

DRAFT

CONSUMER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

HARRISBURG DISTRICT OFFICE
BUREAU OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND
BUREAU OF BLINDNESS AND VISUAL SERVICES
Tuesday, September 21, 2021

Abbreviations used in this meeting:

ACB: American Council of the Blind
BBVS: Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services
BEP: Business Enterprises Program
BVRs: Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation
CAP: Client Assistance Program
ILOB: Independent Living Older Blind program
IPE: Individualized Plan for Employment
NCSAB: National Council of State Agencies for the Blind
NDEAM: National Disability Employment Awareness Month
NFBP: National Federation of the Blind of Pennsylvania
O&M: Orientation and Mobility
PCB: Pennsylvania Council of the Blind
RSA: Rehabilitation Services Administration, the government entity state agencies report to
VR: Vocational Rehabilitation
VRT: Vision Rehabilitation Therapists
WIOA: Workforce Investment Opportunity Act

Individuals present at this meeting:

Rod Alcidonis, Director, BBVS (briefly—beginning of meeting)
Cynthia Gibbs-Pratt, customer, ILOB program
Jessica Hanula, BBS VR Supervisor
John Horst, CAC Vice-President
Patrick Kane, VR Supervisor, BVRs
Cathy Long, Secretary for this CAC
Bobbie Simmons, former BBVS customer
Rodger Simmons, CAC President
Nicole Wade, District Administrator, BBVS
Angelique Zolomij, current customer, graduate student in Vocational counseling doing her internship

Rod Alcidonis was our first speaker. Of note is that he was waiting for his plane at Harrisburg International airport, and his time with us had to be brief. General overview. Focus is on pre-employment transitional services for VR customers. Anne Strollo has been working with each District Office (there are six of them) to assure that all customers needing this service are getting it. For the next fiscal year, Rod Alcidonis will be chairing the transition committee for the NCSAB. He will bring his knowledge and expertise back to BBVS. Note: NCSAB meets regularly to review best practices among their agencies. There is 15% federal money set aside for Pre-employment Transition Services and OVR wishes to use as much of it for that purpose and not allow the feds to take some of the money back. Conversations are taking place with providers to assure that services are targeted more appropriately. It is his observation that the

agreements this agency enters into are generic in nature. Blindness is a sensory disability and requires more targeted services.

Overall the performance of BBVS is acceptable, given that COVID-19 disrupted how the agency had to deliver services. Part of the challenge was that services could not be delivered in person. Numbers for successful closures are down because of our employees working remotely and not having face-to-face contacts with customers. The area most affected by this were customers needing O&M and VRT services.

With regard to the ILOB Program, RSA made some reporting changes. Working with database people to get it done. ILOB customers are able to receive more funds for necessary items to support them in their homes because funds are available due to the difficulties in providing services to VR customers during COVID-. This will allow the purchase of assistive technology up to \$2,500 per person until December 31, 2021. Re-evaluation of this will occur in November, 2021 to attempt to keep that financial threshold where it is at least well into fiscal year 2022.

BEP has been struggling. Vacancies occurred because of state buildings closing, etc. Next week, starting September 27, 2021, a new BEP Director will be on board as well as a new BEP Coordinator. These individuals will begin October 24, 2021 and will report directly to Rod Alcidonis. He will provide updates about the BEP in the future.

Another challenge BBVS has is the ability to hire qualified individuals timely. Staff is working and doing their very best. There are many vacancies across the Commonwealth. Mr. Alcidonis is diligently working to get permission to hire people. Complications are twofold when even Human Resources is not fully staffed and that just slows down the process. .

When Mr. Alcidonis came to BBVS, it did not take him long to observe that services in each District Office were not provided uniformly. Internally this is a priority. At District Managers' meetings discussion surround revising and refining policies to make sure that policies and services are equitable but are consistent across the Commonwealth. Meetings and discussions are ongoing. This will afford predictability for staff and customers wherever customers receive services in Pennsylvania. Future updates to us on this topic will occur.

He let us know the Advisory Committee for the Blind is in motion. It has been meeting. Discussions are taking place, advising the agency on what BBVS could do differently. One example of this is that the Blindness Expo will take place at the Capitol.

He did give us time for questions. John Horst asked about waiting list for services. Mr. Alcidonis said the Order of Selection list stopped on July 1, 2021. Cases have been coming off, but the Order of Selection was for both BBVS and BVRS. BVRS is a much larger agency with more customers and names are taken off the wait list based on length of waiting for services. Mr. Alcidonis has not heard of difficulty but he understands the Order of Selection list may have discouraged some from applying for services.

Approval of Minutes for last meeting: June 15, 2021. They were distributed. John Horst made a motion that minutes be approved as distributed. Bobbie Simmons seconded. Motion carried unanimously! For the record Cathy stated these are draft minutes until they are approved. At that point BBVS or BVRS staff make them final, review for any changes staff wish to make, and then the minutes can be published on the Department of Labor and Industry's website or wherever they go.

BBVS Report: Jessica Hanula. Staff are no longer working remotely. They came back to the office 07-19-2021. As of August 2021 BBVS has two VR counselors. A third counselor is currently on extended leave with no anticipated return date. All eight counties are being covered. BBVS has no successful closures but are working with customers for some successful closures soon. One Social worker with one vacancy. So far there are 7 successful closures. O&M is fully staff with three individuals. They have 5 successful closures. VRT staff are fully staffed with 2 individuals and have 7 successful closures. This is commandable, given that just recently O&M and VRT staff could once again visit individuals in their homes for direct hands-on instruction.

The Strive On program continues. This is to provide post-secondary education preparation college readiness class for students. This is a virtual learning experience, so students must work after school and in the evening. There are two attendees.

Jessica let us know that Omega Consulting is closing its doors after 18 years of providing instructional assistive technology services to our consumers. Vision Corps is an assistive technology provider for BBVS and BBVS will use this alternative service provider more, with the loss of Omega Consulting. White Cane Day occurred on October 15th. That will be at Strawberry Square inside. O&M staff will be masked and available to provide outreach and information to people passing by. Awards and mock interviews will occur in October for National Disability Employment awareness month.

Pat Kane continued with this topic. Pat started work with BBVS in 2005. He does not recall a big push for NDEAM early in his employment. This also is Cathy's experience. She started in 1977 and retired in 2013. Never a word about NDEAM. Pat says in the last seven years or so staff is doing activities. He was a VR counselor for many years. Events were also hosted in the office. The last time for that was 2019 and then COVID-19 happened. The office is open for state workers but not for outsiders to come to meetings. Counselors are meeting customers in person. BVRs counselors use Career-Link sites to meet with customers, and BBVS staff do in home visits with customers. Typically BVRs had customers come into the office in person. There are four interview rooms at the front of the office for this purpose. This is not occurring yet. Not sure customers will be able to come to the office even by December, but he will let us know prior to the meeting. We may continue to meet via Skype on the phone until the general public can enter the building again.

More on NDEAM plans: in October they are going to have mock interviews with customers, give out awards to employers. A senator generally does an event at the Capitol for people with disabilities, and OVR plays a big part in the success of that endeavor. OVR knows employers who are happy to consider a qualified person with a disability for their positions, and OVR knows the customers who are ready for employment. Having the event at the Capitol is a win-for all concerned. We do not know if this will occur this year because of the pandemic. Pat let us know that workers are back but masked in the building. Down the hall from OVR is the Social Security Administration. They are only taking pre-scheduled appointments. Social Security was quite busy. It opened for customers at 9:00 a.m. and the line would go a good ways down the hall because people lined up waiting for Social Security to open. They would block the passage that leads to the employee rest rooms. Workers knew if the feeling hit by 8:45, just hold on until 9:05! But now all that has changed, apparently. Pat believes next year will be truly back to business, holding in person meetings and scheduling appointments with customers, and having NDEAM in the office again.

BVRS Report: Pat Kane. The State Fiscal Year ends on June 30. Last Fiscal Year BVRS obtained 90% of their VR successful closure goal, closing 185 cases while working virtually. This is remarkable! Pat does not know what the new fiscal year goal is yet but soon enough all will be revealed. This meeting took place in September, so OVR was into the new state fiscal year for three months. Certainly they do not wait to work until they know the goal—no, they are working with customers every day! BVRS already have closed 35 cases. As of the end of the second week of September, BVRS has done 135 IPE's or IPE Amendments. It is noteworthy to explain that NOTHING can happen in the way of service provision until a plan is signed by the customer and counselor and is mutually discussed prior to putting it in writing. Appeal rights are always in the Plan, as well as the customer's right to contact CAP to discuss with them any struggle the customer has to understand the process or differences in opinion between customer and counselor.

BVRS also is working on hiring staff. It is a challenge to do so. They need a few counselors, a VR supervisor, a Business Services person, Early Reach Coordinators, and they help with pre-employment transition. WIOA has changed how BVRS and BBVS work.

BVRS is hosting a Summer Early Reach Academy collaborating with the York BVRS office to host in July, 2022. Managers are looking at getting applications ready to send to students and schools to make all aware of the program and have a great attendance next summer. They did have one this past summer and about 20 students participated in this virtual event. Pat personally did a few presentations on the business services, writing resumes, and did some mock interviews during that event.

Working with Inspiritech (spelled phonetically). This is a vendor from the Philadelphia area who have state contract for pandemic-related unemployment. That ended. This company is interested in hiring OVR customers to do a variety of tasks, telephone-based customer service work. Most of this will be done in the Philadelphia area, but Wyomissing, in the Reading area also has a call center. OVR has been working with this company since March and have done some on-the-job training grants so they can employ and train OVR customers in the tasks the company needs them to do. Cathy asked if BBVS customers were invited to apply. Pat replied that certainly they are. This was questioned because sometimes call centers use proprietary software that does not work well with screen reading software. Jessica agreed and stated BBVS has been at the table since the beginning and now has three BBVS customers working. This company is an Ability One provider and as such have obligations to make accommodations or changes to allow someone with blindness or a visual impairment to be as productive as anybody else—maybe even better!

Pat is ready to go back into the field. He's going to do some home modifications interview, will be meeting with an employer in Carlisle, etc. Each day it gets better. Pat and Jessica invited anyone to email them with questions or concerns: write to patkane@pa.gov or jhanula@pa.gov

Reports from other organizations: PCB held its annual conference and convention and that ended on September 19, 2021. It's still fresh in our minds. This was a virtual conference on Zoom and also through ACB Media. We provided a brief overview. We did have discussions on technology, low tech ways to get groceries, inspirational speakers like Jonathan Mosen, some podcasters about audio description. We did have an audio described movie (sound over Zoom only) and a blind architect who was blind and discussed in length universal design for buildings with accessibility in mind. This would include lighting, color contrast, flooring materials, etc. He has written a manual for other architects to learn more. There was an update from TechOWL and so much more. We also had kitchen gadgets described and people made recordings to

explain how they were using the gadget. There were fun games too. Noteworthy was Jeopardy for the common man. One category was called PCB Peers. One question was of particular interest to me. The question was: "This chatty person was Secretary of the Board for two decades. The answer: Who is Cathy Long? Then the announcer remarked: "She's going to kill me!" I texted him after the game was over and told him I liked it so he gets to live. You understand this person and I have known each other for 60 years! Such a great conference.

NFBP also had a conference and it was hybrid, on Zoom and in person. No one was available from NFBP to report on it. Certainly details on that conference and convention can be found on their website. Unfortunately, I am not sure I have the correct website name. The NFBP President is Lynne Hights.

There were no other reports from other agencies. Cynthia Gibbs-Pratt reported on the virtual Independent Living Conference. Judy Human was a keynote speaker. She was featured as a young teen in the movie Crip Camp. She grew up to be an advocate for people with disabilities in California, but is known nationally and I would not be surprised to learn that she also has international recognition. Cynthia reviewed some of the good things about that Independent Living Conference.

That ended this meeting. John Horst moved to adjourn, and Bobbie Simmons seconded. There was no vote on it—we were just done! We will meet again on December 21, 2021 at 12:00 p.m. The meeting generally lasts 90 minutes. Look for emails and attached flyers for our next meeting, to possibly include skype code. Send suggestions or complaints, etc. to Rodger Simmons at rsimmons5@comcast.net

If I got anything wrong in these minutes, write to me at long.cathy1223@gmail.com before the next meeting. I can always submit a draft 2 but after the December meeting, if you want to change anything and the minutes were approved, have at it!

Respectfully Submitted,
Cathy Long, Secretary