

DRAFT MINUTES

CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE
BUREAU OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND
BUREAU OF BLINDNESS AND VISUAL SERVICES
Tuesday, March 16, 2021

Abbreviations in this document

BBVS: Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services

BVRS: Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

O&M: Orientation and Mobility

PCB: Pennsylvania Council of the Blind

VR: Vocational Rehabilitation

VRT: Vision Rehabilitation Therapist

VROCP: Vision Resources of Central Pennsylvania

The following individuals were in attendance:

Rodger Simmons, Chair

Cathy Long, Secretary

John Horst, Assistant Chair

Bobbi Simmons, previous customer

Patrick Kane, VR Supervisor, BVRS

Jessica Hanula, VR Supervisor, BBVS

Danette Blank, Executive Director, VROCP

Norma Flinchbaugh, customer, York County

Gregory Canard, Dauphin County, BVRS customer

Nancy Altemos,, Director of Services, VROCP

Andrea Koretz, possible future BVRS customer

Cheryl Cuddy, Director of Community Relations, VROCP

Melissa Caarney, Director of Outreach and Community Engagement, Pa. Council of the Blind

Approval of minutes for our December, 2020 meeting. Bobbi Simmons made a motion to approve minutes as distributed. John Horst seconded. This motion was approved.

BVRS Report: Pat Kane. This agency has reached 59% of its goal for the federal fiscal year. The goal is 223 successful closures, and BVRS is currently at 138. The Federal Fiscal Year ends June 30, 2021. BVRS is operating a summer early reach academy. It will be virtual. This is for customers who are transitioning out of high school and into a college setting. The event will occur mid-July and will occur Monday morning, Wednesday morning, and Friday morning. There will be a variety of seminars/training opportunities geared for this audience. Many of these opportunities are to assist customers to be successful, so all things vocational rehabilitation will be discussed. These might include how to request a disability accommodation, writing a resume, how to prepare for an interview, (also includes mock interviews), college life, financial matters, etc. 25 students have applied already. Last year an event was planned but was not carried out due to COVID-19 and its uncertainty. The event can occur this year because we all have become better at attending online virtual meetings.

In the Business Services area, a virtual job fair is planned in April, 2021. Central Office must approve it.

Internally, the agency continues to tele-work. Today, March 16, is the one-year anniversary of Commonwealth employees working from home. They will be doing this work from their homes at least until June 30, 2021. Some Commonwealth employees have received their COVID vaccination shots and others are signed up. It is hoped that in short order, those who wish to receive vaccinations will be vaccinated.

Services are moving forward appropriately. Pat believes Zoom will be approved for the Commonwealth to use for meetings. Central Office is also looking at a product called docu-sign to help customers sign their names for cases to move through the system. BVRS hopes to hire additional staff. This would include at least two VR Counselors and another VR Supervisor. However, right now the Commonwealth is on a hiring freeze.

There still is a VR waiting list but the number of individuals waiting for service has declined significantly. There are less than 2,000 customers on the waiting list. It is hoped that within six months the waiting list will be terminated, with all individuals in an active status and being served by then. Referrals are down at this time.

BBVS Report: Jessica Hanula. Ditto to much Pat described for VR is occurring in BBVS. BBVS is also doing a virtual program known as Strive On. One is occurring now and one more is planned for the Fall. BBVS Harrisburg District has three students involved in this current training session. BBVS is happy students are interested. Many students are just worn out from attending school on Zoom, let alone trying to get them to sign up for yet another webinar, but some did. Numbers will increase by the Fall if students are back in school with the regular method of teaching. Topics discussed will be independent living in the dorm, preparing for work.

VR goals for BBVS are at 28%. BBVS has 12 successful closures. This agency has reached its goals for the past few years. The goal is 43. BBVS has three VR counselors. One trainee successfully completed the program. All counties are covered, and no over-time is needed.

BBVS has one Social Worker for all programs. Therefore, the Social work Supervisor is assisting by doing referrals. It is hoped that BBVS can hire another Social worker soon. There are 232 children in the children's Program.

BBVS has three Orientation and Mobility Instructors. The caseload is 70. They have five closures. This is because workers are not permitted to work with the person in their residence or out in the street with them. It's hard to progress with someone needing orientation and mobility until that can occur.

Vision Rehabilitation Therapists are fully staffed with two. One of these VRT's also does O&M part-time. Instructional support staff will be going into the field to work with customers on a priority basis. This might begin as early as April, 2021.

John Horst asked if Commonwealth employees are encouraging customers to get their Covid-19 vaccinations. Jessica said she is pretty sure Commonwealth employees are not permitted to tell customers to get their shots, even though it would assist with direct instruction if VRT's and O&M's and customers they work with all had been vaccinated.

Danette Blank wanted to know when the hiring freeze will be lifted. Not certain. BBVS did get its Director, Rod Alcidonis, last June. FYI: this is the third meeting Secretary of CAC has invited him to, and did have his Administrative Assistant set time on his schedule to meet with us but all three times something more pressing took precedence for him. Will invite to the June 15th

meeting as well and as always, stays hopeful he can speak briefly with us. Secretary of CAC has asked for 15 minutes: about the time it takes to get a cup of coffee and have a snack. Now we'll see.

Danette stated that PAB's are meeting with customers and providing services. If someone is in need, contact your local Blind Association to get some services for customers in need of them, but PAB's cannot provide all services. Danette said her facility is not under contract with BBVS. There is an O&M and an occupational therapist on staff at VROCP.

Reports from other organizations. Melissa Caarney. PCB is referring customers to PAAB as the need arises. Melissa has been in contact with each and every Blind Association. Some did not appear to know about Pennsylvania Council of the Blind. There are concerns of customers getting transportation to obtain their COVID-19 shot. She is informing customers that many of the paratransit companies, Rabbit and Capital Area Transit in the counties of Dauphin, Cumberland, Perry, York, Adams, Snyder, Union, Northumberland and one or two more counties are providing transportation free of charge. Do not know what Lancaster and Lebanon transportation authorities are doing. PCB is planning its annual conference. Looking for presentations. Assuring that people in the community are connected with resources to assist them. This is especially important in this time of isolation that people can attend conference calls, or workshops surrounding advocacy, leadership training, Etc. . The top priority is to make sure people feel connected, even if it is not with PCB. Andrea Koretz is associated with an insurance company, UPMC, and she gave a phone number for people to call to schedule the COVID vaccination shots Looking for that information to include in these minutes. Perhaps she said she had a number but did not give it. She is soon to be involved in a meeting to discuss website accessibility and what that needs to look like for people who have some vision or no vision. Buttons must be labeled verbally so that screen readers can read where the button is taking you. Headings must be designed accurately. Andrea promised to get back to us with any updates from UPMC.

More news about PCB. The Harrisburg Office is closed. We currently have a Post Office box where the part-time secretary lives. To send mail, write to the following:

Pennsylvania Council of the Blind

Post Office Box 68

Volant, PA 16156.

Phone: 717-920-9999

Email: pcboffice@pcb1.org

Mr. Canard is a BVRS customer and wishes to receive funds to attend college. Pat Kane asked him relevant questions in order to get the name of his counselor, in an effort that the counselor will contact this customer to determine next steps. We do not know and do not need to know at this meeting if an Individualized Plan for Employment has been mutually agreed upon, written, and signed. However, without that Plan, nothing will happen. Pat Kane will alert his counselor to contact this customer to discuss his plans.

Andrea asked if this CAC has a sub-committee related to consumer participation. If not, she would be interested in assisting. Andrea had a lot to say and suggest. She is willing to put information on social media about our meetings. She stated she has a brain injury and is in touch with individuals who have suffered a stroke. If she had not self-identified as someone with a brain injury, based on her verbal communication, it would not be apparent. She expresses herself extremely well. We are led to believe she is in either supervisory or management at her employmen, as she must attend meetings and helps make decisions for UPMC. She drives.

She appears to work full-time. It would be hard to determine what exactly her disabling condition is at this time. So perhaps she will put our future meeting on Social media. OVR does have a Facebook page, but according to Pat Kane, these meetings are not advertised there. Perhaps it would take permission from the Communications office to pursue that avenue through the Commonwealth, but nothing should be able to stop Ms. Koretz from reaching out on social media about this. In the past, OVR sent out mailings to everyone eligible, e.g., those individuals in active status with BBVS and BBVS served by the Harrisburg District for this meeting and those mailings cost at least \$5,000 per mailing. It was done quarterly. Now BBVRS and BBVS are sending emails out to eligible customers and that is free, so that is at least a \$20,000 savings for OVR to hopefully spend this money more judiciously. Our most attended meeting of the CAC was when the Director of BVRS and the Director of BBVS came and presented to us. Those two gentlemen are now pursuing other interests, and are not working for the Commonwealth. Andrea suggests she and social media friends or perhaps some of us here get together, discuss our frustrations and come up with at least one solution. To that end, Cathy and Andrea did exchange phone numbers and briefly for several days did exchange text messages.

John Horst asked for an explanation of why Mr. Alcidonis has not been coming to our meetings, although he was invited three times now. Cathy provided information on what has been going on. Further recommendations were made by John. Mr. Alcidonis will be invited to our June 15, 2021 meeting He was asked to give us a minimum of 15 minutes, the time it takes to have a cup of coffee. . Cathy did forward her invite to Mr. Alcidonis to Jessica Hanula, Patrick Kane, and Rodger Simmons. If he does not or cannot come and speak to us briefly, then perhaps John can attempt to convince him to show up and speak with us, where Cathy, along with his Administrative Assistant, Bethany Spriggle, have failed so far. John was also provided with the email address and phone number for Jeremiah Underhill, Supervisor of Rod Alcidonis.

Somehow we talked a little about the computer users group in Harrisburg, known as SACATE. This group is geared to demonstrate new accessible programs. Interestingly, Pat mentioned having the state using a product known as docu-sign. I have sat in on a demonstration of that product recently. It appears to be totally accessible. Rodger asked for information about SACATE and Cathy will send it to him. Norma Flinchbaugh also expressed interest and Cathy will call Norma. Anyone who is interested and in particular uses access technology of any kind is invited.

Andrea has been in touch with a representative about something and Andrea asked him who the OVR liaison was. This gentleman told Andrea that there is not an OVR liaison, so Andrea asked Pat Kane about that. Andrea is attempting to build a relationship with her local representative to advocate for herself and others. She said: "We need to open up better forms of communication." Pat replied with state government, OVR is the rank and file state employees. The gentleman Andrea was speaking with are the legislators. If OVR employees liaise with them in any formal or informal way there is a possibility that could be looked upon as lobbying This is not permitted. The Executive Director is the liaison with the legislative branch. Her name is Shannon Austin. That is for BVRS. The legislative liaison for BBVS would be Rod Alcidonis. Each Congressman and Senator are connected to the legislative branch. BVRS and BBVS do get calls from the legislative branch routinely about their constituents. Congress provides our state budget. Pat expressed that any person can speak with their legislator about anything they want, but when OVR gets involved, perhaps to attend an event, the orders come down from on high. OVR attends events they are invited to all the time. Prior to COVID-19 there were events at the Fish and Boat Commission and for the Civil Service Commission. any time someone calls legislators to talk about disability stuff, OVR is there.

That ended our meeting. Our next meeting will be on Tuesday, June 15, 2021 at noon. Please look for the new Skype code or possibly Zoom link in your email.

Respectfully Submitted,
Cathy Long, Secretary