**Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Meeting Minutes**

**March 28, 2024, 5-7 pm EST**

**Please note: this meeting was held virtually.**

**Attendees**:

* **Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Members:** Heather Wood (Chair), Joe Bellil, Dawn Clark, Paula Euber (Ex-Officio), Naomi Goldberg (Client Assistance Program – CAP), Steve LaMaster, Tay Silveira, Commissioner Toni Wolf (Ex-Officio),Rosanna Woodmansee
* **Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff:** Amanda Baczko, Kate Biebel, Jessica Cimini, Darien Johnson, Kaitlin Morrisette, Joan Phillips, Graham Porell, Rachel Reyes, Amy Karr
* **Other individuals present:** Liz Fancher (Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council – MDDC), Darien Johnson, Doug Mason, Jeanne Perrin (CAP), Kristin Campione, Yuki Nishizawa, Jerri Roach, Christine Tosti[[1]](#footnote-1), Sarah Wiles (CAP)
* **National Association of Head Injury Administrators (NASHIA):** Jill Ferrington, Regina Rodriguez Sisneros, Hayden Steward
* **ASL Interpreters:** Lucy Annett, Patrick Cole
* **CART Provider:** Lisa Nihan-Demeule
* **Absent members:** Matthew Bander, Rebecca Davis, Dr. Lusa Lo

# Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 5:03 pm by the Chair.

# Reading Of the Vision and Mission Statement: Ms. Woodmansee read the SRC Mission and Vision Statement.

# Approval of Meeting Minutes

The December 2023 Quarterly meeting minutes were not approved because of a lack of quorum.

# Introduction/Icebreaker – Heather Wood, Regina Rodriguez Sisneros

Ms. Sisneros explained that we are trying an icebreaker at this meeting with the ultimate aim of increasing engagement at SRC meetings.

The instructions for the optional icebreaker were provided to members in advance as part of the agenda. Ms. Sisneros also read them at the meeting:

You are encouraged to share when your name is called or share your responses in chat.

Will you please share with us your name, location, and **three words** that describe:

* What is your favorite food?
* Who prepared this food for you? (mother, grandmother, father, etc.)
* Name one word you think of when you think of this food. (For example: love, family, holiday, etc.)

Ms. Sisneros went first to demonstrate. She called on someone else, who then answered the question and passed it to another person. This continued until all attendees had answered the questions either orally or via chat.

# Old Business

* 1. **Membership update – Sahara Defensor**

Ms. Defensor was not present so there was no membership update.

# New Business,

* 1. **NASHIA – Jill Ferrington, Regina Rodriguez Sisneros, Hayden Steward**

Ms. Ferrington shared NASHIA’s presentation. **(See MA\_SRC\_CouncilMeeting\_20240328.pdf.)**

Ms. Ferrington discussed the four FY24 SRC recommendations, and how not all of the current SRC committees are working on a recommendation this year. She noted the SRC’s current committee structure and NASHIA’s research on the committee structure of other SRCs.

NASHIA is helping to operationalize the goals previously established for the SRC’s Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEI-A) plan. Ms. Ferrington reminded the SRC of the goals and explained which members of her team would be working on which aspects. **(See page 8 of MA\_SRC\_CouncilMeeting\_20240328.pdf.)**

* Regina Rodrigues Sisneros: DEI-A recruitment. The recruitment strategy will align with the SRC’s DEI-A plan.
* Hayden Steward: DEI-A engagement
* Zaida Ricker: DEI-A governance (Open Meeting Law, Robert’s Rules of Order)

NASHIA is developing resources and materials, such as guidance for the SRC Chair and committee Chairs, onboarding materials, and an Executive Committee training manual. **(See pages 9-11 of MA\_SRC\_CouncilMeeting\_20240328.pdf.)**

Ms. Ferrington talked about the goal of updating group agreements for the SRC. There is a need for people to feel safe while discussing tough topics at meetings. After this meeting, participants will receive a survey. One part of the survey will ask respondents to indicate which sentiments they feel are important to be included in a group agreement. **(See page 12 of MA\_SRC\_CouncilMeeting\_20240328.pdf.)**

Chair Wood thanked Ms. Ferrington, Ms. Sisneros, and Ms. Steward. She stated it is great working with NASHIA. Chair Wood requested that all questions and comments be held to the end of the meeting.

* 1. **Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) Presentation – Jessica Cimini, Rachel Reyes**

Ms. Cimini and Ms. Reyes introduced themselves. MRC has no specific director of transition programs. Ms. Reyes is the MRC expert in Pre-ETS and takes the lead in Pre-ETS. She helped shape many of MRC’s Pre-ETS programs. She will present the slides and give an overview. Ms. Cimini has the questions previously generated by SRC members.

Ms. Reyes shared the presentation. **(See Pre-ETS PPT Federation 3 9 24.pptx.)**

The five core components of Pre-ETS:

* + - Job exploration and counseling: This is done in a group, not one-to-one.
    - Work readiness training: Providers help students work on soft skills and harder skills. These are things students will need to go to work, such as a resume and interview skills. Age matters: what a 14-year-old needs is different from what an 18-year-old needs.
    - Work-based learning experiences: Students interacting with employers, working towards paid internships that get on their resumes.
    - Counseling on post-secondary education and training: School counselors may do a lot of this. However, Pre-ETS providers may help disseminate this information to students.
    - Self-advocacy: This is included in the programs of many vendors. For example, it is worked into discussions about negotiating with an employer about an internship.

There is a lot of confusion about the Chapter 688 referrals in schools. Referrals can come from students, family members, school staff, and from community programs. A student receiving Pre-ETS is not automatically eligible to receive MRC services after leaving school. MRC Connect is being promoted in schools.

Answers to the questions that were generated at the January Executive Committee Meeting and were submitted to MRC:

* How are Pre-ETS services funded? Does the financing come from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), WIOA, or other sources?

The funding comes from federal sources. VR is required to spend 15% on Pre-ETS. If VR receives reallotment money, 15% of that must be used for Pre-ETS. Massachusetts is one of the few states that uses all of its federal funds and does receive reallotment money.

* 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.

Data are not captured about the percentage of students who received Pre-ETS who then obtained competitive employment. About 20% of Pre-ETS students do apply for VR services. This went up from 15%. Many of the students in that 20% do go straight from Pre-ETS to VR. Some do leave Pre-ETS and come to VR later, but it is mostly a seamless transition. Mr. Porell said that MRC could get more data about outcomes. Ms. Reyes said that MRC is working on a way that Pre-ETS providers can identify students who want to receive VR services so that they are connected with MRC Connect.

* 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?

There is one community training partner per school district. By the nature of the structure, providers are not competing with each other to serve the same students. MRC has not developed a standard yet but is constantly looking at the quality of services provided. MRC does rely on feedback from students and schools.MRC runs learning communities to help providers understand Pre-ETS and expectations and has established groups of providers to share best practices and information. MRC believes most providers are in it for the right reasons. If providers are not doing well, they may need skill-building. MRC can remove providers but prefers to help providers to improve.

* 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.

That is the thinking, that students who go through Pre-ETS may be more ready for VR. Early paid job experience is a predictor of success with VR and future career success. There will probably be more data available in the new data system that is to come. Additionally, some Pre-ETS students may not need the intensity of VR.

Chair Wood thanked Ms. Reyes and Ms. Cimini. She reminded participants to hold questions to the Open Mic part of the meeting.

* 1. **Committee Reports**

1. Business Employment Opportunity (BEO) Committee - Steve LaMaster

The Committee last met on February 8th. At that meeting, the draft version of the Provider Survey was discussed. The committee recommended using question logic that sorts by type or sub-surveys to target types of services provided. This would allow the survey to be more targeted in the questions asked. Different vendors provide different services such as vocational services, independent living services, assistive technology, etc. The survey contains many questions, and it was felt that the response rate may be low with so many questions.

The next BEO Committee meeting is April 11th at 1:00 pm. The plan is to talk about the rollout of the Disability Employment Tax Credit, including how the marketing is going and how many people reached out about it.

1. State Plan Committee - Joe Bellil

The last meeting was on February 21st.

At that meeting, the committee discussed the schedule for the recommendations. Mr. Bellil asked that a request for recommendations be posted in the disability newsletter. The committee discussed the schedule for recommendations. Also hope to have an SRC table at the next Summit, both for outreach and as a way to seek recommendations.

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

1. DEIA Council update - Doug Mason

The Council last met on March 19th.

The primary focus was finalizing the DEIA scorecard, which will allow the council to monitor MRC both as an agency and service provider as it works to reach its DEIA goals. The Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) needs to give final approval of the document. When that happens Mr. Mason will share the document with the SRC, probably before the next Quarterly meeting.

The next DEIA Council meeting is April 16th at 12-1:30 pm.

1. Policy Committee (Naomi Goldberg)

The last committee meeting was on August 3, 2023.

The next Policy Committee meeting is scheduled for April 4th.

1. Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee (CSNAC)

The committee last met on August 21st, 2023.

Currently, there is no chair for the committee. At this time the next meeting is not scheduled.

**Questions & Comments for Committee Chairs:**

There were no questions or comments for the committee chairs.

* 1. **MRC Commissioner’s Update & Report - Commissioner Wolf**
* Commissioner Wolf gave kudos to Mr. Mason and the DEIA Council. MRC’s recruiting and hiring process has improved. 37% of MRC employees are people of color. MRC is looking at revising existing policies and developing new policies, so there may be work for the Policy Committee in the future.
* Rebranding: We cannot use the name MassAbility. The name change is still pending legislative approval. No one disagrees about the name change; it is just a procedural delay. We are eager to release the new name. It ties in with the campaign around the DETC.
* Budget FY25 and funding: EOHHS does not have extra money for this fiscal year. Revenue is not as high as anticipated. There were demand issues. (This will be discussed in the MRC Connect presentation.) The MRC budget of $86.4 million includes $44.4 million for VR. This includes increased rates for providers, so they have the capacity to hire staff, but basically, MRC is level‑funded.

The federal side is impacted by the pending resolution of the federal budget. Money may not be released in a timely manner; we have to watch our cash flow. The money may be released in the next 3-4 weeks. She thinks next 3-4 weeks will be able to get the money, but must pay the agency’s workforce and bills. Have to pay workforce and bills.

Reallotment dollars. Some VRs don’t spend all their money. This allows other agencies to request additional funds via reallotment dollars. This money is used for special projects. NASHIA is an example. Because of an SRC recommendation, some of the money is being used for a consultant to look at VR self-employment services. Also used for strategic messaging and special events. Reallotment dollars are being used to explore developing a pilot project with the Social Security Administration (SSA) about the cliff effect, where people with disabilities do not work full-time because of fear of losing their benefits.

* The RSA is saying VR outcomes are not as strong as desired. Looking at how to provide funding and service delivery. For example, some states have shifted VR to the Department of Labor (DOL). Sometimes people with disabilities get lost when working with the DOL. There is new language about innovation and change, a real push to think differently, out of the box. RSA used to be about rules and compliance. Massachusetts is looking at this on an ongoing basis.
* There are a lot of initiatives going on. The City of Lawrence is establishing a new outreach for incarcerated people, but MRC has not established a wider strategy. MRC is thinking of a way to partner with the Department of Youth Services (DYS). Looking at ways to think differently around this population. MRC does not yet have a great new strategy, but there may be opportunities to join with our partners who know this work.
* Executive Order number 627: The governor signed this Executive Order, which mandates skill-based hiring when hiring state government employees, rather than focusing only on education. More to come about this in the future. As of December 2023, a VRC-1 can start with MRC without having a master's degree. Those hired must have experience, either working or lived experience. Commissioner Wolf is excited by this. MRC has to open its doors wider because staffing is a challenge.
  1. **MRC Connect presentation - Kaitlin Morrissette**

Ms. Morisette is the Director of MRC Connect. She shared the presentation. **(See SRC Presentation MRC\_Connect\_3.29.24.pptx**.)

MRC Connect is one front door for all of MRC. Applicants can be screened for all MRC programs, including VR. **(See slide 3 of** **SRC Presentation MRC\_Connect\_3.29.24.pptx**.**)** It can be done online or via phone. There is a centralized team that is mostly virtual but can meet applicants where they are if necessary.

MRC Connect began with a phased rollout and completed a statewide rollout in June 2023. The team grew from its original staff of 25 to 40 due to the volume of applications received.

July 2023 was a slower month, and January 2024 highest to date. The majority of applications are for VR. About 20% of applicants are applying for multiple programs. VR eligibilities are climbing. **(See slides 6-8 of** **SRC Presentation MRC\_Connect\_3.29.24.pptx**.**)**

There have been enhancements and improvements since the implementation. Intakes are no longer scheduled out, and applicants get better information about expected timelines and where they are in the process. MRC has received good feedback from applicants. Before MRC Connect it took an average of 93 days for applicants to complete intake and be determined eligible, it is now down to 44 days, and with overtime down to 36 days. **(See slides 9-10 of** **SRC Presentation MRC\_Connect\_3.29.24.pptx**.**)**

# Open Mic

Chair Wood opened the meeting for questions and/or comments for any of the presenters.

* In the chat, Ms. Tosti shared the following:

“The reliance on consultants who already have the privilege of employment, especially using federal dollars, concerns me. This is an RSA circular that explains how consumers who are on SSDI and SSI are not required to pay for any VR services. It's important that money goes DIRECTLY to consumer needs, especially those who do not have the privilege of being employed at a livable wage.”

She shared the following link:

<https://rsa.ed.gov/sites/default/files/subregulatory/RSA-TAC-22-03_0.pdf>

* Ms. Tosti shared the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31lzu8GzjdM>

In the chat, she indicated that it is an excellent presentation about Oregon’s Pre-ETS efforts. It describes the regulations around Pre-ETS and is great supplemental information.

* In the chat, Ms. Tosti expressed concern about the lack of turnover in SRC membership and requested that a section about the SRC be added to MRC forms.
* Ms. Ferrington shared the link to the post-meeting survey participants are asked to complete:

[https://form.jotform.com/240874961290059](https://urldefense.com/v3/__https:/form.jotform.com/240874961290059__;!!CPANwP4y!SwOG9v_wy4wzGjPes6gUotCk9tY2oku9D4F7Vak_D9uwLa6zVfeYdkr5TEwlxkdkzDWQnnzRug9XXfVOuKSPOdl3$)

The next Quarterly Meeting is on June 27th at 5:00 pm.

Chair Wood called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Bellil motioned to adjourn. Ms. Goldberg seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 7:06 pm.

1. Upon request, participants’ names are used when they contribute to the discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)