what vendors they are using. Ms. Tosti advocated for not solely having speakers from the MRC. Ms. Tosti shared the link for the Regional Environmental Council in the chat:

<https://www.recworchester.org/youthgrow>

Ms. Tosti noted that many young people do not yet know what they want to do, and creative youth may be deterred from pursuing creative fields as careers. It is sometimes possible to incorporate a hobby or passion into careers. It is hoped that the SRC learns about this as we learn more about Pre-ETS. Ideally all youth are supported to find their passions.

Chair Wood suggested that since there is interest about this within the SRC, that educational speakers could present first to the Executive Committee, and then there could be an expanded presenting in an SRC Quarterly meeting.

b. Planning for December SRC Quarterly meeting – Heather Wood

Items to be placed on the agenda were discussed. These include:

- An update about the SRC membership, nominations, and reappointments.
- The chosen vendor for the RFR will be announced.
- Mr. Porell will present the update about the MRC WIOA State Plan.
- Mr. Porell will present an update about MRC surveys for the CSNAC report.
- Items requested to be included in the Commissioner's update include:
 - Ms. Tosti requested that the Commissioner discuss the xenophobic comment on MRC's Facebook page, and to describe what MRC is doing about this. Chair Wood had sent those images to the Commissioner. MRC does have a strategy to deal with this.
 - Are there any federal Updates? RSA did attend the MRC Momentum event in November, and the Commissioner will be asked to provide an update about that.
 - The Commissioner will also be asked to update the SRC about other ways MRC is using reallocation funds.

Ms. Tosti expressed a desire to have an item discussing the relationship between incarceration, disability, and employment. She is frustrated that this topic is avoided, and that it seems that only committee chairs are able to speak. Ms. Tosti would like this topic to be discussed at the December Quarterly meeting. Chair Wood stated that she is still acclimating to her role as SRC Chair. She would like to collaborate with Ms. Tosti to create a presentation that will be useful and well received, and would like to aim for a presentation at the January Executive Committee meeting.

c. Committee Reports

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

The committee last met on October 20th.

The date of the next BEO Committee meeting is December 14th 2024 at 1:00 pm, before the December SRC Quarterly meeting. Mr. LaMaster will prepare an update about the BEO meeting to share at that meeting on December 14th.

- **State Plan Committee – Joe Bellil**

The committee last met on October 18th and discussed the responses to the SRC recommendations. The recommendations were approved at the November 2nd Executive Committee meeting. The SRC Annual Report should be finalized by the end of December.

There is no State Plan Committee meeting in December. The next State Plan Committee meeting is on meeting is February 21st at 11:00 am.

- **DEIA Council – Doug Mason**

The council last met on November 21st.

When the council was established, a set of ground rules was developed to guide how meetings would be conducted. Based on the experiences of the 15-16 months, that document has been updated.

Most importantly, the council looked behind the numbers of VR. A few interesting things were noted.

1. We do not know why 16-17% of participants chose not to disclose their ethnicity.
2. Regarding wages earned by VR recipients, black and Hispanic men tended to work more hours than their white counterparts. Is there a pay differential? MRC is taking a deeper dive into that. It may be possible that white people choose more high wage occupations. Analyzing this may involve focus groups for some individuals. It was noted that women also tend to take lesser paying jobs because of lack of resources, such as childcare.

Ms. Tosti noted that she has had low wage jobs because she has not been interviewed for higher wage jobs. She feels that it is not occupation choice that is resulting in the lower wages. Studies have found that incarcerated students need to prove themselves more in education. Ms. Tosti feels that higher earners do not think that way. Mr. Mason appreciated her comment, and stated that to learn more, there is a need for empirical data, which MRC is obtaining.

Mr. Mason noted that the surveys never ask about respondents' religion. Should that be done? Offices are decorated for Christmas; do we do the same thing for Hanukkah? Christianity should not be favored over other religions. Mr. Mason would like to know what the Executive Committee thinks about this. Religion is important because it can create strong communities.

Ms. Tosti expressed appreciation for the topics Mr. Mason brings up. Ms. Tosti was a drug counselor and an atheist. Many of her clients had religious beliefs. She does worry about Christianity being favored over other religions. Mr. Noone did confirm that MRC does not collect data about religion.

Mr. Mason noted that when the presidents of three universities were asked about what actions qualify as antisemitism on campus, they did not directly answer, and would not state that antisemitism is a problem and that wrong doers would be dealt with. We should be proactive rather than waiting for problems to develop.

Mr. Mason wants the council to also look at MRC as an employer.

The next meeting of the DEIA council will be on December 19th from 12-1:30 pm.

- **Policy Committee – Naomi Goldberg**

There was no Policy Committee meeting in October. The December Policy Committee meeting was cancelled. The Policy Committee last met on August 1st.

The Policy Committee did complete working on their FY23 recommendations. Ms. Goldberg stated that Pre-ETS will potentially be discussed by the Policy Committee.

The next Policy Committee meeting is on February 1st 2024 at 11:00 am.

- **Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee**

There was no meeting in October. The committee last met on August 21st.

Mr. Fujii has resigned as the chair of the Consumer Satisfaction Needs Assessment Committee (CSNAC), and was absent from this meeting, so there was no report. The December CSNAC meeting has been cancelled. Ms. Tosti would like to serve as chair of that committee.

Chair Wood can send out the next steps about nominating a new committee chair.

The date of the next CSNAC meeting is on February 12th 2024 at 5:00 pm.

There were no additional questions or comments for the committee chairs.

d. MRC Updates – Kate Biebel

- **Operations and services**

Area Directors are fully staffed. MRC has moved from fully remote to hybrid. MRC vacancies have been low for the past two years.

- **MRC Connect**

There were approximately 944 VR applications in November, total MRC applications were about 1300. About 20% were applications for VR as well as an additional MRC service, which is one of the reasons for MRC Connect. The wait for an appointment was 7-8 weeks. Now people are in put in an eligibility determination queue, and then receive calls for eligibility determination. There had been a problem with no shows when appointments were scheduled so far in the future. Even though the process is still too long it is faster than previously. Once the applicant receives the call eligibility can be determined in about a day. The Commissioner is aware of the front door bottleneck. This is not unexpected when starting a new system, but it is frustrating. Ms. Biebel would like MRC Connect to present to the SRC in 2024, perhaps at the March or June Quarterly meeting.

Ms. Tosti asked if applications could be done by phone or only in person. Applications can be done by phone, in person, or online.

- **Family Engagement**

The newsletter from the Office of Learning and Community Engagement, Ms. Baczek's office, went out in November. Members were invited to email Ms. Baczek to receive a copy.

The Disability Partnership Forum will be held on December 19th from 5 to 7 pm. The three topics to be discussed are the following:

1. How to have healthy relationships with disabilities
2. There will be a self-employment panel where people with disabilities will talk about their self-employment paths and experience working with MRC towards self-employment. Ms. Tosti noted that she is currently working with MRC towards self-employment.
3. Information about supported living expansion

The link for registration is [Webinar Registration - Zoom](#).

Open Mic

Ms. Tosti is excited to work with MRC vendors about dog training, and wants other consumers to work with vendors that will help them pursue their passions. She shared the following two links in the chat:

<https://atyour servicedogtraining.com/>

<https://donnasdorightdogs.com/>

Chair Wood called for a motion to adjourn. The motion was made by Mr. Mason. The motion was seconded by Ms. Tosti. The meeting was adjourned at 2:51 pm.