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

**June 27, 2024, 5-7 pm ET**

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

**Attendees**:

* **Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Members:** Heather Wood (Chair), Joe Bellil, Naomi Goldberg (Client Assistance Program – CAP), Steve Higgins, Steve LaMaster, Tay Silveira, Commissioner Toni Wolf (Ex-Officio)
* **Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff:** Amanda Baczko, Kate Biebel, Graham Porell, Amy Karr
* **Other individuals present:** Darien Johnson, Doug Mason, Sarah Wiles (CAP)
* **National Association of State Head Injury Administrators (NASHIA):** Jill Ferrington
* **ASL Interpreters:** Patrick Cole, Denise Martinez
* **CART Provider:** Lisa Nihan-Demeule
* **Absent SRC members:** Matthew Bander, Dawn Clark, Rebecca Davis, Dr. Lusa Lo, Rosanna Woodmansee

# Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 5:05 pm by the Chair.

# Reading Of the Vision and Mission Statement: Mr. Higgins read the SRC Mission and Vision Statement.

# Approval of Meeting Minutes

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

Chair Wood called for a motion to approve the March 2024 Quarterly meeting minutes. Ms. Goldberg motioned for approval of the minutes. Mr. Bellil seconded. It was noted that the March 2024 minutes needed to be corrected to indicate that Darien Johnson was present. The March 2024 minutes were approved with that correction.

# Old Business

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

Ms. Defensor was not present at this meeting.

Mr. Johnson said that he received a letter stating that he would be appointed but has not yet received his SRC appointment letter.

# New Business

* 1. **Review of the SRC budget**

Chair Wood shared the budget. **(See FY25 SRC Budget Request\_ Revised 20240618.xlxs.)**

Budget items mentioned included:

* ASL and CART for Quarterly meetings - Only when requested, as opposed to every meeting, to be mindful of the shortage of ASL and CART providers.
* Conference registration
* Training for SRC members twice per year, to help fulfill the council’s mission and vision statement. Perhaps there could be a virtual meeting early in 2025, maybe just before the new recommendations process begins.

The goal will be to vote on the SRC budget at the next Executive Committee meeting in August or at the September Quarterly meeting.

* 1. **Vote on Recommendations – Joe Bellil**

Mr. Bellil shared the recommendations. **(See State Rehabilitation Council FY25 Draft Recommendations\_(003).docx.)**

Mr. Bellil submitted two recommendations. One is about restructuring the SRC committees (FY25‑1) and the second is about collaborating with MRC to help improve communication between MRC and consumers (FY25‑2).

Mr. LaMaster submitted three recommendations. Two of these are follow-up recommendations. FY25-3 involves the SRC working with MRC to continue to get the word out about the Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC) to employers and people with disabilities. The DETC has been available this past year but fewer than 50 individuals with disabilities have been certified. FY25-4 involves the SRC continuing to support MRC as it identifies potential practices to adopt or modify to help consumers who wish to pursue self-employment and the MRC staff who help them.

Mr. LaMaster’s third recommendation, FY25-5, is a new recommendation. Forty-eight percent of consumers served by MRC have mental health conditions, making it the most common disability type of MRC consumers. MRC has been collaborating with the Department of Mental Health (DMH) to help people with significant mental health problems get back to work. This recommendation would help the SRC learn more about what other vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs are doing to help this population of consumers.

There were no questions or comments about the recommendations.

Chair Wood called for a motion to accept the slate of FY25 recommendations. Mr. Bellil made the motion; it was seconded by Mr. LaMaster. The motion was approved unanimously by voice vote, 6 Yes votes and 0 No votes. The roll call voice vote is recorded below:

Heather Wood Y

Joe Bellil Y

Naomi Goldberg Y

Steve Higgins Y

Steve LaMaster Y

Tay Silveira Y

Mr. Bellil will send the recommendations to MRC tomorrow, June 28th.

* 1. **Review proposed changes to the Bylaws – Heather Wood, Jill Ferrington, Sahara Defensor**

Ms. Ferrington shared the Bylaws crosswalk document. **(See Proposed Bylaws Crosswalk 20240606.pdf.)** The changes reviewed tonight are not all the proposed changes. Some of the proposed changes will be affected by the revised Executive Order, which is in process.

The first column shows the proposed new language, the second column shows the old language, and the third column provides the rationale for the change.

* Section 5.01: Changed the number of members to “at least 15” to be consistent with the Federal regulations and the revised Executive Order.
* Section 5.03: Removed the section about Ex-officio membership. The Federal regulations only use this term for the Commissioner and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC). Removing this section aligns the Bylaws with the Federal regulations.
* Section 6.01. The section that states that members with expired terms may continue to serve until their replacement is appointed has been removed. (However, operationally this will continue.)
* Section 6.02: Removed language about the time of start and end of the terms of officers and members. Only the Governor has the authority to start and end terms.
Specified that members absent from two consecutive Quarterly meetings without good cause could be considered for termination and clarified that the Governor is the one with the authority to remove the member.
* Section 7.01: Revised this section to only keep the offices of chair and vice chair but provide the chair with flexibility to create additional roles as needed.
* Section 7.02: Removed Ad Hoc Nominating Committee for nominating officers. Ms. Defensor had said this was cumbersome and unnecessary. Nominations can be made on the floor.
* Section 9.01 (b): Revised to specify that when determining a quorum, current membership vacancies are excluded. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) has stated that vacancies should not keep SRCs from performing their work.
* Section 9.01 (c): This section about requesting a mail or telephone vote has been removed, because it is not allowed by Open Meeting Law (OML).

Ms. Ferrington stated that the Bylaws do have to have some reference to the SRC’s parliamentary procedure, but there is movement away from full adherence to Robert’s Rules of Order.

Comments/questions/concerns about the proposed Bylaws changes

* Clarification is needed about when members should express interest in open positions. Voting occurs at the third quarter meeting (September).
* It was clarified that quarter and quarterly refer to the calendar year, not the fiscal year.

Ms. Ferrington said additional changes are upcoming, such as clear language about public comment. A draft of the revised Bylaws will be sent to the SRC no later than 3 weeks before September Quarterly, and the council will vote on the revised Bylaws at that meeting,

* 1. **Committee Reports**
1. State Plan Committee - Joe Bellil

The last meeting was on February 21st.

There is no additional report beyond the recommendations.

The next State Plan Committee meeting is on August 21st at 11:00 am.

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

The Committee last met on June 13th.

At that meeting, the committee discussed its two FY24 recommendations about the Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC) (FY24-4) and self-employment (FY24-6).

* FY24-4: Joe Reale updated the committee on the number of DETC certifications obtained by people with disabilities, which is still under 50. The committee discussed methods to get DETC information out to the public, including employers and employment service providers.
* FY24-6: The committee discussed some of the best practices Deloitte gathered from other vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and suggested ways in which the committee could work with MRC’s team working on this self-employment initiative.

The next BEO Committee meeting is August 8th at 1:00 pm.

1. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Council update - Doug Mason

Members of the Executive Committee received the DEIA scorecard before the June Executive Committee meeting and were asked to contact Mr. Mason with any questions or concerns about it so he could address them at this meeting. Mr. Mason did not receive any feedback from the SRC. Commissioner Wolf will be addressing DEIA in her report, so he is deferring to her.

The DEIA Council will next meet on July 16, 2024.

1. Membership Ad Hoc Committee – Naomi Goldberg

Ms. Ferrington, Regina Rodriguez Sisneros, and Ms. Goldberg met in May to discuss start up plans for the committee.

The first meeting of the Membership Ad Hoc Committee is tomorrow, June 28th, at 9:00 m.

1. Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee (CSNAC) – Dawn Clark

The committee’s interim chair, Dawn Clark, was unable to attend this meeting. SRC Chair Wood presented the committee report.

At the May 28th meeting, the committee reviewed latest results from the Consumer Experience Survey. The committee chose to schedule another meeting for June 3rd with the goal of trying to formulate some recommendations based on the findings from the survey. Trends and areas to watch were discussed, but the committee did not create any recommendations to submit for consideration.

The next meeting of the CSNAC is August 12th at 5:00 pm.

* 1. **MRC Commissioner’s Update & Report - Commissioner Wolf**
* Budget FY25 and funding: We are hearing from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) that FY25 will be a very tight year and are anticipating additional state cuts. This is a different landscape than it has been over the past years. MRC has requested $86.4 million, $40.6 million for VR. There are dollars to increase wages for providers. The union has also negotiated a 5% raise for FY25. When there are union increases it does take away from money for VR services. We have $11.2 million in reallotment funds that must be spent by September 30th of this year. It’s one-time dollars so we try to use it for equipment, IT structure, event planning, strategic marketing, enhancements in VR, etc.
* Self-employment: One of the VR enhancements is regarding self-employment. MRC has been working with Deloitte. Deloitte has been looking at what different states are doing. Colorado has an interesting model. In the future we will share what we learn with the SRC.
* MRC Connect: Because of social media, events and family forums, our applications have increased dramatically. Currently there are about 1,700 applicants per month, about 1,200 for VR. Keep in mind that the rebranding has not been officially launched. It is exciting but concerning. Because of the high demand, we cannot really process applicants’ eligibility to get into the door with MRC Connect for about 40 days, instead of the hoped for two to three weeks. However, we are better at communicating timelines and status to applicants. Once someone gets through MRC Connect, the eligibility happens in one day and then a vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC) is assigned within two days. MRC tracks a lot of data about applications, such as reasons people are seeking services, and geographical locations of applicants. This might help with future planning.
* Rebranding: The House of Representatives did pass the bill in April. It is now sitting with the Senate. We are told that it will be passed within this budget cycle. This delay has slowed us down. MRC has not been able to do certain things in this fiscal year because it is all tied to the rebranding. It has delayed things like brochures and staff business cards. Once the legislation is passed, MRC is ready with new language, new materials, new logos, etc. Members are encouraged to reach out to any contacts who may help expedite the passage of the bill through the Senate.
* DEIA scorecard/Workforce: Commissioner Wolf praised Mr. Mason’s leadership on the DEIA Council and for his work on the scorecard. She is proud of the work of so many people who made efforts in this area, including hiring managers. For example, 37% of people in the MRC workforce are persons of color (POC). That is higher than four or five years ago and above the benchmark set by EOHHS for all state agencies. MRC and the DEIA Council have decided to focus on surpassing the benchmark set by EOHHS for hiring people with disabilities. We are also looking at the promotional opportunities that are available for people of color and people with disabilities.

MRC has had informational sessions for employees who are interested in professional development opportunities. Over the last 22 months there have been 102 internal promotions, approximately 60% into supervisory positions. That’s a lot for a small agency with approximately 800 employees.

We were able to change requirements for the vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC) position to not require a master’s degree, which is exciting. There is now a mentorship program. The agency is working on ways to help the workforce connect with each other, and hopefully create a culture that is warm and inviting.

* Highlights of FY24 Quarter 3 Consumer Survey results: 78% of respondents reported high satisfaction. MRC has been working very hard to emphasize customer service. We want to make sure staff, MRC Connect staff and VRCs, are responsive to inquiries, so consumers know that they are not forgotten. 94% of respondents say they would recommend MRC services to others. Commissioner Wolf is happy with that figure. About 26% of respondents indicated they had issues with MRC, which is a slight increase from the previous quarter. The biggest complaint was VRCs not returning calls, emails, and texts. Customer service has been put in the performance review for VRCs. We are emphasizing how important it is to respond to consumers. About 85% of respondents were satisfied with MRC Connect. Commissioner Wolf would like that number to be higher and would like the wait time to be much lower, but the demand for services is very high and MRC Connect is still fairly new.
* New MRC initiatives:
* At last year’s summit there was a presentation about Ahoi!, a new app that measures accessibility in the community. MRC has been paying Ahoi! to train MRC consumers to use the app and then go out and determine if a location, such as a store, is accessible. They then enter the information in the app. The participants can put this on their resumes. Commissioner Wolf can send more information if desired. There will be more to come about this.
* MRC has been working with Deloitte on self-employment. Deloitte did a wide survey of the self-employment programs of the VR agencies of other states. Commissioner Wolf is disappointed that nationally there are not more innovations, although Colorado’s program is intriguing.
* There is a pilot program in development to assist those applying for services through MRC Connect, somewhat similar to Turbo Tax. It will be ready to use soon. Ms. Biebel praised the MRC Connect Director Kaitlin Morissette and her team for being able to shift and pivot.

# Open Mic

Ms. Ferrington said that after this meeting a survey will be distributed to SRC members. One purpose will be to obtain feedback about the meeting. The survey will also ask questions about a possible in person training in the fall – topics of interest, proposed dates, and any potential accommodation needs or travel expense requirements. The survey will also ask demographic questions such as questions about geographic location, race, ethnicity and disability. This information will help NASHIA create a tracker to use for future membership recruitment to ensure that the SRC is diversified.

The next Quarterly Meeting is on September 26th at 5:00 pm.

Chair Wood adjourned the meeting at 6:43 pm.