

**Policy Committee
Minutes**

600 Washington Street, Boston, MA 02111

February 3, 2022

11:00 AM -12:30 PM via Zoom

Attendees: Naomi Goldberg, Sarah Wiles, Rosanna Woodmansee

Guests: Jessica Cimini, Director of Vocational Rehabilitation Operations; John Houlker- West District Business Improvement Partner

The Policy Committee has previously identified particular areas in which it wants to focus relative to procurement. This meeting was to gain further clarification on the potential for addressing issues that have previously been identified as barriers. Jessica Cimini and John Houlker came to the meeting to offer additional insight into the procurement process as it relates to our chosen area of focus.

Increasing language capacity

The committee has been inquiring about potential ways that MRC can increase the capacity of CIES (Competitive Integrated Employment Services) vendors to provide services in consumers' native languages. MRC contracts with CIES vendors to help with job placement because the agency doesn't have the bandwidth to provide that service to all consumers in house. The most common contract they have is job development /job placement.

The resources and capacities of CIES vendors varies across the state but there are more choices and capacity in cities, and fewer providers toward the cape and far west areas of the state. There have been vendors who have done well around language capabilities, but it varies from vendor to vendor. Sometimes the language capacity is tied to a single employee, which is not the most reliable situation. MRC has bilingual counselors who do often have to step in and provide interpreting services for consumers. In recognition of this added responsibility, bilingual vocational rehabilitation counselors are assigned smaller caseloads. The committee believes that bilingual VR counselors can offer valuable input on problem solving in this area.

Offering financial incentives would be a part of increasing CIES' vendors capacity to serve consumers in other languages. Potential options for incentivizing the ability to speak other languages include cost reimbursement within a contract, a supplemental rate (hourly) or an extra component rate. MRC would have to explore the three options to determine what would work best.

The current contracts don't currently include a language rate, but it would be possible to add extra point in scoring for applicants who have language capacity.

It is also may be possible to strengthen the language in RFR around language capacity and highlight the expectation that the vendor follow through if they have indicated that they can speak other languages upon application. Understanding that staffing can change, it is not entirely clear how to address this. An important piece to this is that there must be a funding mechanism in place, especially for hiring ASL interpreters.

Rewriting the RFR or redoing the rate structure would be a huge undertaking but perhaps there are a few things that could be done, even by the beginning of the fiscal year, such as adding in a language rate and billing MRC for an add on rate. To do this would require an examination of what the best mechanism would be and what the proper cost would be.

MRC is currently working with larger agencies and encouraging them to hire bilingual staff. This is particularly challenging now when many employers are finding it hard to hire people in general. MRC seeks to work closely with vendors to support them. Ideally they would like the vendor to provide the service with language access. MRC can use the language line in its work but needs a funding structure in place if the expectation is that vendors will use language access resources if they don't have bilingual staff. It will also be necessary to monitor their progress.

Obtaining goods and services from vendors not contracted with the state

There is a mechanism in place to make incidental purchases for consumers but the amount of funding possible is limited. Purchasing items is tied by state rules. The committee inquired as to whether contracting with an agency that acted as a conduit for purchasing goods and services would work and it was suggested that this would probably not be clean. Cash disbursement is limited to \$500 and state agencies are expected to avoid incidental one-time emergency expenses whenever possible.

The Business Improvement Partners used to be contract managers. Their primary role is to support vendors, maintain relationships from the contract side, meet goals, and provide technical assistance and training to vendors.

Status of tutors in the state

Historically it has been difficult to have sufficient tutors to serve the needs of consumers. Tutors are lone individuals who must go through a tedious process with Combuys, and people find it frustrating. MRC is trying to streamline the process a bit but much if it is out of their control and there is only so much they can do to make the process user friendly. Currently there are 10 active tutors in the entire state and two in the pipeline. Some of them have specialties and some are general. They just hired one tutor who has a specialty in starting a business. MRC pointed out that many consumers utilize tutors at their school and

other community resources (e.g., CILs for people studying for their license) so there is not an overwhelming number of consumers who have a need to utilize tutors provided by MRC. Additionally, the opportunity to offer tutoring remotely has obviously improved in the past few years.

The Policy Committee needs to review the recommendation considering the information that it has accumulated over the past few years, keeping in mind that it was made several years ago. The committee should consider changes that have since been implemented as well as if/how it can take action to address issues or have a role in monitoring changes. This will be discussed at the next meeting.

The next meeting of the Policy Committee will take place on Thursday, April 7, 2022, at 11:00 via Zoom.