

Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Meeting Minutes

September 22, 2023, 5-7pm EST

Please note: This meeting was held virtually.

Attendees:

- **Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Members:** Inez Canada (Chair), Joe Bellil, Rebecca Davis, Ronaldo Fujii, Naomi Goldberg, Steve LaMaster, Cheryl Scott, Christine Tosti, Heather Wood, Rosanna Woodmansee
- **SRC Ex Officio Members:** Amanda Baczko, Kate Biebel (MRC Deputy Commissioner), Liz Fancher, Kevin Goodwin, Doug Mason
- **Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff:** Commissioner Toni Wolf, William Allen, Colleen Casey, Jessica Cimini, Sahara Defensor, Emily McCaffrey, William Noone, Amy Karr
- **ASL Interpreters:** Meagan Cooney, Sharon Mendes
- **CART Provider:** Stefanie Farrell
- **Public:** Steve Higgins, Tay Silveira

1. Call to Order/Introductions

The meeting was called to order at 5:16 pm by the Chair.

Ms. Karr read off the meeting participant list.

Mr. Higgins, who is the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) representative until a permanent representative is appointed, introduced himself. Currently he is serving as the Chair of the SILC, and is the Executive Director of Independence Associates, Inc., one of ten Independent Living Centers (ILCs) in Massachusetts.

Tay Silveira, who recently applied to join the SRC, introduced herself. She is on the Commission on Disability of South Hadley, Massachusetts.

2. Reading Of the Vision and Mission Statement: Ms. Tosti read the SRC Mission and Vision Statement.

3. Approval of Meeting Minutes

Chair Canada called for a motion to approve the June 2023 Quarterly meeting minutes. Ms. Scott motioned for approval of the minutes. Ms. Woodmansee seconded. The June 2023 minutes were approved with no corrections.

4. Old Business

a. Vote on budget (Inez Canada)

This vote was tabled until a quorum was reached.

With a quorum present, Chair Canada read the budget items. Members had received the budget. **(See FY24 SRC Budget Request_ Revised 20230601.)** The total budget is \$47,090. At this point stipends for unemployed members with disabilities is not possible because it against current Massachusetts statutes. As discussed in a previous meeting, Ms. Defensor is going to look into the history of the laws currently prohibiting stipends for council members. Federal law does not make stipends mandatory. States can choose whether or not to provide stipends. Ms. Defensor encourages people to reach out to their legislators to advocate for changes in the law.

Chair Canada called for a motion to accept the budget. Mr. Fujii made the motion, it was seconded by Ms. Goldberg. The budget was approved by voice vote, which was recorded as follows:

Mr. Bellil	Yes
Ms. Davis	Yes
Mr. Fujii	Yes
Ms. Goldberg	Yes
Mr. LaMaster	Yes
Ms. Scott	Yes
Ms. Tosti	Abstained
Ms. Wood	Yes
Ms. Woodmansee	Yes
Chair Canada	Yes

The motion passed with 9 Yes votes and 1 Abstention.

b. Review Open Meeting Law (OML) Complaint filed 8/9/2023 (Inez Canada, Sahara Defensor)

This vote was tabled until a quorum was reached.

With a quorum present, Ms. Defensor discussed the issues raised in the OML complaint that was filed on 8/9/2023. Members had received the complaint. **(See OML Complaint Form August 9 2023_Redacted.)**

OML requires a body respond within 14 days of receiving the complaint. Discussion of the complaint had been scheduled in August and September, but a quorum was not reached at either of those meetings. The Attorney General's Office (AGO) gave an extension for response until tomorrow, September 22nd. The SRC can vote to have legal counsel Ms. Defensor respond to the complaint. The response will be sent to the complainant and to the AGO.

Chair Canada called for a motion to allow legal counsel Ms. Defensor to respond to the complaint. Ms. Goldberg made the motion; it was seconded by Mr. Fujii. The motion was approved by voice vote, which was recorded as follows:

Mr. Bellil	Yes
Ms. Davis	Yes
Mr. Fujii	Yes
Ms. Goldberg	Yes
Mr. LaMaster	Yes
Ms. Scott	Yes
Ms. Tosti	No
Ms. Wood	Yes
Ms. Woodmansee	Yes
Chair Canada	Yes

The motion passed with 9 Yes votes and 1 No vote.

The response is a public document so it will be available. A member asked if a public record request would be required to obtain the response. It was explained that there are two types of public records. One type is those that are required to be posted by law, the other is those that are not posted. A public record request must be made to see items internal to the SRC or MRC. It will be necessary to submit a public record request to obtain the response.

5. New Business

a. Elect new SRC Chair

This vote was tabled until a quorum was reached.

With a quorum present, the Chair opened the floor for nominations. Chair Canada nominated Ms. Heather Wood. A request was made for other nominations. A member discussed wanting to nominate another person who was not present at the meeting. That person had resigned from the SRC so would not be eligible for nomination. There were no other nominations. The floor was closed for nominations.

The Chair asked Ms. Wood if she would do accept the nomination. Ms. Wood accepted the nomination. The Chair asked her to tell the council why she would like to be chair. Ms. Wood spoke about herself. Ms. Wood stated she appreciated Chair Canada's faith in nominating her. Ms. Wood has spent most of her career supporting and advocating for people with disabilities. She started as a hotel restaurant manager, but learned she wanted to be a teacher. She loved working with students in special education. She became a wheelchair user after her son was born and had to advocate for herself. She worked for the Executive Director of the Massachusetts chapter of the United Spinal Association, advocating for people with spinal injuries. She has worked with MRC in many stages of her life; first as a teacher, then as a consumer of MRC services, now back in the classroom. She is completing a certification program in Transition Leadership at UMass Boston this fall. She is doing her practicum in school now. She made a lot of great professional connections. Ms. Wood hopes to bring her knowledge and energy to the SRC.

The Chair called for a vote on Ms. Heather Wood as the next SRC chair. Ms. Wood was elected chair by voice vote, which was recorded as follows:

Mr. Bellil	Yes
Ms. Davis	Yes
Mr. Fujii	Yes
Ms. Goldberg	Yes
Mr. LaMaster	Yes
Ms. Scott	Yes
Ms. Tosti	Abstained
Ms. Wood	Yes
Ms. Woodmansee	Yes
Chair Canada	Yes

The motion passed with 9 Yes votes and 1 Abstention

Chair Canada welcomed Ms. Wood to being Chair. Chair Canada will be available to help with the transition in SRC leadership and she and Ms. Wood will work out who will chair the December SRC Quarterly meeting.

Chair Canada believes Ms. Wood will do a great job, and is a great next step for the SRC. Other members praised Ms. Wood's background and are looking forward to working with her.

Ms. Wood thanked the SRC for its faith in her, she is touched and excited. She is looking forward to getting to know the members better and working together to move the SRC forward. She has many ideas and is eager to share them.

b. Committee Reports

Since a quorum was not yet in attendance, Chair Canada asked the Committees to give report. She noted that we would revisit the items up for vote once a quorum was in attendance.

i. State Plan Committee (Joe Bellil)

The last meeting was on August 9th. The committee reviewed the MRC response to the FY24 recommendations. Mr. Bellil still needs the responses from the Consumer Satisfaction/Needs Assessment Committee from Mr. Fujii.

The next State Plan meeting is on October 18th at 11:00 AM.

ii. Policy Committee (Naomi Goldberg)

The last committee meeting was on August 9th. The committee finished working on its second FY23 recommendation, making fact sheets for VR consumers, and will send the sheets to MRC.

The committee has now started to receive, on behalf of the SRC, a summary of appeal decisions from MRC. At the last meeting the committee reviewed a summary of appeal decisions from the last part of 2022 and early 2023, ten cases in total. The decisions were made by fair hearings and administrative review. Most of the appeals were about case closures. Two case closures were upheld; one was settled before fair hearing. One case involved a consumer being denied funding for college because the training was not consistent with services provided by VR. The Client Assistance Program (CAP) was involved in a few cases. This overview was provided to give the SRC an idea of the appeals and decisions occurring. The committee will continue to receive this summary twice per year and will share reports with the SRC.

The October Policy Committee is cancelled. The next Policy Committee meeting is on December 7th at 11:00 AM.

iii. DEIA Council update (Doug Mason)

The council last met on Tuesday September 19th. The council has existed for some time and now has more forward movement. The most recent meeting primarily focused on retention, recruiting and affirmative action regarding MRC staffing. When comparing agency statistics to statewide statistics women, veterans and people with disabilities are underrepresented among MRC staff. MRC and the council are in the process of developing ways to identify people in those categories who might be interested in working for the agency. The council is also looking at the latest statistics from the consumer survey to use consumer concerns to create methods to move the agency forward. Commissioner Wolf said the statistic of 14% of staff being people with disabilities does exceed the state figure, but that does not mean the agency does not want to improve. The employment of veterans is still a challenge. Promotions of people of color account for 37% of the MRC workforce promotions, but there is a need to do more to place them in leadership roles. Mr. Mason agrees that MRC is doing well overall, but improvement is needed in certain areas.

The next DEIA Council meeting is on October 17th at 12 pm.

A quorum was reached once Mr. Fujii joined the meeting. Chair Canada paused the committee reports to address the tabled items that needed a vote.

After the votes, the committee reports resumed.

iv. Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee (Ronaldo Fujii)

Mr. Fujii had to leave the meeting early, so his report was not shared. The last CSNAC meeting was on August 21st.

The next CSNAC meeting is October 16th at 5 pm.

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

Mr. LaMaster had to leave meeting early, so his report was not shared. The last BEO Committee meeting was August 17th.

The next BEO meeting is October 12th at 1:00 pm.

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

Ms. Scott noted that the MassHire Workforce Board is making progress on the overall State Plan that is due March 2024. Mr. Noone and Joan Phillips are participating. Ms. Scott will contact Mr. Bellil. At the December Quarterly meeting there can be a progress update. A draft of the State Plan will be available for that meeting. The update will be added to the agenda for the December Quarterly Meeting. The new director of the MassHire Workforce Board will be Darien Johnson.

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

Commissioner Wolf is pleased that Ms. Wood will take on the role of SRC Chair, and is excited to work with her. Commissioner Wolf also appreciates everything Chair Canada has done in her role, and congratulates her on her new job.

- **Budget**

The Governor's budget is later than usual. There is a challenge with contracts.

The total MRC budget is \$84.9 million; the VR portion is \$19 million. MRC had requested an additional \$3.9 million and was told there was support for the request, but did not receive it. The Massachusetts Independent Living Centers (ILCs) also did not receive the additional \$2 billion they requested. Commissioner Wolf will meet with legislators to find out what MRC could have done differently.

There is still \$25 million remaining from FY23. There is a possibility of a federal government shutdown. It will be a problem if the shutdown duration is longer than the time the \$25 million will last. MRC has not yet received FY24 funding. That is not unusual, but MRC is eager to receive it.

MRC has applied for reallocation money. When VR does not spend all the allocated funds, the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) can provide VR with a one time payment to be used for special projects, not staffing. MRC is pleased they have received \$11.2 million reallocation. It will be used to enhance IT equipment, for the case management system, to add further accessibility measures, event planning, and FY24 VR statewide training. Some funds will be for events, for strategic messaging and rebranding. It is required that 15% of the funds be used for Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). That is a reason some VR programs do not use all the funds; Massachusetts does use the funds.

- **Staffing**

The position for Hyannis area director has finally been filled after being vacant for two years. The long time vacancy caused difficulty for staff and for moving forward.

There is new leadership training and coaching. MRC is being attentive about the needs of new people coming in.

Commissioner Wolf attended an event with providers. There is a need to recruit and retain people to build the workforce. Every agency has talked about vacancies, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining people. There will be more to come on this.

- **Workforce**

A lot of energy is going into DEIA, increasing the diversity. MRC is above the state benchmarks in employment of people of color and people with disabilities. MRC has worked at outreach, how to recruit and retain people. Of MRC managers, 38% are minorities, 14% are people with disabilities. MRC is focusing on people with disabilities and people of color, particularly men of color. Employment of veterans is also a difficult area. MRC is looking to increase percentages further above the state benchmarks.

Commissioner Wolf had missed the most recent DEIA Council meeting and asked Mr. Mason if he wanted to add anything. Mr. Mason said the council has asked for further breakdown of employment figures, looking at figures per geographic area, trying to see what problems may exist and if they can be fixed. It is self-defeating if the agency recruits new people but loses current employees.

Commissioner Wolf also stated MRC must ensure equity in the population that receives its services. Mr. Noone said MRC is looking at this regularly. In particular, African Americans and Hispanics tend to work more hours for less money. This is sometimes due to the types of jobs people are choosing or being placed into. Currently only 20% of the people MRC serves go into high salary jobs. It may be that some people do want to obtain certain jobs, such as retail jobs, but MRC does have an obligation to inform consumers of higher wage industries, and that training may be possible to help obtain those positions. MRC wants to ensure that consumers are considering jobs that pay more money and provide a career path. Commissioner Wolf will ask the DEIA for assistance towards this goal.

MRC is focusing on job-driven training. Some consumers received 9 months of cyber security training, received stipends during the training, and then got jobs paying \$80,000 at the start. NextGen is another opportunity for consumers to obtain jobs with higher wages.

Currently 48% of people served have psychiatric disabilities, 16% have learning disabilities. The population MRC serves changes, and MRC has to change to reflect that. People with disabilities are not only wheelchair users. The average age of those applying for MRC services is 33, often people who were in the workforce and left.

About 2,823 consumers were placed in employment. About 15,000 are served, so that figure is not high enough. There were 10,213 new VR referrals. Currently 21,000 consumers are receiving services.

When MRC closed cases, it used to be hard for people to go back to MRC and receive services again. That is no longer the case. People need to know that they can leave MRC and then return.

MRC has received \$16.1 million dollars through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) that is to be spent by March 2025. It will be used for assistive technology equipment and training, home modifications such as wheelchair ramps, and support from ILCs.

- **MRC Connect**

There were 786 intakes in July. In August there were 1600, double the volume of July. That jump was not anticipated. The good news is that more people want to know about MRC. The bad news is that MRC cannot keep up. The wait is now up to seven weeks. Once people do get appointments, they go through the system quickly. The challenge is getting the initial appointment. Overtime was used for the first time in July and August. Staff has committed to handle the volume. There are over 30 employees in the MRC Connect eligibility unit. Looking at technology and what further streamlining can be done.

Members were asked for their questions and comments.

- There was a discussion about the counselor to consumer ratio. Currently it is 1:30, better than in some states. The additional \$3.9 million MRC requested but did not receive would have reduced VR caseloads. MRC will still try to reduce caseloads. Waiting to see if the August figure of 1,600 intakes is a fluke. August has traditionally been a busy month for MRC because people are getting ready for college and sometimes get referred to MRC for support and assistance. For years the counselor to consumer ratio was 1:60 and sometimes higher. MRC wants VR counselors to keep engaged and does not want to lose counselors because of large caseloads. MRC will observe the intake figure over the next months to see if it is consistently trending up. For the first time the data is centralized for examination. California has been innovative; a California VR commissioner is coming to Massachusetts so Massachusetts can learn with a goal of improving the process.
- There was a discussion about what is being done to recruit and retain men of color at MRC. MRC is doing an analysis of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis), and is working with the DEIA roadmap team. The DEIA Council is also looking at this. MRC is working with recruiters to help establish its commitment to a diverse workforce. The state efforts around that are very high level. There has been a recruitment pilot program over the last six months; the data has not yet been examined. The belief is that recruitment has to be more personal and very targeted. Commissioner Wolf made trying different things a priority a year ago. For NextGen staff the requirements were altered so that VR counselors do not need master's degrees. The MRC Connect team is diverse and that is in part because requirements were changed. MRC would like to change requirements for VR counselors. VR taught in master's degree programs may not always reflect the current VR needs. The Massachusetts requirement for a master's degree may be a recruitment barrier. Some of the reallocation funds will be used to look at best practices for workforce recruitment and retention.

A member asked why black men in general are hard to reach. The MRC figures about men of color in leadership roles were distressing but not surprising. Commissioner Wolf agreed that there is still much work to be done.

d. Rebranding (Colleen Casey)

Ms. Casey thanked everyone for attending. A few weeks ago, the new name was announced to the Executive Committee, but Commissioner Wolf asked that the new name not be shared at today's meeting. Waiting for governor to sign so can release the name. It is hoped the governor signs and releases the new name before January 2024. There will be a new website and materials

The brand is not just the name. It incorporates the thoughts and feelings evoked when people hear the name. The brand will help to express that we are a more progressive, thoughtful, caring agency looking to break down barriers at the individual and societal levels.

Some reallocation funds will be used for rebranding. The new brand will help with engaging employers and for recruitment. Some videos have been finalized. The rebranding will be in at least ten languages, including ASL, for high accessibility.

Ms. Casey congratulated Ms. Wood on her becoming chair, and stated she will be in touch with Mr. Bellil. Ms. Casey may be asked to present at the December Quarterly meeting or once the official launch occurs.

6. Open Mic

A member stated she is excited to be working with her VR counselor towards self-employment as an incarceration diversion consultant and to bring dogs into jails. She shared the following link:

<https://uncommonwealthgroup.com>.

Mr. Higgins thanked the SRC for allowing him to attend today's meeting. At the Explore Possibility Summit the Massachusetts Statewide Independent Living Council was able to gather input from attendees for the State Plan due next June. They received 200% more responses than expected; it was a great opportunity.

Chair Canada attended the summit in person. Her first CAP client attended. This client was working towards a bachelor's degree when she worked with CAP. She has now received a master's degree in social work, will be promoted when she receives her license, and will no longer need benefits. Chair Canada was pleased to learn of this as she is ending her position with CAP.

Ms. Scott mentioned the MassReconnect program, newly launched by the Governor, that provides free community college for those 25 and older. She shared the following link:

<https://www.mass.edu/osfa/programs/massreconnect.asp>

Chair Canada called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Goldberg motioned to adjourn. Ms. Scott seconded the motion. Meeting was adjourned at 7:01 pm.