

State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Executive Committee Meeting Minutes

March 7, 2024

1:00 - 3:00 pm EST

Attendees:

- **State Rehabilitation Council Members:** Heather Wood (SRC Chair), Joe Bellil
- **Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff:** Amanda Baczko, Kate Biebel, Emily McCaffrey, William Noone, Graham Porrell, Amy Karr
- **Members of the public:** Doug Mason, Christine Tosti¹
- **National Association of Head Injury Administrators (NASHIA):** Jill Ferrington, Hayden Steward
- **Absent Members:** Naomi Goldberg, Steve LaMaster

Please Note: This meeting was held remotely.

The meeting was called to order at 1:03 pm by the chair.

Introductions: Chair Wood asked members and attendees to introduce themselves.

Chair Wood apologized for the need to cancel the February Executive Committee meeting.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: The January 2024 Executive Committee minutes were not approved because of a lack of quorum.

OLD BUSINESS

a. Membership Update and Executive Order – Sahara Defensor

Ms. Defensor is still working with the Governor's office to ensure the SRC's membership complies with the regulations and the Technical Assistance Circular (TAC) released by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in 2023. Many members are currently serving in holdover seats. For example, Mr. Bellil is waiting for someone to be appointed to his seat; this could happen at any time. Each seat is tied to a particular category. Each seat has to be filled with someone who meets the requirements for that seat. Currently, our Executive Order requires 21 seats. The federal regulations only require 15 seats. The Executive Order, the operating document for the SRC, is being revised to reduce the number of members to 15, to align the Executive Order with the federal regulations. It is in the final stage before it will be sent to the Governor's office.

NEW BUSINESS

a. NASHIA RFR presentation –Jill Ferrington and Hayden Steward

Ms. Ferrington shared the document for her presentation.
(See [MA_SRC_ExecutiveCommittee_20240307.pdf](#).)

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

Ms. Ferrington went over what NASHIA does and gave examples of projects it is currently working on and has done. She and Ms. Steward described their experience. Ms. Ferrington also discussed colleague Regina Rodriguez Sisneros, who will be handling NASHIA's Disability, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) work for the SRC. Ms. Ferrington will meet with Ms. Sisneros next week to discuss the start of Ms. Sisneros' work for the project.

NASHIA has been contracted to provide organizational and implementation support for the SRC. Currently, they are in the process of creating deliverables and processes for the SRC. NASHIA is looking at the SRCs of other states to see what is possible in the relationship between a state's SRC and its vocational rehabilitation (VR). They will look at the templates and tools our SRC already uses and will look at the best practices of other states. NASHIA is excited to work side by side with the SRC.

Ms. Ferrington went over the deliverables NASHIA will produce and the timeframes for the drafts and finalization of the projects. (See page 10 of MA_SRC_ExecutiveCommittee_20240307.pdf.) Support and guidance for the SRC Chair and committee chairs are scheduled to be completed this month. The final piece, recruitment, is scheduled to be completed by the time the entire project ends in September.

There were no questions or comments for Ms. Ferrington and Ms. Steward.

b. Committee Reports

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

The committee last met on February 8th, 2024. Mr. LaMaster was absent from this meeting, so no committee report was given.

The date of the next BEO Committee meeting is April 11th at 1:00 pm.

- **State Plan Committee – Joe Bellil**

The committee last met on February 21st. At that meeting, they discussed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) State Plan virtual hearings. Mr. Bellil and Ms. Tosti attended different virtual hearings. Mr. Bellil also shared the Annual Report at the February 21st meeting.

The timeline for developing recommendations for the State Plan was discussed. Suggestions for obtaining input from the public included posting a request for input in the newsletter put out by Ms. Baczek's office and having a table at the next consumer conference as a way to obtain recommendations and also conduct outreach. The possibility of MRC including requests for input for the SRC in their social media will be discussed. Mr. Bellil encouraged committee Chairs to start developing recommendations.

The next State Plan Committee meeting is on April 17th at 11:00 am.

- **DEIA Council – Doug Mason**

The Council last met on February 16th. At that meeting, the Council looked at the first draft of the scorecard for MRC. It monitors the progress of MRC as both an organization and an employer. It tracks the progress made and problems incurred as MRC is working to reach its DEIA goals. It is about accountability. Earlier today there was a meeting to go over the third draft of the document. Mr. Mason thanked Mr. Porell and Mr. Noone for putting together the data. It is hoped that this document will be approved by the DEIA Council in time for the next full SRC

meeting at the end of March or the next Executive Committee in April. Commissioner Wolf brought the scorecard to the Executive Committee of the DEIA Council. The next step will be bringing it back to the full DEIA Council.

Mr. Mason asked about the progress on hiring a new DEIA manager. The Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) has shifted its model again. Now the DEIA manager is appointed to each agency. So, the new DEIA manager will be appointed by EOHHS, not hired. The next meeting of the DEIA council will be on March 19th from 12 until 1:30 pm.

- **Policy Committee – Naomi Goldberg**

There was no Policy Committee meeting in February. The Policy Committee last met on August 1st. Ms. Goldberg was absent from this meeting, so there was no report given.

The next Policy Committee meeting is on April 4th at 11:00 am.

- **Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee (CSNAC)**

There was no CSNAC meeting in February. The committee last met on August 21st. There currently is no Chair for the committee.

At this point, the next CSNAC meeting has not yet been scheduled.

Questions/Comments for Chairs:

There were no questions or comments for the Chairs.

c. Committee Reassessment – Heather Wood, Jill Ferrington, Hayden Steward

Ms. Ferrington shared the chart that shows which of the SRC's committees are working on which FY24 recommendations. **(See page 11 of MA_SRC_ExecutiveCommittee_20240307.pdf.)** The CSNAC is responsible for one recommendation, the Executive Committee is responsible for one, and the BEO Committee is responsible for two. Ms. Ferrington pointed out that of the five committees that currently comprise the SRC, two do not have a specific goal. The SRC may consider how there might be greater efficiency.

The federal regulations do not require any specific committees. The regulations do state the responsibilities of the SRC and the minimum number of times the SRC must meet annually. The current bylaws of our SRC list only the Executive Committee as a required standing committee. The Chair does have the authority to create additional standing committees and ad hoc committees.

Ms. Steward compiled information about the committees and the total number of members of the SRCs of 17 other states. **(See Multiple State SRC Subcommittee Review 3.7.24.xlsx - Number & Type of Sub Com.pdf.)** SRCs with more members may have the capacity for more committees.

Every state examined has an Executive Committee. Committees similar to our CSNAC and Policy Committee are common. Many states have a committee dealing with membership and nominations. Not many states have a committee similar to our BEO committee. Ms. Ferrington thought that was interesting and gave credit to our BEO committee for being very active. Not many states had a designated State Plan committee. A few states had additional committees such as steering and advocacy committees.

Chair Wood made it clear that she does not want to disband any committee. However, our membership is currently limited and there is a need to maximize efficiency and efficacy.

SRC members will receive an email after this meeting about creating a short-term ad hoc committee to work closely with NASHIA on onboarding materials and procedures for newly appointed members.

d. Benefits of VR Training for Incarcerated Individuals – Christine Tosti, Heather Wood

Ms. Tosti thanked Chair Wood for allowing her to give this presentation. Ms. Tosti is passionate about this topic. She enjoyed researching the information and Chair Wood enjoyed using her teacher skills.

Chair Wood shared the presentation. **(See SRC Version Incarceration Diversion Heather edits.pptx.)**

The following is a summary of the key points:

- **Marginalized Identities are Overrepresented in Incarceration Settings**

While the percentages of incarcerated individuals who report disabilities are high, these figures may be low because some may not have been diagnosed or even know they can be diagnosed.

- **Employment = Economic Security**

Those who are economically insecure may have less access to educational opportunities and healthcare; experience higher levels of unemployment, trauma, and homelessness; and be more likely to have negative experiences with law enforcement.

- **The Path from Arrest to Pretrial Detention**

Those without money for bail can be detained and kept in jail before even meeting with a judge. Those with substance abuse or mental health disorders can be involuntarily detained in facilities run by the Department of Corrections where no treatment is provided.

- **Vocational Rehabilitation Example: Good Will Hunting**

Will Hunting was working as a janitor at MIT, but a professor caught him solving extremely complicated math problems. Will was really a math genius and was also on probation. After the professor learned about Will's background, he supported Will at his arraignment hearing, which allowed Will to be released. The professor recognized Will's abilities. With the professor's help, Will got interviews and offers for jobs more suited to his intellectual abilities, and he also stayed out of jail.

- **Impacts of Education While Incarcerated: Videos**

The first video was about Prison Pet Partnership, a program where incarcerated women learn how to train puppies to become service animals. One woman adopted the dog she trained and she and the dog work with people who are facing mental health and substance use disorder and are homeless.

The second video was a trailer for the documentary College Beyond Bars, which is about the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI). Ms. Tosti pointed out that the prisoners were deeply committed to learning despite being in prison.

- **How Exposure to Vocational Training During Incarceration Lowers Unemployment and Recidivism**

The goal is to lower recidivism rates in Massachusetts and nationally. One of the highest predictors of recidivism is unemployment. A research study showed that recidivism was lowered by 24% for those who received some vocational training while incarcerated but did not complete the training. For those who completed training, recidivism was lowered by 57%. Disability might have contributed to the failure to complete training for some people.

- **Wrap Up and Call to Action**

Ms. Tosti ended the presentation with suggestions about how MRC and the SRC could work with disabled individuals who are or were incarcerated. **(See slide 9 of SRC Version Incarceration Diversion Heather edits.pptx.)**

Ms. Tosti encouraged those present to subscribe to the Prison Policy Initiative newsletter.

Ms. Ferrington noted that her colleague Regina Rodriguez Sisneros has experience with institutional changes and working with correctional institutions. Ms. Ferrington will send this presentation to Ms. Sisneros.

e. MRC Updates – Kate Biebel, Amanda Baczko

- VR operations and service-related updates:** There are no scheduled moves and no vacancies in management leadership positions.
- The next **Disability Community Partnership Forum** is on March 12th. The topics will be brain injury and guardianship and its alternatives. The quarterly newsletter will be about brain injury and will come out in mid-March.
- The **Explore Possibilities Summit** is tentatively scheduled for the third Thursday in August. Once the planning committee is established Ms. Baczko will contact those who have expressed interest in being involved.
- MRC Connect:** MRC continues to see more individuals applying for services. In January 1600 individuals contacted MRC Connect, which is double the current capacity of 800 per month. There was a 17% increase in one month. In one way that is good news, because MRC wants more people to receive needed services. However, there is a backlog in contacting the applicants to determine eligibility. This takes about 45 days, which is shorter than previously but longer than MRC would like. Once someone does receive the eligibility call, eligibility is usually determined in one day, and then the individual is quickly assigned to an MRC office. About 1100 of the 1600 are looking for VR services.

The demographic pattern for those seeking VR has not changed much. The age range of VR applicants skews somewhat older than before MRC Connect was launched. Mr. Noone said he could bring data to the next meeting. The SRC might want to think about a presentation of such data when planning for the March Quarterly meeting, which will be done later in this meeting.

Questions/Comments

- Why has the monthly number of applications increased from 800 to 1600?
Even though the official rebranding has not launched yet, MRC's social media is very active. The Communications team is tracking that. Social media may facilitate the process of applying because information is readily available, and the same questions do not need to be answered multiple times. Consumer feedback has indicated they feel the application process has become somewhat easier.

Also, in the current economic climate, it is very difficult to support oneself solely with disability benefits. Nationally the wait time for disability determination is huge; over a million people are on the waiting list. The majority of calls to MRC are about disability determination. Because the process is federal, MRC is not able to provide any information about projected timelines. Some people who applied in 2020 are still waiting to get benefits. There is a hiring freeze in Disability Determination Services (DDS) nationally.

Ms. Tosti shared her experience obtaining benefits. Her VR counselor suggested that she obtain a lawyer, but Ms. Tosti had to appeal the decision herself. It is scary for consumers who are waiting for disability determination, and it is often difficult for them to work on employment goals during this time. It is stressful for those who cannot afford even basic necessities. It usually takes 6 months to over a year to schedule appeals, and the appeal process could be as long as two to three years. The Social Security office is permitted to cancel and reschedule appointments. Those who do hire a lawyer will lose a third of their benefits. Ms. Tosti would like consumers who are receiving benefits to share their experiences with the SRC. She would like the SRC to consider consumers' experiences in its work going forward.

There were no additional questions or comments.

f. Setting March Quarterly meeting agenda – Heather Wood

- Chair Wood confirmed that there will be a presentation about Pre-ETS.
- The following specific requests were made for the Commissioner's report:
 - Update about the national environment around VR
 - More detailed data about trends noted with MRC Connect. This may be in a separate presentation. There are a lot of data connected with this.
 - Ms. Tosti requested information and feedback about reentry initiatives and VR in prisons and would like to learn more about how to further these causes.
- Ms. Ferrington stated that the NASHIA presentation can be brief to accommodate the other agenda items.

g. Open Mic

There were no comments

The meeting was adjourned at 3:00 pm.