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

**September 26, 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, Rosanna Woodmansee, Commissioner Toni Wolf (Ex-Officio)
* **MassAbility Staff:** Kate Biebel, Jessica Cimini, Sahara Defensor, William Noone, Amy Karr
* **Other individuals present:** Liz Fancher, Kevin Goodwin, 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

# Call to Order

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

# Reading Of the Vision and Mission Statement:

Mr. LaMaster read the SRC Vision Statement and Mr. Higgins read the SRC Mission Statement.

# Approval of Meeting Minutes

No minutes were approved at this meeting.

# Old Business

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

Individuals whose applications are at the governor’s office are waiting to be appointed. Chair Wood and Mr. LaMaster are waiting for reappointment. Getting past the governor’s office takes some time, but it is the last phase.

* 1. **SRC Budget update – Heather Wood, Kate Biebel, Commissioner Wolf**

MassAbility only received a small percentage of the reallotment money requested. For many years MassAbility has successfully received the reallotment funds requested. This year MassAbility asked for $33 million and received $4 million. This will be primarily used for staff salaries. State staff salaries are funded by federal dollars, so state money is not used to cover salary increases. There is no funding for training or conferences. However, the Explore Possibility Summit is still going to be held.

# New Business

* 1. **Vote on revised SRC Bylaws – Jill Ferrington, Heather Wood, Sahara Defensor**

Ms. Ferrington shared the SRC Bylaws crosswalk document. **(See SRC Bylaws Crosswalk DRAFT clean 20240905.docx.)**

Significant changes:

* Section 5.01: Council is composed of “at least fifteen” members
* Section 5.03 in the previous bylaws was completely removed. Now “Ex-officio” is used as the federal regulations use it, to refer to the Commissioner and vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC) members of the SRC. Any others who were previously termed “Ex-officio” members are now members of the public, but their continued participation is encouraged and appreciated.
* Section 6.01(d): A “meaningful break in service” needed to be defined. It was decided that a person could be reappointed to a membership slot three years after the date the member’s last term ended.
* Section 6.02(b): – Adds language from the Technical Assistance Circular (TAC) from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) about membership vacancies not preventing the SRC from doing its work.
* Section 6.03: Added clarity about absences from meetings. More importantly, clarified that the SRC can forward a recommendation for a member to be removed to the Governor, but only the Governor can remove a member.
* Section 7: Removed mention of any officers except for vice chair.

There was a discussion about succession if the chair leaves. Does the vice chair automatically step up to the chair role? Currently the revised bylaws talk about the vice chair filling in for the chair but do not specify that the vice chair becomes chair if the chair leaves. There may be considerations – the vice chair may not want to serve as chair, or new members may come in and want to serve as chair. If the vice chair does assume the role of chair, it is only for the end of the original chair’s term, it does not reset the clock. There is an open opportunity for the SRC to consider if want to consider if we want automatic succession. The roles are important. There is a need for leadership prepping. Maybe build in some leadership training/prep during the chair’s last year? Maybe have elections three or six months before the end of the chair’s and vice chair’s terms? Perhaps this can be put in written procedures (as opposed to the bylaws).

* Section 9.01(b): Quorum has been defined as 51% of the voting members, excluding vacancies. This will make it easier to obtain quorum at meetings.

Additional changes:

* Prescriptive language from Open Meeting Law was added. This had not been in the bylaws previously.
* Added a time limit for ad hoc committees of one full calendar year.
* Moved away from a strict interpretation of Robert’s Rules of Order.
* Changed that a simple majority of the quorum must vote to approve changing the bylaws. The previous bylaws, and Robert’s Rules of Order, required that 2/3 of members must vote on changing bylaws.

It was noted that in the introduction to the bylaws on the first page of the document that MRC is used and that this needs to be changed to MassAbility.

The SRC’s Executive Order (EO) was changed to match federal regulations. In the SRC’s EO that was created in the 1990’s the SRC chose to increase its membership to 21, over the 15 that the federal regulations require. However, we have had a hard time maintaining full membership, which is why the EO was changed. Besides the membership number, other changes to the bylaws were made directly from the newly approved EO, such as the new diversity statement in section 4.02 of the bylaws.

Members were asked to vote on the changes to the bylaws. Results of the roll call vote follows:

Heather Wood Y

Joe Bellil Y

Naomi Goldberg Y

Steve Higgins Y

Steve LaMaster Y

Tay Silveira Y

The changes to the bylaws were approved unanimously, 7-0.

* 1. **NASHIA updates – Jill Ferrington**

Ms. Ferrington summarized what NASHIA has worked on with the SRC.

* Examined the committee structure of the SRC and compared that to the committees of the SRCs of other states.
* Helped developed the Ad Hoc Membership Committee. The committee helped develop the survey distributed after the June Quarterly meeting and provided suggestions for recruitment events and recruitment tools.
* Open Meeting Law (OML) analysis - some bylaws revisions developed out of this.
* Enhancing orientation and onboarding materials. Changes include providing a stronger explanation of the public vocational rehabilitation (VR) system and clarifying how the SRC interacts with the VR system. OML guidance was added to orientation materials, so that as members begin they have clarity on what is permissible and what they must avoid per OML.
* Bylaws were updated; revisions include relaxing Robert’s Rules of Orders, changes from the new EO, and addition of OML requirements.
* Additions to the SRC manual, which include chair tools, procedures and bylaws changes.
* Diversity, Inclusion, Equity and Accessibility (DEIA) work, which included accessing the current demographics of the SRC and reviewing the application tools. We created a membership and recruitment tool, which shows the current filled seats and the demographics of those members, and will be helpful when recruiting and nominating new members going forward.
* Onboarding and governance tools; work includes updating the already existing SRC Guidebook by inserting information from the new bylaws and EO, and also information about how to make meetings accessible.
* Recruitment and stronger diversity: The member survey (based on 10 responses) showed that most current members are in the Boston metro area. There will be a need to expand membership to those from the Western part of Massachusetts. NASHIA has prepared a list of Community Based Organizations for the SRC to use for possible outreach and recruitment. However, many members have also noted that the SRC should not overlook MassAbility offices as potential sources for members.

Commissioner Wolf thanked Ms. Ferrington for NASHIA’s incredible work.

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

The committee last met on August 21st.

At that meeting the committee reviewed MassAbility’s reviewed responses to the FY25 recommendations. There were five recommendations. Mr. Bellil is working with Mr. LaMaster to create a final document accepting the recommendations.

The committee also discussed getting SRC committee reports together for the SRC’s Annual Report. Mr. Bellil shared the template for the committee reports to be included in the Annual Report at the meeting. He will need committee reports by the beginning of October. He has done his for the State Plan Committee and Mr. LaMaster has done his for the BEO Committee.

Commissioner Wolf wonders whether there would be a value in messaging if MassAbility and the SRC combined their Annual Reports into one Annual Report. Bill Noone confirmed that it would be acceptable in terms of requirements. Once the Annual Report is finalized it is sent to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). Wolf – MassAbility and SRC’s Annual Reports. She is wondering whether there is a value in messaging in having one annual report including SRC with MassAbility’s annual report. This will be put on the agenda for the next Executive Committee meeting, which is next Thursday, October 3rd.

The next State Plan Committee meeting is on October 16th at 11:00 am.

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

The Committee last met on August 8th

At that meeting, there the committee heard about MassAbility’s consultation with Deloitte regarding its self-employment services. Deloitte provided MassAbility with four recommendations. **(See Deloitte recommendations to MRC Self Employment.pdf.)**

The committee also discussed helping MassAbility market the Disability Employment Tax Credit (DETC) now that the rebranding has occurred.

The next BEO Committee meeting is on October 10th at 1:00 pm.

1. DEIA Council update - Doug Mason

There is no update because the meeting that was to have occurred before this meeting was rescheduled to the following week.

Mr. Bellil noted that he will send the DEIA Council’s committee report to Mr. Bellil until after the council’s next meeting.

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

1. Membership Ad Hoc Committee – Naomi Goldberg

Ms. Goldberg summarized how the committee has been offering input into the work NASHIA has been doing.

* Suggested changes to the online SRC membership application to capture demographic information. This was discussed at a previous Executive Committee meeting but now that rebranding has happened this can be revisited.
* Changing language in SRC brochure to provide more information about what the SRC is about.
* The orientation slides for new members have been updated with information from the new bylaws.
* Using the recruitment tracking spreadsheet going forward the SRC will be able to use the demographic categories during recruitment in order to prioritize diversifying the council.
1. Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee (CSNAC) – Heather Wood

The committee last met on September 23rd.

At that meeting the committee reviewed the results of the Staff, Employer/Business and Provider/Vendor surveys.

The committee has decided to meet every other month going forward, instead of meeting quarterly.

At the next meeting the committee will discuss the results of the Consumer Experience Survey.

The next CSNAC meeting will be on November 18th at 5:00 pm.

* 1. **MassAbility Commissioner’s Update & Report - Commissioner Wolf**
* Rebranding: Many projects were being held until the name change was approved. MassAbility is now thinking about focusing on the employer side, helping businesses understand that it is good business to work with MassAbility. There is a video and there will be digital banners. Career Services is now the term being used for vocational rehabilitation, and Home and Community Life is new name for the community living division. Commissioner Wolf suggested that Colleen Casey from Communications come to an SRC meeting to talk about the SRC being a brand ambassador for MassAbility. It is exciting to have the new name, new logo, new colors. However, it is really about the people we serve. We have new language; language informs people’s thinking. We can talk more about this in December.
* Other outreach campaigns: In addition to focusing on reaching out to businesses, MassAbility is focusing on reaching out to young adults and the Asian‑American communities. MassAbility has received feedback that there is often much stigma felt by individuals with disabilities in the Asian‑American communities.
* Budget FY25 and funding: MassAbility asked for $33 million of reallotment funds but only received $4.8 million. We are prioritizing staff salaries. There may also be limited funds from the Commonwealth for VR. There are many demands put on the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS).
* Demand for MassAbility**:** The great news people is that people are finding MassAbility and applying for services. finding us. The outreach and marketing efforts are working. MRC Connect (whose name may be changed to Connect) is the one front door for people to access all MassAbility’s services at one time. Currently we receive about 1,500 applications per month, almost triple the number anticipated. Because of that large demand, it is not to get people through the door. However, once they are in the door eligibility is being done in one day. About 80% of people submitting applications ask for VR services. We want to make sure the counselors’ caseloads are manageable to maintain the integrity and high quality of the services. MassAbility is closely watching the volume of applications coming in.
* Explore Possibility Summit: This had to be rescheduled because of facility issues at the original location but is still going to be held in October. The first day is for job seekers and participants. The second day is particularly for providers, the people that we fund to provide career services and home care services to our participants. This year we want to help the providers understand why we our changing our name and our language and who MassAbility is as an agency.

Questions/comments for the Commissioner:

* How many of the applicants applying for VR services are found eligible?

Currently MassAbility does not require documentation from an applicant, just that the individual can articulate how their functional abilities impact their ability to go to work. This is a conversation between the individual and the eligibility screener. So right now, 100% of those applying are eligible for services.

* MassAbility requested about $33 million in reallotment funds and received about $4.8 million. Is there a possibility for a supplemental request at some point during the year?

MassAbility has met with RSA because of the dilemma we are facing with payroll costs going up and not receiving reimbursement from either the federal or state government. Disability Determination Services (DDS) is an arm under MassAbility, but the salary increases for that staff have been paid by the Social Security Administration (SSA), not RSA. MassAbility will report back to RSA. However, typically there is not another chance to go back to RSA and receive more funds.

MassAbility needs to be concerned with not only how much money it has but how quickly we can change our practices. We must be fiscally agile to spend less when necessary. We are doing things like thinking differently about how we use our offices; participants and staff both like the hybrid mode. So MassAbility is looking do things like reducing our office footprint that will not impact service delivery. We always want as much of our money as possible to go towards serving our consumers.

# Open Mic

Ms. Biebel announced that Bill Allen is retiring. Tomorrow, September 27th, is his final day. He has worked for the Commonwealth for 30 years.

Commissioner Wolf thanked the SRC. She praised the work reviewing the bylaws, looking at the diversity, honing in on the committees.

Chair Wood thanked Ms. Ferrington and NASHIA, the committee chairs and council members. She encouraged everyone to attend committee meetings.

The next SRC Quarterly Meeting is on December 12th at 5:00 pm.

Chair Wood adjourned the meeting at 7:02 pm.