

Harrisburg District Office  
Citizens' Advisory Committee  
December 23, 2020

In attendance:

Rodger Simmons, Chair

Cathy Long, Secretary

Bobbi Simmons, previous customer

Frank Abror, previous BBVS VR Supervisor

Jessica Hanula, Supervisor, Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services

John Horst, Vice-Chair

Patrick Kane, VR Supervisor, Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Melissa Carney, Director of Outreach and Engagement, Pennsylvania Council of the Blind

Norma Flinchbaugh, customer

Wesley Davenport, customer

Richard Bradford, Lancaster

Nicole Wade, District Administrator, Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services

Amy Moore, Assistant District Administrator, Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Minutes were sent out in draft form of the September, 2020 CAC minutes. Rodger asked for a motion to approve these minutes as distributed. John Horst made that motion. Cathy seconded the motion, just to get it on the table. Motion passed unanimously. No additions or corrections.

Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Report: Pat Kane and Amy Moore. Halfway through the state year, the goal for 2020 and 2021 from July, 2020 to June, 2021 is 223. BVRS is at 89 or 39% of the total goal. Doing great, considering COVID-19. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is tele-working and not meeting with customers face-to-face. It's all done by phone or email, and snail mail. No disrespect meant to the United States Post Office. Tele-work continues through June, 2021 and possibly beyond that point. Internal field staff: hiring freeze but this situation may change in the beginning of 2021, (next month).

On 12/03/2020 Pat listened to the Pennsylvania State Rehabilitation Board meeting. Shannon Austin, Executive Director, updated the Board. Now the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services has a Director. Other mission-critical executives have been hired as well. Hopefully field staff can be hired to replace vacancies soon.

Ms. Austin reported that 3,500 people from the waiting list are being served. Presently about 13,500 customers were moved from the waiting list to a status that allows services to begin for them. This resulted in 1,633 closures between the two Bureaus as of 12/03/2020.

BVRS is moving forward with an Early Reach Academy virtually. It will occur this summer. This project will concentrate on students who are in high school but plan

to continue on to college. BVRS is using Penn State Middletown campus and previously put on a two to three-week program. This past summer it was cancelled, but this summer with COVID-19 still with us, students will attend virtually. Early days for this project.

The Business Services Division is working on having a virtual job fair. That will happen in February, 2021 or March, 2021 (to be announced). We want to take advantage of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, and that was two months ago, in October, 2020. What happened? The vendor the Commonwealth was working with discontinued the relationship and the Commonwealth had difficulty locating another vendor to carry on with the project. Now Central Office is working with a vendor, so it will happen soon. That should help employers and customers to come together and employers will hire people looking for work! All customers will be apprised of the up-coming job fair.

Ms. Austin did mention the idea of measurable skills and the importance of it. BVRS and BBVS must document results of training. Example: Junior College. What were the take-aways for the customer and the agency? Customers must be passing their classes and advancing to the second year of Junior College, for example. This is consistent with WIOA, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Pat stated that his District Administrator, Tracey Mailee, did want to come to this meeting which was supposed to occur last week. Due to technical difficulties, the meeting is taking place today and she is not available. We reviewed what happened so we do not have a repeat of it. This is not worth revisiting it for the sake of these minutes. However, Pat promised to get a new Skype code after this meeting and when he does, he can disseminate it to the Chair and Secretary at least, and then to all those on the mail distribution list in the hope that some will join us in March.

Frank Abror asked if the agency has studied the impact that the Business Services Division has made on customers obtaining employment and retaining jobs. Pat is unaware of that. However, WIOA has added mandates that the agency work directly with businesses. This Business Services Division came into being, replacing the Placement services. These placement services mainly were worked on in Central Office. Certainly with Business Services now located in District Offices, there would most likely result in a higher positive impact on employment for customers. This agency is in contact with more employers than it ever has been before. More employers are contacting the agency to hire customers with the skills they need. Sounds like a win-win to me! Frank stated that because of the positive impact, the Board would not hesitate to provide additional funding or approving the program. At the OVR board meeting, various groups spoke, including the Business Services Division. Amy Moore also concurs. Evaluating and collecting data for the feds require this through the WIOA. Also, our new Executive Director is looking for new measures to be able to determine outcomes. What things work? What needs to be changed and improved? A big part of that is the employer engagement piece. This is something the agency has been doing a good job on. Most particularly, thanks to Jeff of Business Services Division, and to Pat Kane, and they spend time educating

employers so that there is a long-term relationship. BVRS and BBVS is really working with employers to answer questions for them, to let employers know that the agency is here for them with lots of customers with the skill set employers need. The agency is here for support to both the customer and employer and there are numerous services that the Business Services Division can offer. It's all good!

Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services report: Jessica Hanula. Customers just came off the waiting list. Customers are now being placed in plan status. BBVS is working as fast as they can. BBVS has three VR counselors. 257 customers are working with BBVS staff. Year to date the goal is 43 for the year. 10 closed cases. Working to meet the goal before the end of the fiscal year, be it federal or state. Jessica believes BBVS will meet its goal by June 30, 2021, so it's state fiscal year we are considering.

There are 110 customers in the Independent Living Older Blind program. There is only one Social Worker for that program. The Social work supervisor is assisting with helping the customers with their application for services.

There are 230 children in the Specialized Services-Children's Program. Specialized Services-Adult program has ten customers in this program. Vocational Rehabilitation is the preferred choice for adults who are hoping to become employed. The goal for Social work goal is 32 and so far 28 successful closures have occurred. They are going to make it for sure!

The Orientation and Mobility program has three workers providing services. The goal is 73. Currently four are closed because these workers cannot work face-to-face with these customers. Partial assessments are being done, with virtual contacts. A case cannot be closed until the worker and the customer have been out in the field together.

The Vision Rehabilitation Therapy program has three VRT's and they are fully staffed. Actually, there are 2.5 workers. One of these workers is certified for VRT and also orientation and mobility, so she has some customers from both programs. There are 75 on the caseload with a goal of 50. Currently four successful closures. The reason for the low closure rate is the same as that of the Orientation and Mobility. Right now the VRT's cannot meet virtually with their customers.

The Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services runs a Summer Academy which is different than the Early Outreach Academy that BVRS does. They changed the name. The new name is Strive On! Applications are being accepted. The agency is reaching out to school districts and customers to entice customers to apply for the program.

Note: the Business Services section also serves customers of the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services. Looking forward to putting on a virtual job fair, either in the winter or spring of 2021.

John Horst asked how the goals for expected successful Rehabilitation closures are determined. We were told by Nicole Wade that goals are set by Central Office. We do not know how Central Office determines the goal. In light of COVID-19, this is a reasonable goal, but generally seems low in normal times.

Frank asked who is the Director of Field Operations for BBVS now? He was told that Anne Strollo, former District Administrator, Altoona District Office, has taken the position, about the same time that Rod Alcidonis became Director of BBVS. Anne is working virtually and is Acting Director of Field Operations. At the time of this meeting, the position had not been posted for a permanent position. If she becomes permanent, she could work virtually three days a week and be in Central Office two days a week depending on the need.

Frank had questions about eligibility determination criteria. This refers to tax returns and review of them to determine customer's income. It could change at the time of assessment which could happen much later than the tax return. Pat Kane replied that income tax returns are not used in eligibility determination. Eligibility is based upon their disability and functional limitations, etc. It is believed Frank was referring instead to the Financial Needs Test. It is critical to do the FNT for all customers receiving services which are possibly requiring the customer to help pay for some of the cost of these services. The Financial Needs Test tries to determine the customer's current income. If it has changed between income tax and when the needs test information is taken, the customer can put in writing what has changed, what the income is, most likely showing a recent checking account statement or something like that to verify the customer's claims. Financial Needs Test also refers to certain lines on the tax form. This is done to determine if the customer is required to pay something toward their services. Amy Moore chimed in. she is the Training Coordinator and as such she goes over this with newly hired staff. She verified what Pat explained. If the income has changed for the customer, the agency requires two paystubs to determine current customer income. Calculations from there could determine annual income. Frank was satisfied with this explanation. We then covered the items which are exempt from the Financial Needs Test. Some are peculiar to blindness, such as mobility canes, some Rehabilitation Teaching supplies, disability-related costs that the customer would incur, such as wheelchair user needing to have a ramp installed, etc. This is a process that the counselor and customer determine together. The Financial Needs Test is updated annually or if the customer's income should change for the better or worse. Nature being what it is, most likely a customer would be reluctant to declare if income had increased, knowing the customer would then be obligated possibly to pay more for the services being rendered to him/her. Hopefully a good working relationship would help the customer to be honest about his/her good fortune with counselor. There is a waiver process if the customer's income is not reflecting what comes in and what goes out. An exception would be out-standing medical bills related to their disability. In this scenario exceptional expenses are considered.

Wesley asked how much he was allowed to earn a month while on SSDI. Wesley was told to speak with his VR counselor. There is a service counselor can hook him up with and it is called benefits planning. This takes into consideration what kind of

Social Security a person receives: Supplementary Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance. In light of Wesley's question, Pat will reach out to Wesley's counselor to talk with Wesley about it. Wesley did give us an overview of his work history and what he is interested in doing.

Rodger asked for reports from other entities. Since our last meeting in September, the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind had a successful conference and convention. This conference and convention began on October 21, 2020 and ended with a virtual auction on October 25, 2020. Five days of good speakers and information disseminated. Every night there was entertainment, interactive games, role play, trivia with a twist, etc. Example for trivia with a twist was name all the counties in Pennsylvania that start with the letter L in reverse alphabetical order. Not easy! Then during an intermission, they had other names for corporations and the contestant had to name the name of the corporation. Example: saltine holder was Cracker Barrel. Correct Help was Rite Aid. Sandy Marsiglia participated and knocked it out of the ball park! Me, I passively listened and cheered contestants on while on mute! But the auction was amazing! I baked and sent out nine dozen cookies and a loaf of banana bread and brought in \$225. It seemed that baked goods and talking thermometers were what the audience wanted!

We will be having another virtual conference and convention in 2021 from September 16 through 20, 2021. The National Federation of the Blind of Pennsylvania had their virtual convention as well.

Dates for 2021: Cathy made a motion to continue to meet on the third Tuesday of March, June, September, and December. Therefore, March 16, 2021, June 15, 2021, September 21, 2021 and December 21, 2021. No one seconded the motion but we did not vote on it either. Just basically agreed to do this. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:25 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Cathy Long, Secretary