

Citizens' Advisory Committee for RDO (Berks & Schuylkill Counties) - 4/15/2019

1:00 PM to 3:00 PM

14 in attendance at meeting start

Meeting began at 1:05.

Chairperson Angel Torres stated previous meeting minutes were not attached to this meeting's invitation. Because they were not available for CAC members to review ahead of time, they will be discussed and approved at the next meeting.

Powerpoint presentation by Angel Torres & Andrew Pennington

- Each OVR District Office (DO) must form and maintain a Citizens' Advisory Committee to give relevant, region-specific information to the DO regarding:
  - Type of services that would benefit
  - Amount of services that would benefit
  - Scope of services that would benefit
  - Quality of services currently conducted / provided
  - Needs of individuals with disabilities and local employers
- Reading District Office strives for 1/2 CAC members to be individuals with disabilities
- RDO CAC meets at least quarterly
- If members expect to vote, a quorum is required (but was not indicated how many must be present to form a quorum)
- New CAC members benefits both RDO customers and RDO staff

Attendees were asked to introduce themselves and state ways they hoped to benefit from participating in the RDO CAC. The benefits cited by attendees included:

- Discussing barriers to the disabled community and relaying information to OVR
- Helping provider services grow and clients/customers and stakeholders get quality services
- Networking and discussing with OVR and providers about trends and difficulties in providing services to customers
- Helping employers become more educated on mental health and other disabilities to help them maintain and sustain their workforce
- Giving back to and improving the OVR as its services are delivered to customers
- Giving feedback and building on employee training
- Networking and community building
- Gathering and sharing information and resources
- Empowering those served by the OVR

- Helping the disabled community and educating individuals with disabilities become educated on what is available to them to improve employment outlooks and quality of life
- Meeting other CAC members to continue to make improvements and suggestions on improving OVR services

1:30 PM – OVR Report presented by RDO ADA Yvelisse Gonzalez

- The OVR Report was provided to attendees in the invitation attachment for accessibility purposes and to be reviewed ahead of the meeting
- OVR’s mission is to help individuals with disabilities gain and maintain employment
- Going forward, RDO is focusing on maintaining current services provided and increasing the impact of services provided to Transition-age (high school leading into college / post-secondary employment / training, etc) students
  - Focus on this age group will help students at a critical age navigate the world of work
  - Focus on this group also aims to help young people investigate employment possibilities and potential college / training majors
- Due to funding issues, Pennsylvania enacted a state-wide change to the Order of Selection in July 2019, putting new applicants into a waiting list before they were able to be served. There was much discussion about the waiting list by CAC members.
  - Since COVID-19 started, more than 5,000 individuals were released from the waiting list; more than 1,000 of those individuals were customers of the RDO. In April 2021, 110 customers of RDO have been released from the waitlist.
    - “Released from the Waitlist” is a phrase commonly used to indicate that the customer has applied for services, been determined eligible for services, entered into the waiting list, and has been designated as next to be offered services by Central Office (CO).
    - Individuals are sorted into “Waves” by CO, determined by the date of application. Each wave is numbered & tracked by CO and local management to ensure that no one is being left behind or left in the post-waitlist status without a plan for employment.
    - Those who are released from the waitlist are contacted by mail, phone, and email (as reachable) when their wave has been released so that they may be offered services in a timely manner.
    - Some individuals may choose when their wave is released to NOT participate in services. This may be because of COVID, their life situation has changed, etc. Individuals who are no longer interested in receiving OVR services are closed so that there is space for other interested customers to receive services.
    - Some individuals may have moved, changed their phone number, etc, and their vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC) is not able to reach them. While OVR does not want to close people coming off the waitlist unnecessarily, if a due diligence to contact a customer has been

performed and they are not returning contact with their VRC, that individual's case is also closed after a period of time. While RDO would like to keep cases open as long as possible in case of contact, federal regulations indicate that a customer cannot have an open case with no action on it for too long.

- In the last 2 weeks, RDO has been performing a “hard look” at cases lingering from previous waves to determine what actions are best to be taken for each case.
- In late 2020, the “Job Retention” case category was reinstated. This is where an individual with a disability is in jeopardy of losing their job. They are called by the VRC assigned to this category of cases within 3 days of application and pushed to the top of the waiting list to help the individual keep their job. If they are closed successfully but need more services within the year, they must be entered into the waitlist without this expedited service.
- Referrals to RDO are currently drastically decreased compared with pre-COVID levels. The most likely reason for this is individuals are nervous about working during the pandemic.
  - Since the waitlist was enacted, referrals have declined, but the pandemic has seen even further drop in number of referrals.
    - Currently RDO sees approximately 25-30 referrals each week
    - Half or more than half of referrals to RDO are transition-age students
  - There are increased transition referrals as schools are currently in session.
  - Adult referrals in rural locales remain down
  - Because referrals are down, there is not currently concern about running out of funding again. Also, Shannon Austin has been working hard to ensure that OVR remains funded so that post-COVID OVR will not run into funding issues again
  - Although the referrals are down and the waiting list was enacted to ensure there was enough funding for all cases being served, the waiting list remains in effect likely because the state is currently in a hiring freeze and DOs across the state have many vacancies
- RDO is aware that lack of referrals is a problem for ensuring individuals with disabilities meet their employment goals. RDO has paired VRCs with local organizations to increase visibility, referrals, and communication to let other agencies know that OVR is still open for business and able to help individuals with disabilities who may benefit from OVR services.
- RDO currently has 50% vacancies – 11 of 19 VRC positions are currently filled
  - RDO would like to recruit new counselors, but PA state employment is currently in a hiring freeze due to the pandemic
  - Governor Wolfe recently allowed OVR to re-open hiring, and RDO has been granted 4 openings to be filled
- Inspiritec currently has a contract with Unemployment Compensation to fill 1,000 open positions. OVR has been allowed 500 of these positions to fill with individuals with disabilities. Position details include:
  - \$15/hr
  - Work-from-home (because of COVID)

- Full and part-time hours available
  - Temporary position, with possibility to become permanent with Inspiritec in another position
  - On-the-job training through OVR for up to 90 hours
  - Virtual / Phone interview process
- The Inspiritec contract is to help Unemployment Compensation get caught up, but it is possible for the contract to be extended. This situation potentially provides OVR customers with multiple benefits:
  - Good work experience for resume gaps / returning to the workforce
  - Summer employment for transition-aged individuals
  - Experience in customer service and working with the public
- RDO's physical return to work is expected to be July 1, 2021
  - RDO is waiting further guidance from the Governor and Central Office
  - A Return-To-Work assessment was completed for the RDO to figure out ways to keep staff, customers, providers, and other visitors to the office safe regarding COVID. A similar assessment was carried out in each DO statewide, and RDO is awaiting further guidelines ahead of the anticipated re-opening
  - As OVR is a state agency, it is unlikely that a record of vaccination will be required to return to work. CO has been providing encouragement to be vaccinated as well as leave to receive the vaccine, but it is not currently required.
  - As the COVID vaccines are in an emergency roll-out, it is understood to be illegal to require a vaccine to be employed. When the emergency use order is lifted, that could change.
- New OVR programs were created with extra monies that were not being utilized due to referrals being down
  - Most new programs are in Transition to keep students engaged during the summer
  - Provider agreements and trainings have been sent out, and providers should be on the look-out for them to be informed of changes to the program. They should receive / have received an invitation to a webinar and future trainings about these topics.

After the OVR report, the meeting was opened for comments.

- One attendee, a former customer of OVR, related that she did not know that she could have applied for OVR again after she has previously received services. She related how she had lost her job of 13 years when the employer changed management / ownership, and after a period of difficult interactions from management, she was fired. Perhaps after successful placement & closing, VRCs can stress that customers are welcome to reapply at any time should they find themselves needing further services?
- Setting up a member directory to assist with communication & collaboration among CAC members would be helpful

- Because the meeting was conducted over Teams, it is encouraged that everyone on the call who is not currently speaking mute their microphones on all devices / take phones off speaker so that it improves the call quality for everyone listening. If needed, a Teams primer can be provided / conducted to make sure that everyone knows how to use the program.

Carole Homolash, RDO DA, shared some thoughts:

- A DO's CAC can be a very powerful organization
- Consider forming goals and/or subcommittees to encourage member engagement
- Possible subcommittees may include:
  - Transition
  - Employer Outreach
  - Whatever the CAC thinks may be beneficial
- Agree on purpose and goals of committees and know that it may take time to accomplish projects and make a difference
- Think about things you are passionate about and how to improve it going forward or groups that can help improve it
- Should an employer be invited to attend a CAC meeting, be sure to keep content focused on the goal of that visit / employer focused, not taking apart little things of no interest to that presenter

Angel Torres, chairperson, also had a few final thoughts:

- He will send a survey to CAC attendees to find out the best time for future meetings.
- One goal he would like to address going forward is to improve outreach to the disability community. He hopes this will help bring OVR to the attention of people with disabilities who are not currently aware of the agency and its mission.
- Another goal is to possibly streamline the application process so that people without easy access / ability to complete online applications have better access to the application, as well as education of others to increase referral numbers

The next meeting agenda items were cited:

- Discussion of CAC goals
- Ideas to increase referrals
- Best time to schedule future meetings
- Andrew Pennington will speak about integrating community in services
- Possible candidates for officer vacancies: Secretary & Co-Chair
  - Possible candidates should be aware of CAC bylaws governing election of officers
  - Should be someone who is aware of the CAC and/or has had experience with it over time

- Would be encouraging to have an individual from Schuylkill county to bring that perspective to the table
- Future meetings are likely to be every 2 months

Announcements: None brought forward at this time.

Meeting was adjourned at 2:56