

Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Meeting Minutes

June 16th, 2022, 5-7pm EST

Please note: this meeting was held virtually.

Attendees:

- **Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Members:** Christine Tosti, Ellie Starr, Ronaldo Fujii, Joe Bellil, Dawn Clark, Katie Queally, Inez Canada, Rosanna Woodmansee, Naomi Goldberg, Olympia Stroud
- **SRC Ex Officio Members:** Commissioner Toni Wolf, Deputy Commissioner Kate Biebel, Amanda Baczko, Doug Mason, Kevin Goodwin, Liz Fancher (DDC), Sadie Simone (SILC),
- **Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Staff:** Nick Pizzolato, Colleen Casey, Michelle Banks, Joan Phillips, Bill Noone, Bill Allen, Selina Boria, Jessica Cimini
- **Public:** Ben Elwy

Old Business

1. **Call to Order/Introductions**
 - a. Meeting was called to Order at 5:00pm by the Chair.
2. **Reading Of the Mission Statement:** Mr. Fujii read the MRC Mission and Vision Statement
3. **Moment of Silence:** Chair Canada led a moment of silence to honor the lives lost due to gun violence. Chair Canada pointed meeting attendees to mental health resources shared in the calendar invitation to support members and their loved ones.
4. **Introductions:** The group went around and introduced themselves verbally and in the chat.
5. **Approval of Meeting Minutes**
 - a. Ms. Canada called for a motion to approve the 2022 March Quarterly meeting minutes. Mr. Bellil motioned for approval of the minutes. Ms. Starr seconded. Minutes were approved with no corrections.
6. **Discussion and Vote on proposed SRC Budget**
 - a. Quorum was not met; the Council was unable to discuss or vote on this item.
 - b. Per Bylaws, we can conduct a mail or telephone vote; Chair was unsure if "mail" can interpret to include "email" vote. Governor appointed members will receive an email regarding voting options.
7. **Discussion and Vote on State Plan FY23 Recommendations**
 - a. Quorum was not met; the Council was unable to discuss or vote on this item. The same process applied for the budget applies for the FY23 Recommendations.

The voting items were tabled to see if the Council would reach quorum later in the meeting.

8. **New Business**
 - a. **Committee Reports:** Committee reports were shared in written form. The Chair recognized the MRC Team to start their presentations.
 - b. **MRC Updates, Presentations and Q&A**
 - i. **NextGen Project- Michelle Banks, Joan Phillips**

- Ms. Banks walked through a power point presentation on a new innovative grant at MRC, called NextGen Careers.
- Overview- MRC received \$17 million dollars from Rehabilitation Services Administration for five years. This is a demonstration project focused on improving long-term outcomes for young adults 18-30. The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind and Massachusetts Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing are partners on this work
- All young adults are eligible to participate in NextGen, but we are conducting additional targeted outreach to those with intellectual disabilities, etc.
- Core components of NextGen careers includes a multidisciplinary integrated resource team, career preparedness, career pathways, and career extended supports.
- **NextGen Careers** is focused on Self CARES (self-capacity, self-advocacy, self-realization, self-sufficiency)
- The service delivery approach is unique from standard Vocational Rehabilitation. Standard VR provides career mentoring, one on one support from VR counselors, compliance focus, and large caseloads. NextGen Careers is focused on mentoring, a team approach to service delivery, use of apprenticeships and internships, career portfolios, and smaller caseloads.
- Staff roles include peer mentors, counselors, employment success specialist, benefits counselors, specialty counselor role, family specialist, and supervisor
- Partnership between NextGen and SRC: to share information about NextGen, to have SRC advise on recruitment and service strategies, MRC will provide periodic updates regarding progress and challenges/successes.
- **Question & Answer:**
 - a. Who do we send individuals who fit the criteria to?
 - i. We are inviting participants in starting in October, which will begin with outreach. If you currently have people who you want to refer, you can reach out to Michelle Banks (michelle.banks@mass.gov) and David Sykes (David.Sykes@mass.gov)
 - b. Why are you using the STEM acronym instead of STEAM? We have worked with artists beyond challenges trying to access self-employment, so we want to make sure art is not forgotten.
 - i. As we help young people with Self CARES and they identify places they want to pursue competitive employment, art will not be off the table. We are using STEM because it's a common name for science and technology careers that can get on promising career paths. Staff will be ready to support in all fields, including art! The grant request for responses was also focused on STEM careers, so NextGen is embracing STEM to help with being responsive to the funders. Additionally, we want to focus and prioritize on career ladder positions and living wage focused positions.
 - c. Will there be a role or liaison to partner with STEM employers? Preparing young adults for careers is great, but we also want to build the bridge to employers.

- i. We will be hiring Employment Specialists who will be responsible for identifying employment opportunities, speaking with hiring managers, and tapping into the expertise of our statewide employment specialist group to tap into this.
 - d. Is NextGen focused more on young adults, or K-12?
 - i. We are focused on young adults, 18-30.
 - e. Is there a connection with adult continued learning, HiSET or GED connections for young adults who may not have completed high school? Ms. Stroud works within adult education and offered her support in addition to this question.
 - i. Yes, we will build connections to HiSET and GED programs. Young adults will get to choose the member of the team who is the best person to usher towards the preferred goal, including education completion.
 - ii. Ms. Stroud provided the HiSET website via chat: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/hse/>
 - f. Can you talk about the particular focus on employment for NextGen as opposed to a focus on continued education or college?
 - i. Someone who is a strong fit for NextGen is a person who may want professional certifications or short-term education. Someone who is interested in a four-year degree may be a better fit for traditional MRC VR services.
 - g. What is the target number of people that NextGen grant hopes to serve across five years?
 - i. We are aiming to serve 1,000 individuals
 - h. For people who want a short-term program (certificate), what does the difference look like in the workforce? If you go into employment in STEM with a certificate as compared to a four-year degree, how will that look for an employer?
 - i. There are some certificates that lead directly to employment in high pay career-based job. For example, individuals completing the MRC 9-month cyber security training happening at local community colleges are entering careers at a starting wage at \$60,000-80,000. The focus of NextGen will be in connecting young adults to certificates that have direct feeders into professional career paths
- c. **Rebranding- Colleen Casey, Nick Pizzolato**
 - i. Ms. Casey and Mr. Pizzolato provided an overview of what a brand is, and why it matters to an Agency like MRC. MRC is looking to partner with the SRC to elevate the work of MRC, as well as the work of the SRC. MRC considers the SRC ambassadors for our Agency, and our new brand! The rebrand was vetted through multiple stakeholders and the disability community, including members of the SRC
 - ii. The rebrand has started with development of a new MRC mission and vision. Ms. Casey described the importance of having an action-based mission and vision that is simple and easy to understand.
 - iii. The core principles of the MRC brand were covered including:
 - people first
 - we are change agents

- community matters
 - our work is for all
- iv. The new brand focuses on images and stories of individuals MRC serves. The images in the power point are actual photos of people who have received MRC services and have shared their stories and service experiences.
 - v. Examples were shared during the presentation on the shift in MRC language to be more simple, active, and easy to understand
 - vi. The new MRC elevator pitch was reviewed: *Together with stakeholders, partners and allies, MRC collaborates, problem solves, and innovates to bring about a better Massachusetts for everyone- one that is truly equitable, accessible, and inclusive*
 - vii. MRC has developed a signature marketing piece that brings together all the pieces of the rebrand, the new language, and an overview of MRC services and contact information.
 - viii. MRC released information in English and ten other languages all at the same time.
 - ix. Rebranding the SRC and More: MRC is working with SRC teams to update the look and feel of the SRC information and messaging. The Business and Employment Opportunities Committee has been supporting updating of new information, and will support a logo, and updated fonts and visuals to support SRC materials (Annual Report, etc.)
 - x. Question and Answers:
 - Question: What is the difference between the brand presented today and the brand presentation to other programs doing different levels of service delivery?
 - a. In the Commonwealth there has been a lot of emphasis on public awareness campaigns. A lot of these campaigns come back to a solid brand strategy. However, for MRC, we needed to start at the beginning to ensure MRC is not the best kept secret in the Commonwealth, so we needed to start at the foundation with the brand message.
 - Question: Is there going to be a separate focus on consumer facing materials? Does that happen after the general rebrand happens?
 - a. The first step of the rebrand was to develop the mission and vision, core principles, and how we talk about ourselves. Now that we have our brand guide, we are starting to go through all MRC services and programs to develop targeted outreach materials. The Communications Department will ensure we reach out to SRC Committees to include them in the review of drafted programmatic language.
 - Comment: I like the look, feel and language as someone who has looked at a ton of branding and marketing. I hope the resources will be put behind this beautiful brand to launch this into the world
 - Comment: Congratulations, looking into the language I lost myself in the old language. To flash read the new language was a lot easier and this change is much needed. We need to think about our consumers and clients are going to perceive the language. It would be nice to bring this to the consumers to see what the impact has been there. It would be nice to put together a survey and impact assessment for language.

- a. We will work to bring in impact questions for the consumer experience survey like “where did you hear about MRC” and “Did you see our branding campaign”
 - Question: In addition to a survey, can we also conduct a forum to get live feedback? We sometimes lose people, especially BIPOC individuals, when we don’t create spaces outside of a survey.
 - a. MRC is conducting focus groups with underserved populations.
 - Comment: Can we bring in more diversity for our Disability Inclusion Leaders in the rebranding materials?
- d. **MRC Update:**
 - i. VR Operations and what’s happening today: People are still working remotely, we are asking VR staff to come into the Office two days a week, and to emphasize in person work. Some staff and consumers are hesitant to get out in the community, but we are continuing to support and educate to find a better balance.
 - ii. Prior to the pandemic, we were serving 21,000 people, today we are only serving 15,000. We are aware the outreach and marketing are critical to help get these numbers back. We need to think differently about community outreach and getting on the ground to recruit.
 - iii. Space: MRC is working to co-locate with other agencies for physical space as part of embracing the modern workplace, as we don’t need as much physical space. We are reducing our footprint with our leases and partnering with Department of Transitional Assistance to co-locate and work together to serve the disability community.
 - Taunton is planning to move in December to the DTA Co-Location site, that is currently next door.
 - For our Southbridge Office, we also planned to host a co-location. However, we have found that the physical DTA building is not accessible. Due to supply issues, construction has been very slow, which has delayed this move.
 - iv. MRC Explore Possibility Summit: This will take place August 18th in person in Marlborough. We will be disseminating a save the date and slotting invites for the SRC members. Currently, members of the SRC Committee will also be supporting the planning efforts.
 - v. We are disseminating our quarterly disability newsletter in July to support young adult services and how to be culturally responsive to young adults.
 - vi. Fiscal picture- we are in strong shape and finalizing the plan for our new fiscal year budget. There are a lot of federal dollars out there, and we have developed a lot of new initiatives to build off those funds. Our CFO is proactively forecasting the long-term budgeting expectations for federal dollar changes (slotted for 2025), as we want to be responsive over the next 3-5 years, so we are not negatively impacted when funding changes.
 - vii. MRC reverted state and federal dollars and have been hearing on a national level that this is happening to VR agencies all over the Country. The amount of dollars we are spending per individuals served has increased, meaning people are getting more services. However, due to the pandemic, we are seeing less people. We were able to reverse the amounts of funding we had to revert due to creativity from the VR field and the Fiscal Team.

- viii. Our provider network is struggling with staffing, as is MRC. We have 80-90 positions we are struggling to fill, so it's been challenging for VR to not be able to refer people to providers.
- ix. Question and Answer:
- Question: Where are the reports that share the amounts of dollars per person?
 - a. MRC conducted a Town Hall on Monday with MRC staff. Commissioner Wolf will share the slides from that presentation
 - b. CIES is our Competitive Integrated Employment Services, which is one tool where vendors assist consumers finding jobs with placement, and job support. This is where we spend the largest chunk of overall VR dollars. This is the most significant increase we've ever seen and is based on helping providers to get out of the struggle to not hire, resulting in a 23% increase. The impact for us is a little over 1.6 million dollars, which will go to providers this next fiscal year
 - Question: I enjoyed the way you talk about the modern office. Is MRC planning to target companies that provide remote work opportunities, and conducting training programs with places like CVS for remote employers?
 - a. Many employers have more opportunities for remote work which is great for many of our consumers. We are on top of that, our placement team within their account management structure, are working to ensure our consumers are prepared for remote work
 - Question: On the consumer side, is MRC thinking about talking to counselors to do training programs to educate consumers regarding new things like remote etiquette (e.g., presenting on a visual screen)?
 - a. MRC started offering training for individuals referred to placement team, and everyone was interested, and it's now moved to the VR field to allow all consumers to get training. The strategy is also including providing technology to consumers.
 - b. With remote work and self-employment, it's been a big topic now that people are invested in staying home. Two of our offices have pushed out self-employment strategies which are going to be disseminated agency wide for case examples to push opportunities for self-employment and the modern workplace.
 - Question: When reverting funds, we try to be as creative as possible. We have a budget for the SRC, can we use the funds there?
 - a. The spending in state government has been very challenging as there are strict categories we have to respond to. There is a big challenge in thinking about how State Government should and can be more fluid.

Quorum was not reached during the meeting. The discussion and votes on the budget and recommendations will be taken up next time the SRC meets with a quorum present.

9. Open Meeting:

- a. **Suggestion about funding reversion:** There are several students who receive MRC services who have been denied funds for college and books. It would be nice to see if anyone has been denied funding if we have extra dollars to spend. Can MRC be more proactive about seeking out consumers that meet the eligibility for receiving post-secondary support?

- i. VR Offices do have some limitations and thresholds to funding for things like education. However, there is a waiver process to go beyond these max obs.
- ii. Is the waiver process written down, where can consumers locate them?
 - The Waiver process is within the Max Ob policy, which gets issued twice a year to staff.
 - There is also a one pager that can and should be disseminated to consumers.
 - MRC sends this to the SRC as well: MRC will make sure that the SRC has the updated Maximum Obligation Policy.

The Chair called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Mason motioned to adjourn. Mr. Fujii seconded.
Meeting was adjourned at 6:51pm.