

## Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Meeting Minutes

December 14, 2023, 5-7 pm EST

Please note: This meeting was held virtually.

### Attendees:

- **Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Members:** Heather Wood (Chair), Joe Bellil, Inez Canada, Rebecca Davis, Naomi Goldberg, Steve Higgins, Christine Tosti<sup>1</sup>, Rosanna Woodmansee
- **SRC Ex Officio Members:** Commissioner Toni Wolf
- **Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff:** William Allen, Kate Biebel, Jessica Cimini, Sahara Defensor, Paula Euber, Emily McCaffrey, William Noone, Graham Porell, Amy Karr
- **ASL Interpreters:** Patrick Cole, Denise Martinez
- **CART Provider:** Catherine Zelinski
- **Other individuals present:** Doug Mason, Tay Silveira
- **Absent SRC Members:** Dawn Clark, Rebecca Davis, Steve LaMaster, Dr. Lusa Lo

### 1. Call to Order/Introductions

Chair Wood called for a motion to call the meeting to order. Ms. Tosti made the motion. Ms. Canada seconded the motion. The meeting was called to order at 5:07 pm by the Chair.

Because of the presence of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, those present were asked to raise their hands when speaking and then speak slowly and clearly.

### 2. Approval of Meeting Minutes

Chair Wood called for a motion to approve the September 2023 Quarterly meeting minutes. Mr. Mason motioned for approval of the minutes. Ms. Woodmansee seconded. The September 2023 minutes were approved with no corrections.

### 3. Old Business

#### a. Membership update (Sahara Defensor)

There is not much of an update. We are attempting to reach out to the Governor's office and our business partners to move submitted nominees to approval. The oldest pending appointment is almost a year old, from December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023. Cheryl Scott's replacement, Darien Johnson, is one of the pending appointments. Seven nominations have been made and are pending. Ms. Defensor believes that only one member, Rebecca Davis, is not in a holdover seat. In addition, an appointed member has recently resigned. It is currently impossible for the SRC to make quorum. The SRC is not the only council with this problem. The MRC General Counsel has been working with leadership within the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHSS) to change the SRC's Executive Order to reduce the number of required seats. A Chief of Staff at the Governor's office is keeping an eye on that.

#### Questions/Comments:

- Can a member in a holdover seat continue to serve?  
Members in holdover seats are encouraged to serve until they receive a letter from the Governor confirming the end of their term of service.
- Since the SRC cannot make quorum, what happens if there are deadlines for actions that must be voted upon?  
There are actions that mandate quorum. The Governor's office has been made aware of the necessity of quorum. This is a reason we are trying to push the Governor to act on the nominations. It is at the very top of our requests to the Governor's office.

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

- Steve Higgins announced he was sworn in as a member of the SRC by the Governor on December 13, 2023. His appointment is through 2025. He can provide the appointment letter if needed.
- Ms. Tosti asked whether we can request that the Governor allow the SRC to compensate unemployed members to help incentivize more people to join the SRC. Appointing members who are attracted to join the SRC because of offered compensation could be a way of diversifying the SRC. Most of the current SRC members have jobs. It is not right that there are not more unemployed members of the SRC. The RSA does allow SRCs to pay unemployed members.

It was acknowledged that there is a need to incentivize people to join boards and councils. However, it is not that people are not interested in joining the SRC. There are seven pending nominations. Two of those nominated, Mr. Mason and Ms. Silveira, are present at today's meeting. The Governor's office is holding up the appointments. Members and attendees are encouraged to contact the Governor and legislators to help speed up the appointments and to also bring up the issue of member incentives, including compensation or stipends for unemployed members. Currently, Massachusetts does not allow compensation or stipends for members of boards and councils.

Ms. Tosti shared the language of the federal regulation allowing SRCs to compensate members in the chat:

(g) Compensation and expenses

The Council may use funds allocated to the Council by the designated State unit under this subchapter (except for funds appropriated to carry out the client assistance program under section 732 of this title and funds reserved pursuant to section 730(c) of this title to carry out part C) to reimburse members of the Council for reasonable and necessary expenses of attending Council meetings and performing Council duties (including child care and personal assistance services), and to pay compensation to a member of the Council, if such member is not employed or must forfeit wages from other employment, for each day the member is engaged in performing the duties of the Council.

#### **b. RFR update - Chair Wood**

At the December Executive Committee, the SRC discussed hiring a vendor to help with operationalizing the SRC, including tasks such as creating and revising materials, supporting the onboarding of the SRC chair, and implementing the previously created Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEI-A) plan. There was a meeting to evaluate the bids. The chosen vendor is the National Association of State Head Injury Administrators (NASHIA). NASHIA is known to MRC. Amanda Baczko has worked with them. NASHIA does a lot of work to support councils. The funding for this is \$50,000. We hope to have this start in January and go through the end of the federal fiscal year. The SRC is excited to start with NASHIA in the new year.

Ms. Tosti asked about the cost of the vendor used by the SRC regarding DEI-A activities. The exact figure was not available, but was less than \$100,000.

### **4. New Business**

#### **a. Committee Reports**

##### **i. Business, Employment and Opportunity Committee - Chair Wood**

The chair of the committee, Steve LaMaster was not present at this meeting. He prepared a report, which was read by Chair Wood. **(See BEO committee report.docx.)** From the report:

The committee met earlier today, December 14<sup>th</sup>.

The committee received updates on the Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC) and the efforts of MRC to compile resources to better assist consumers seeking self-employment goals.

The MA Dept of Revenue (DOR) is still updating relevant documentation for employers completing their 2023 taxes. MRC indicated that there have been “a handful” of individuals who have applied to be certified as having a disability. A consultant will be hired to provide information in a variety of media to raise awareness about the importance and benefits of hiring people with disabilities, which will include information on how to make use of the DETC. A phone number was provided to assist those with questions about how to apply for the credit: 617-887-6367.

On the topic of self-employment, two MRC Area Directors joined the meeting, both of whom have been working together with a group of counselors within MRC to compile and organize the resources available to assist VR Counselors in supporting self-employment goals. Feedback to MRC staff included:

- Talk to MRC consumers about needs, to inform an understanding of what resources would be most helpful.
- Recognize the range of complexities that exist beyond working for an employer that must be met, both by the person with a self-employment goal, and the VR counselor who is responsible for supporting the consumer’s goal.
- Utilize a networking approach to connect the talents, goods, and services of self-employed individuals to the needs of the general public.
- Build a network: identify people who have successfully completed self-employment goals who can serve on panels and working groups to support future self-employment aspirants
- Leverage microenterprise support groups such as Boston Impact Initiative (<https://bostonimpact.org/>), WIN Lab (<https://www.babson.edu/womens-leadership-institute/entrepreneurs-everywhere/win-lab/>), and EforAll (<https://eforall.org/>), formerly Merrimack Valley Sandbox, to support self-employment aspirants in developing skills and acquiring capital.
- Finally, participants were informed of a self-employment panel that will speak at the upcoming Disability Partnership Forum on Tuesday, December 19<sup>th</sup> from 5-7 PM. The registration link is [Webinar Registration - Zoom](#).

The next BEO meeting is February 8, 2024 at 1:00 pm.

**ii. State Plan Committee - Joe Bellil**

The committee last met on October 18<sup>th</sup>. There was no meeting in December.

The next State Plan Committee meeting is on meeting is February 21<sup>st</sup> at 11:00 am.

**iii. Policy Committee - Naomi Goldberg**

The last Policy Committee meeting was on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, before the previous Quarterly meeting in September. The committee discussed a report on the outcome of consumer appeals to MRC.

The committee will need to decide what to work on next. The committee does not have recommendations to work on.

The next Policy Committee meeting is on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

**iv. DEIA Council update - Doug Mason**

The council last met on November 21<sup>st</sup>.

The council has been looking at MRC as both an employer and service provider at the October and November meetings.

At the October meeting, the council looked at MRC as an employer. It looked at MRC staffing, including employment demographics in relation to the state census. Results were pretty positive except for the employment of veterans and people with disabilities; want to increase employment for those categories.

At the November meeting the council looked at MRC as a service provider. What stood out most was that when looking at employment outcomes of those who received VR services, it was found that African-American and other minority males worked more hours and were paid less than their white counterparts. This is not yet fully understood. Perhaps there is a need to expand the analysis to women. The results will indicate if there is an internal problem in the recruiting and hiring process of MRC.

Mr. Mason thinks that looking at MRC as both an employer and a service provider is a good thing. As a whole, MRC is doing well but there is still work to do.

The DEIA manager position is open because the previous manager, Robert Arnáu, was promoted.

The next DEIA Council meeting is on December 21<sup>st</sup>. Mr. Mason will ask the council to put together a report comparing how the council performed in its second year to the council's second-year plan for presentation in either January or February of 2024.

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

**v. Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee - Graham Porell**

Ronaldo Fujii, the previous chair of the committee, has stepped down. Mr. Porell presented the report for the committee.

The committee last met on August 21<sup>st</sup>.

MRC has gone over four quarters of data collection and put together a final report. The committee had requested additional data and Mr. Porell relayed that request to the vendor. MRC had to recontract with the vendor. This week the vendor is reaching out via phone calls. The survey will be online shortly.

There was a staff survey performed last spring with interesting results. There will be a follow-up starting in January 2024 for next spring. The business survey will be sent out. The provider survey will roll out next spring. Mr. Porell will consult with Steve LaMaster and the BEO committee.

Mr. Porell will send the data to Ms. Karr to be shared with the SRC. Anyone who has questions about the surveys is encouraged to contact Mr. Porell.

The next CSNAC meeting is February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024 at 5 pm.

**vi. Questions/Comments for Committee Chairs:**

There were no questions or comments for the committee chairs.

**b. MRC Update**

**i. Commissioner's Report - Commissioner Wolf**

MRC's budget has been cut for FY2024. Agencies had been asked to submit possible cuts for their budget. EOHHS has been spending much money to support individuals who have newly arrived in the U.S. The cut for VR services, \$1.3 million, is manageable. MRC may be able to apply for

additional reallocation funds. The other large cut for the MRC budget is for the Statewide Head Injury Program (SHIP). MRC does have a trust fund for emergency needs.

Because MRC did spend all their federal funds, they requested and received reallocation dollars. It is a \$14 million award and must be spent by the end of the next fiscal year. The funds are to be used for specific one-time needs and special projects. This can help to address gaps in the agency. For example, MRC has put out RFRs for consultants to address four issues, including self-employment. Because of reallocation funds, the effects of the budget cut will not be dramatic.

MRC contracts for competitive integrated employment services (CIES). An issue is that there are not enough providers and vendors. One reason is that the process of becoming a contracted vendor for MRC is complicated. There are many state regulations about procurement. MRC wants to use a consultant to examine the barriers to procurement and to help streamline the process. In January and February 2024, MRC will convene a small task force of providers to learn about their barriers.

Thanks to Ms. Biebel all of the RFRs have been released and MRC is in the process of reviewing the prospective vendors.

#### Questions/Comments

- Ms. Tosti commented that MRC did not get a budget cut because of the new arrivals and that Commissioner's Wolf statement made her uncomfortable. In addition, there was a xenophobic post on the MRC Facebook page that concerned her, and she hopes it is being addressed.

Commissioner Wolf stated that her language was not meant to be xenophobic. Sometimes there are budget cuts, and the reasons are not known. This year, we do know that state revenue was smaller than forecasted, along with EOHHS providing many services for new arrivals. Her intention was to help the SRC understand why MRC did receive a budget cut. She did not intend to communicate anything else.

The Facebook post was passed along to the individuals who manage MRC's social media accounts, and the post was addressed with the individual. (See section 4.d.iii. below for an expanded response to Ms. Tosti's social media concern.)

Commissioner Wolf wished everyone the best holidays. She recognized that the holidays can be enriching, but also challenging.

#### **ii. Update about branding launch – Colleen Casey**

The Governor filed the name change with the state legislature. It was heard by the Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight this past Monday, December 11<sup>th</sup>. MRC hopes to be able to change the name in January. To get to this point, there have been focus groups and surveys of advocacy groups.

#### Questions/Comments

- Ms. Tosti stated that as a disability representative member of the SRC and an MRC consumer, the name change does not matter to her. She does not mind the word "rehabilitation." There are better ways to support consumers, such as providing assistive technology. She wants to

see money going to consumers or for other uses, not rebranding. That is why the rebranding troubles her.

Many members of the community did not like the word “rehabilitation.” It was difficult to find a name to represent everyone. The chosen new name, MassAbility, communicates that people with disabilities do have abilities. That is why the name was chosen. The agency helps consumers use their abilities; it does not fix broken people. One of the goals of rebranding is to help raise awareness in the employer community to increase the employment of people with disabilities. The name change is just one part of the rebranding. MRC will be looking at their website and other methods used to reach individuals.

- Why did the Governor announce the name change before the name change is approved and can officially take place?

The Governor announced that she was filing the name change with the legislature, not the actual name change itself.

**iii. Agency’s responses to social media posts – Colleen Casey**

The Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) has a social media internal use policy and guidelines. Each platform, such as Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, and TikTok has its guidelines. MRC’s Communications team oversees MRC’s social media sites and reports any illegal activity to the platforms. We are trying to use social media to increase awareness, celebrate the disability community, build community, and provide information. Social media is tricky. There is a First Amendment right for people to express their opinions and MRC encourages them to do so unless it is hate speech or threats of bodily harm.

Regarding the xenophobic post mentioned previously, MRC responded to the post, referred the poster to the MRC Ombuds, and also sent a direct message to the poster.

**iv. SRC Annual Report – Colleen Casey**

The Communications team is in the final process of editing the SRC Annual Report. It should be finalized by next week. Ms. Casey is proud of it. She gave kudos to Mr. Bellil and Ms. Canada and thanked everyone who participated.

**v. How MRC supports consumers in finding vendors they want to work with - Jessica Cimini**

It can be challenging for people to become vendors for the Commonwealth. Consumers who are working with MRC and who know service providers or services they want should talk to their VR counselors. Ideally, there are already providers qualified with the Commonwealth. If there are none, for example when there is a very specific need, the VR counselor can do research. If an appropriate vendor is found who is not already qualified, MRC can help with that. VR counselors can assist with both identifying appropriate vendors who already have contracts with the Commonwealth and bringing on suitable vendors who are not already on contract.

Questions/Comments

- Ms. Tosti stated that she has experience asking MRC to fund very specific things. For her first few years working with MRC, she received a lot of denials, and it was frustrating. She worked very hard to appeal decisions and deal with the red tape involved in receiving funding for

service dog training. She has difficulty with the process being presented as easy because it likely is not easy.

Ms. Wood thanked the presenters for their updates and for answering member questions.

**c. Update about the WIOA State Plan - Graham Porell**

Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), states are required to submit a four-year State Plan to WIOA. MRC is one part of this. The different sections of the State Plan are prepared separately and then submitted to the federal government. The draft FY25-29 State Plan was due at the Governor's office in late November. After making any changes required by the Governor's office, the State Plan is to be submitted to the federal government in March 2024. Once the State Plan is submitted the government has eight weeks to request corrections. When the State Plan is finalized, it will be published online. The VR part will be part of the MRC portion.

Two public forums are planned before the submission. Mr. Bellil will provide members with the dates of these when they are available.

Changes to the requirements for the VR portion of the State Plan include the removal of some redundant sections and the consolidation of others. There are some new required sections, including information about the composition of the SRC and plans to fill vacancies. The SRC Recommendations are included. The goals for the new State Plan have been updated to reflect MRC's current work and plans. The MRC State Plan includes information about eligibility, DEI-A initiatives, marketing, and rebranding. There are new strategies in the updated Strategy section. The State Plan will include new information from the Consumer Experience Survey. There will be information about census data and labor statistics. There will be updates about the number of consumers served annually and job placement results. The State Plan describes the collaboration between MRC and other agencies, such as the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and MassHealth. There are a large number of required assurances and certifications. MRC will propose goals for FY25 and FY26. These will be negotiated with RSA and then mutually agreed upon.

After receiving feedback from the Governor's office and the public hearings, we will make any needed changes to the State Plan and submit it to the federal government in March.

Questions/comments

- Ms. Tosti suggested that instead of using a consultant to create and work with consumer surveys MRC figure out how consumers can contribute to this and participate in the Consumer Satisfaction Needs Assessment Committee. She is concerned about MRC continually hiring consultants and not relying on consumers. She stated that she loves data and would like to be chair of the Consumer Satisfaction Needs Assessment Committee. She feels that more consumers should participate in that committee.

Ms. Tosti was thanked for her input. One of the tasks for the CSNAC is to appoint a new chair. MRC has always worked well with the SRC, specifically the CSNAC. One of the benefits of using consultants is that they contact consumers by phone, which allows for more feedback than obtained previously. MRC does receive the raw data from the surveys so we can do deeper dives into the data beyond what is done by the vendor.

The hearings that will be held before submitting the State Plan to the federal government are places where consumers can have additional input.

- Ms. Tosti stated that she has had to obtain services and benefits by herself. Just being eligible for benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) does not automatically connect people to MRC and benefits such as Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Coordination and integration between state agencies as described in the State Plan should help people to receive these benefits and get stabilized. She hopes that consumers are educated about benefits and get connected to them.

MRC does know it is important to educate consumers about available assistance. There is a section in the State Plan about benefits planning.

## 5. Open Mic

- Chair Wood reminded members that she did email them a request that they schedule meetings with her. She would like to get to know the members, which will help her be a better leader. She encouraged members to schedule meetings with her. She will update her availability for January 2024. If members need other dates, they should contact her.
- Ms. Tosti thanked Chair Wood for their private meeting, which made her feel better. She wants to participate in the SRC and wants the SRC to look deeply at issues.
- Earlier in the meeting, it was noted that MRC needs to hire more people with disabilities, and it is difficult to serve consumers who wish self-employment. Ms. Tosti wants discussions about using consumers as consultants. Consumers are smart and could help improve systems. At the BEO meeting held earlier today, there was a discussion about consumers networking with and supporting each other. For example, perhaps a consumer who wants to start a business could hire a consumer who wants to provide marketing services.

Chair Wood apologized for not having Ms. Tosti read the vision and mission statements at the start of this meeting. She also wished everyone happy holidays, recognizing they are not always enjoyable. She is looking forward to working with the SRC in the new year.

Chair Wood called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Canada motioned to adjourn. Ms. Woodmansee seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 6:40 pm.