

Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Meeting Minutes

March 23, 2023, 5-7pm EST

Please note: this meeting was held virtually.

Attendees:

- **Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Members:** Inez Canada (Chair), Matthew Bander, Joe Bellil, Ronaldo Fujii, Christine Tosti, Naomi Goldberg, Rosanna Woodmansee, Steve LaMaster, Paula Euber (VRC), Dawn Clark, Ellie Starr, Cheryl Scott
- **SRC Ex Officio Members:** Kate Biebel (MRC Deputy Commissioner), Kevin Goodwin, Doug Mason, Liz Fancher (DDC); Sarah Wiles (CAP)
- **Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff:** Commissioner Toni Wolf, Amanda Baczko, William Noone, William Allen, Jessica Cimini, Joan Phillips, Michelle Banks, Dave Sykes, Amy Karr
- **ASL Interpreters:** Jeannette “Jo” O’Campo-Welch, Kerri MacSwain
- **CART Provider:** Stefanie Farrell
- **Public:** Anthony “AJ” Pape, Sarah Carroll, Boyang Bian

1. Call to Order/Introductions

- a. Meeting was called to Order at 5:01 pm by the Chair.
- b. Chair Canada reminded attendees of the need to speak slowly for the ASL interpreters and CART provider, and to turn off audio and video when possible.
- c. Ms. Karr read off the meeting participant list.

2. Reading Of the Vision and Mission Statement:

Ms. Scott read the SRC Mission and Vision Statement.

3. Approval of Meeting Minutes

- a. Chair Canada called for a motion to approve the December 2022 Quarterly meeting minutes. Ms. Goldberg motioned for approval of the minutes. Ms. Starr seconded. Minutes were approved with no corrections.

4. Old Business

- a. **Introduce new admin support Amy Karr (Inez Canada)**
- b. **Membership update (Inez Canada)**
 - i. The nominations of Boyang Bian and Sarah Carroll have been submitted to Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHSS) no status updates have been received. Mr. Mason has agreed to join the SRC but his nomination has not yet been submitted.
 - ii. Prospective member Anthony “AJ” Pape introduced himself and discussed his background and his interest in joining the SRC.
 - iii. **Compliance obligations** – Chair Canada thanked members who have completed the required Open Meeting Law training and Conflict of Interest training. All SRC members need to complete these trainings by the June 22nd quarterly meeting

c. **NCSRC request for nominee (Inez Canada)**

- i. National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) would like an MA SRC member to join their board. NCSRC is looking for an SRC Chair, Vice Chair or committee Chair. The member should be a currently appointed SRC member, not VR staff. Members were advised that if interested to reach out to Chair Canada.

5. **New Business**

a. **Committee Reports**

i. **DEIA Council update (Doug Mason)**

The DEIA Council is a 13-member advisory group. Its purpose is to assist the MRC with the development and implementation of a DEIA plan in serving consumers. The Council received a report from the Bijoux Consulting Group; this report gave results plus suggestions for MRC. This report has been given to the Council and the MRC and is used by the DEIA council in their work. There were two suggestions. One was to hire a dedicated DEIA manager, which EOHHS has done. The other was to establish a DEIA Council, which has been done. The Council looks at MRC both as an employer and a service provider.

The first meeting of the DEIA Council was in February 2022. At the end of 2022, Mr. Mason asked for a report about the work of the Council in its first year and its plan for year two. The DEIA Council has established a formal set of procedures to monitor work by MRC's Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and any problems they encounter while working on the goals of the MRC. There are ongoing workshops for consumers and families, and outreach to underserved communities. DEIA considerations are included in the recruiting and hiring processes of the MRC. What that entails exactly will become clearer and Mr. Mason will relay that to the SRC in the future. Mr. Mason also came up with questions in order for the DEIA Council to plan for year 2. Some of the questions were included in the year 2 plan, some were considered outside the scope of the DEIA council, and some were considered not priority at this time. Mr. Mason referred to the report from the DEI manager, which was sent to SRC members with the meeting materials (**See, DEIA Council 2.28.23 PPT**). Mr. Mason asked attendees to submit DEIA -related questions to him. He will either answer them or submit them at the next DEIA Council meeting. He is looking forward to continuing to serve on the DEIA council.

The next DEIA Council meeting is April 18 at 1 pm. Any questions should be submitted before that date.

ii. **State Plan Committee (Joe Bellil)**

The last meeting was on February 8. WIOA state plan is due every 4 years. From June to October, the SRC advises MRC on VR part of plan. Plan is sent to the governor in March 2024 and to the RSA in October 2024.

Timeline for SRC input:

- The committees look at their current recommendations, modify, and add new recommendations from February to April.
- All recommendations are due at the Executive Committee meeting on May 4.

- At the next Executive Committee meeting on June 1 the draft is reviewed and approved, then sent to the full SRC membership in time for the members to review the draft recommendations and vote on them at quarterly meeting on June 22.
- The next day Mr. Bellil sends the approved recommendations to MRC to review and respond.
- The MRC VR response is usually received by July 31.
- At the State Plan committee meeting on August 9 the committee will review the MRC response.

Mr. Bellil encouraged members to think about joining the State Plan Committee. The next State Plan meeting is on April 5 at 11:00 AM.

iii. **Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee (Ronaldo Fujii)**

The February 21 meeting was short. Looking at data from the first round of the consumer survey. MRC analysts are looking at the data. Will have more information about minorities and underserved populations.

CSNAC meetings have been reduced in frequency to every other month; that schedule may be revisited in the future. Outstanding meeting minutes have been addressed.

The next CSNAC meeting is April 18 at 5 pm.

iv. **Business Employment Opportunity Committee (Steve LaMaster)**

The committee works the interest of job seekers who are actively receiving MRC VRC services. It is a link to perspective of businesses and offers ways to improve services and business relations to help job seekers.

The last committee meeting was on February 9. At that meeting the committee heard from Laysha Ostrow, who founded the non-profit Live & Learn. She just completed a National Institute on Disability funded study for self-employment for individuals with mental health disabilities. The program includes a resource library, online courses, and peer-to-peer support through connections on the platform. She is applying for a second study through the National Institute on Disability, a randomized controlled trial. Her presentation to the committee was an evidence and discovery opportunity.

Recently Mr. LaMaster, Chair Canada and MRC received an update from the Communications team about branded materials to help recruitment for the SRC. He expects drafts for the committee to look at in April. In addition to that the committee will look for priorities to recommend for inclusion in the FY 2024 State Plan.

The next BEO meeting is April 13 at 1:00 pm.

v. **Policy Committee (Naomi Goldberg)**

The last committee meeting was on February 2. The committee is working on simple fact sheets to explain services for VR consumers. This did come out of a State Plan recommendation. The fact sheets will be provided to consumers, if MRC approves. To date, one fact sheet about the Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) has been created. The committee is working on other fact sheets.

The April Policy Committee meeting has been cancelled.

The next Policy Committee meeting is June 1 where the IPE fact she will be reviewed.

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

- There were no questions.
- Chair Canada reminded members to look at the updated meeting calendar.
- Chair Canada encouraged members to think about joining a committee. She especially encouraged VR consumers to attend Policy Committee meetings, because of their understanding of the process and knowledge about what information would be helpful to have explained.

b. **MRC Commissioner's Update & Report (Commissioner Wolf)**

i. Commissioner Wolf welcomed Mr. Pape, thanked Mr. Mason for his work on the DEI Council, and thanked the Chairs.

ii. **Governor's budget:**

- The budget has \$88.9 million for MRC.
- MRC has requested about \$1,000,000 more than last year. MRC is asking to expand the Empower to Employ program, which supports individuals with disabilities who also receive DTA benefits, from five employees to eight more, for a total of 13 staff members.
- MRC has a pilot program with Work, Inc. that is testing a performance-based model for expanding Competitive Integrated Employment Services (CIES) through community rehabilitation providers.
- MRC has requested \$3,000,000 to reduce the caseload size for VR counselors; the hope is to reduce the caseload to 90-100 consumers from about 160 per counselor. Part of the negotiation will be with the unions because if caseloads are lower, then it should be associated with an increase in performance goals for each counselor. Caseload size has not been reviewed since 2004. MRC has averaged about 4,000 people being placed and this has been consistent through COVID, but not as strong as MRC would like. She asked that the SRC not share this information publicly because this has not been approved yet and has not been shared with unions.
- MRC also has \$100,000 more for the MRC Consumer Summit and to increase family ambassadors and peer partners.

iii. **Workforce:**

- MRC and providers are all facing staffing shortages; MRC has about 70 job openings: MRC Connect, Administrative Assistants, NextGen, VR counselors. Boston and Springfield have the highest VR counselor vacancies. Springfield has had people leave and be promoted.
- Recruitment: The Young Professionals Group at MRC has been going to job fairs and college events to talk about the value of working for MRC.

- Commissioner Wolf acknowledged Mr. Mason and his work with the DEIA Council. MRC has hired and promoted more people of color. She agrees that a DEIA focus is not just to look at the workforce but to also address MRC treats consumers.
 - Mr. Allen, Ms. Phillips and others have been encouraging state agencies to hire people with disabilities, and to get potential candidates through MRC. Ten individuals referred from MRC have been employed by the Commonwealth. There are postings on social media such as TikTok promoting MRC for services and for employment.
- iv. **Update from Ms. Baczko:** Ms. Baczko was the Director of the Office of Individual and Family Engagement. That office worked with MRC and across the Commonwealth, exploring how MRC can partner with the community towards developing policies and improving service delivery. The office has been merged with the Learning and Development Office. The new name is the Office of Learning and Community Engagement. Teams have been combined, new priorities and programs are being developed, including internships and mentoring; the office is trying to get creative.
- The Family Forum is Tuesday March 28. The family inclusion ambassadors, who are diverse, from throughout the state, with different experiences in supporting their loved ones, will present at the Family Forum.
 - Commissioner Wolf acknowledged and thanked Ms. Baczko for all her work.

v. **NextGen update (Michelle Banks and David Sykes)**

Michelle Banks, the NextGen Strategic Director, and David Sykes, the NextGen Director of Operations, introduced themselves. They presented and discussed a PowerPoint presentation about NextGen (**See, NextGenupdate SRC march 2023- _Accessible PPT**). Currently NextGen is located in MRC offices where the data showed a need; it is not throughout the state at this point. The young adults in the catchment areas have the choice of general VR or NextGen. The program is publicized by using QR codes, tweaking landing page, and having materials in multiple languages. This publicity has helped to increase the enrollment of standard VR as well.

The target community is any young adult 18-30 with a disability, but particularly those who have been less engaged because of race or specific disabilities such as Autism, developmental/intellectual disabilities, and sensory disabilities. It focuses on those looking for rapid employment paths like short-term certifications. Those interested in careers that require college degrees are connected to general VR.

The consumers work with a multi-disciplinary team. NextGen uses the Integrated Resource Team model; the team can include family members, other providers, members of the faith community, etc. to help improve service delivery for that NextGener.

NextGen has developed a robust curriculum to develop individual capacities, such as self-advocacy. The goal is to help young adults to increase these skills, ultimately resulting in better employment.

UMass Chan School of Medicine developed a survey to provide NextGen with a baseline for each NextGener and to measure progress.

Staff have been trained to use the NextGen Careers Toolkit. The Toolkit includes InforTalent to assess how “good a fit” a person may be outside of knowledge and skills. Young adults receive support beyond the first 90 days of competitive employment.

Differences between general VR and Next Gen: One VR counselor vs. team; general VR doesn’t rely on internships and apprenticeships, while they are in high use in NextGen; general VR consumers work towards a degree vs. focusing on more imminent employment.

Marketing material includes posters, flyers, digital advertisements; have been translated into Spanish and Chinese; other languages will follow.

NextGen wants to work with the SRC to receive advice on recruitment and feedback, to help promote the model, and to provide the SRC with updates.

Questions/Comments about NextGen:

- Ms. Tosti stated that she underwent neuropsych testing when she was in target age range of NextGen. She thinks neuropsych testing could be helpful to recommend for some NextGeners, it may help clarify abilities, etc.
- Mr. LaMaster thought the presentation was excellent. He mentioned the Kendall Square Association (KSA), which focuses on biotech, and the MIT Job Connectors program, which service a young and diverse population of Cambridge residents. He feels there is an affinity between NextGen and these organization and asked about interest in connecting with them. Ms. Banks expressed interest in connecting with both and NextGen will follow up with Mr. LaMaster.
- Chair Canada will send contact information of the NextGen presenters for distribution to the SRC.

C. Client Assistance Program (CAP) and Ombudsman joint report (Naomi Goldberg and Amanda Baczko)

• **CAP – Ms. Goldberg**

CAP ensures VR services from MRC, the Mass Commission for the Blind (MCB), and Independent Living Centers (ILC) properly serve consumers who have employment goals and/or independent living goals. CAP is separate from VR and ILCs and operates out of the Massachusetts Office on Disability. The program focuses on providing information and advocacy for consumers with questions and/or concerns about service denials; to explain how services should work, and to assist with appealing decisions, while trying to resolve in the most informal way possible. It provides outreach through advertising VR and ILC services, especially to unserved and underserved populations such as BIPOC and certain geographic areas. CAP also has an obligation to resolve systemic issues; it usually learn of these through consumer cases but also from the SRC.

Examples of how CAP has assisted consumers:

- A consumer with substance use disorder who wanted to attend an online program from a private school. MRC usually supports state programs, but CAP assisted in finding a suitable less expensive online program.
- A consumer with an IPE, a former nurse, wanted to do case reviews, but she needed an active RN license to do it. CAP helped VR counselor to understand how the consumer could work competitively in the nursing field despite her disability limitations.

CAP sees a small percentage of MRC consumers. A lot of the consumers who are seen don't understand how things work. The consumers may be confused, not have the right expectations about what MRC can and can't provide. Most of the complaints are about disagreement with employment goals and about funding services, especially for college. CAP can usually resolve things informally. When CAP noticed that so many people were confused, CAP developed two workshops on how to navigate VR services and how the VR services work: one for students and youths in transition and a separate one for current VR consumers. CAP also has a workshop series on employment rights that talk about the disclosure of disabilities, reasonable accommodations, and disability discrimination. Anyone can attend.

CAP collaborates with the Executive Team of MRC about systemic issues. An example about a systemic issue that was resolved last year: the SRC wasn't getting hearing decisions which contain data and information about the kinds of issues about which consumers complain, now MRC has agreed to share this information with SRC.

- **Ombudsman - Ms. Baczko**

Review of Ombudsman and more formal appeals over the last 6 months revealed that there was consistent lack of understanding about what to expect, such as how often to hear from counselor, about services received while in school vs out of school, why cases were closed, about options for post-employment services. A new outline for how administrative review findings will be drafted has just been finalized; this is a template made collaboratively with CAP to enhance clarity for the consumer. There are currently more than 12 calls per day to the Ombudsman line, previously 12 per week. Not sure why the number of calls has increased but it's a positive exposure for the agency.

Redacted copies of appeals and outcomes will be provided to the SRC. The hope is that it will help create change and improvement in services for consumers. The new Ombudsman is joining April 10; this person has mental health experience and is neurodivergent. Will train with CAP and MRC.

Chair Canada thanked Ms. Goldberg and Ms. Baczko.

6. Open Meeting:

Questions:

- How does a member receive certificate for completion of the Open Meeting Law training?
Answer: Check email, and if not there, contact the Attorney General's office.
- What does a member need to do to attend a committee meeting?
Answer: Just show up at the committee meeting; check website for committee meeting dates.
- Will meetings go back to in person soon?

Answer: The emergency order allowing meetings to be virtual has been extended for another two years. Chair Canada believes the MRC Consumer Summit will be in person so that may be an opportunity for the SRC to meet in person.

Chair Canada announced that Cheryl Scott is leaving the State Workforce Board so she will not be able to serve on the SRC. Ms. Scott stated that she enjoyed working with the SRC, hopes to keep in touch, and would like to continue involvement with the SRC in some capacity. Chair Canada reminded her that these meetings are open to public.

The Chair called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Fujii motioned to adjourn. Ms. Woodmansee seconded the motion. **Meeting was adjourned at 7:03 pm.**