

Citizens' Advisory Committee for RDO (Berks & Schuylkill Counties) – 12/7/2021

1:00 to 2:30

14 in attendance, 1 guest speaker

Meeting is virtual, occurred over Microsoft Teams.

Meeting began at 1:07

Motion was made to approve previous meeting minutes – made by Alli. Motion seconded by Andrew

- 9/14 minutes approved pending changes: Alli's name was misspelled consistently and must be amended prior to being posted to PARC site

Yvelisse began the OVR report. She introduced Kim Baskett, Reading DO's Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) Supervisor, to discuss the status of the Pre-ETS program in Berks and Schuylkill counties.

- Transition and Pre-ETS services are provided by the RDO for eligible and potentially eligible youths and students. Pre-ETS counselors connect students with community services and those in the schools.
- Pre-ETS services are provided to students and youths aged 14-21 in secondary or post-secondary school or training. PA Act 66 allows students for the 2021-2022 term only to return/remain in the Pre-ETS category until age 22.
- The Pre-ETS caseloads have had 1 vacancy since September 2021. Some cases have been serviced using overtime hours. Lynn Zale has returned to RDO as an annuitant to help with the Berks Pre-ETS cases. Her territory includes schools South, East, and just North of the Reading area.
- An update to the Pre-ETS manual is coming soon from Central Office. It will be the first update to the manual since 2018.
- Individual services provided through Pre-ETS are all contracted through community providers. Individual services include:
  - Help taking advantage of the current strong job market which is especially favorable for entry level workers
  - Paid Work Experiences to assist in resume building and experience participating in paid positions in the labor force
  - Job shadowing to learn more about certain positions
  - Informational interviews (virtual at this time) with people who perform positions that interest the participants
- Group services are provided by community providers or by RDO staff.
  - Early Reach Coordinators (ERCs), Business Services, and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors provide group services as internal providers.
  - Most groups are run through Pre-ETS provider agreements, allowing RDO to pay for community providers to provide the group services.

- 12-14 schools in the Berks and Schuylkill systems are served by paid group services.
- There are several Summer Programs available. There is the possibility to run these programs during the school year if there are providers available for them, but there are no providers currently available to do so.
  - Professional Connection Experience
    - Was successfully run during summer 2021.
    - 60 hours, available for both eligible and potentially eligible Pre-ETS aged individuals
    - Includes / Focuses on
      - Job readiness
      - Interest inventories
      - Tours of workplaces and post-secondary educational sites
      - Guest speakers
    - Students earn \$625.00 for attending at least 54 of total 60 hours
  - My Work
    - Planning to begin summer 2022
    - Summer work program lasting 6-8 weeks, part-time or nearly full time
    - Students work for municipal or non-profit sites in the community
    - Participants earn a paycheck and focus on learning community service
    - Work involves cleaning up, custodial, outdoor work (rebuilding, maintenance, etc.), clerical, and office jobs
  - Post-Secondary Experience
    - Participants must have applied to or been accepted into post-secondary training / education
    - Participants learn about campus life, connect with disability and campus services, and focus on independent living skills
  - Youth Ambassador Program
    - Very new, there are not many details yet
    - Participants are students in their last 2 years of high school
    - Youth Ambassador is a paid position as a youth leader. They share with others self-advocacy skills and how to connect with services. They share with other students and other community connections what was and was not helpful, which will provide feedback from youths.
  - Project SEARCH
    - Partnership with Penn State health / St. Joseph Hospital, held annually
    - Used to be at the downtown Reading site, now in the Bern Township location
    - Partnership includes RDO, BCIU, and the Berks County business community
    - This year, 10 interns are participating through our site alone – double the amount we usually have
- Upcoming: Provider Agreement for Transportation
  - Not yet approved – more details will follow
  - RDO will contract with provider to provide transportation for youths / students

- Transportation is a huge barrier to Competitive, Integrated Employment in all demographics, not just the Pre-ETS demographics
- When the provider agreement comes out, it will allow the community providers to provide transportation services should they want to participate
- Challenges facing Pre-ETS for 2021-2022 term
  - Both RDO and local providers are short-staffed
  - Parents are concerned for the safety of their children due to the possibility of COVID-19 exposures
  - Students are still adjusting to the new learning environment (remote / hybrid learning), especially experiential learners and those with ancillary services, causing students to need a lot of catch-up compared to previous years
  - RDO staff is attempting to facilitate pre-applications and to connect students/youths with services as much as possible during this period
- **Question:** Are all services open to eligible and potentially-eligible students?
  - **Answer:** Professional Connections and Group Services are open to potentially eligible individuals, but all others must have an open case to participate
  - **Follow-up Question:** What about individual services?
  - **Answer:** To participate in individual services, the individual must have an open case: That is, they must apply, meet with a VRC, and get their intake paperwork completed and returned. They do not need to be determined “eligible” status to receive individual services
- **Question:** Are Group Services provided by community providers, or only by internal RDO staff?
  - **Answer:** The majority of Group Services (12-14 schools between both Berks and Schuylkill counties) are provided by paid Group Services through providers partnered with RDO. The remaining 7-8 schools receive their Group Services primarily through ERCs.

Yvelisse spoke about more general OVR updates.

- A survey was conducted by Central Office regarding questions of how the district offices feel about opening the offices to the public. A decision is expected around January or February 2022.
- VRCs currently telework 2 days each week. The office is open 5 days a week (M-F), and the office remains staffed each day, though not every VRC is in office every day.
- A recent DA/ADA conference talked about standardizing procedures across all district offices (ex: trainings, services provided, etc)
  - OVR procedures need to be standardized to keep the agency strong
  - Updates expected for:
    - Manuals
    - Policies

- Supported Employment
  - Credential Attainment / Measurable Skills Gains
  - Recordkeeping
- 4 new counselors should start with RDO soon
  - 1 intern (Robin Wilkinson) will be starting January 2022
  - 3 others will start afterwards
    - Interviews have been going great
    - 2 candidates have been determined as ones RDO wants to recommend for the position
    - 1 interviewee is bilingual from Puerto Rico
- Currently RDO still has no Business Services Representative – both positions remain vacant
- Lynn Zale has returned to RDO, working as an annuitant.
- **Question:** Is there a maximum time than an annuitant can serve?
  - **Answer:** An annuitant can serve 95 days each year. Our current annuitant must keep aware of this and scale her schedule accordingly.
- The Governor’s Summer Internship Program is open for applications at this time. The Berks CareerLink has applied for one intern.
  - Interns receive a stipend of \$12/hour
  - If a provider is interested in applying for an intern for their office, they should let Yvelisse G. know
  - The deadline for applications is soon
- Statistics received from Central Office (bolded year is fiscal year):

	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
New referrals	1021	934	527	220
Cases moved to status 02 (applicant status)	685	579	309	82
Cases moved to status 10 (determined eligible)	705	527	275	70
Cases placed on waiting list	(N/A)	8	329	70
Cases with completed Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE)	575	479	63	58

- 2017 discrepancies may be due to delays from previous year affecting 2017 numbers, especially eligibility where applicant applied in 2016 and was determined eligible after 2017 fiscal year began
- Waitlist for cases determined “Most Significantly Disabled (MSD)” enacted July 2019

- 2019 found customers were difficult to contact when they were brought off the waitlist, as customers moved or were no longer interested in OVR services by the time their turn came
  - LEAN project to clear case loads of inactive customers occurred 2018-2019, accounting for some decrease from previous years
  - 2019 fiscal year found customers reluctant to go back to work, possibly because COVID-19 started at end of 2019 calendar year
- It is necessary to understand that there may be some discrepancies in the data, as reports run from Central Office do sometimes have errors in them, even ones presented to internal staff
- One of the biggest barriers to successful employment and low numbers in 2021 appears to be COVID-19 and/or the vaccine mandates accompanying the pandemic
- **Question:** Can we get a breakdown of services being received and a breakdown on why the cases were closed
  - **Answer:** Uncertain whether this breakdown is possible. Will ask specialist who runs the reports to see if we can get a breakdown by closure codes

The CAC Member Directory was discussed.

- Yvelisse G. previously sent out the Member Directory to all members
- The Member Directory may need to be updated to note new members
  - Angel will email Yvelisse to discuss updates

Sarita, Alli, and Angel spoke on the results of their meeting regarding the CAC goals: Improving outreach to the Berks-Schuylkill counties' disability community to increase the level of education about OVR services and Social media options to promote CAC and OVR services

- What amount of social media presence is the Berks-Schuylkill CAC allowed to operate while remaining within OVR guidelines?
  - Is an active page allowed?
    - OVR has its own active Facebook and Instagram pages
    - Yvelisse will check if a local CAC Facebook page would need approval from Central Office
  - Can the CAC create visuals to include OVR information / how to apply / etc?
    - OVR has approved walk-through information / PowerPoint documents on the L&I website, but these do not relay the information in a brief way
    - CAC would like to create something smaller / more brief to relay the information succinctly, possibly a JPG with screen reader descriptions?
    - Approval is needed for things regarding advertising and need to be for the agency as a whole, not for each individual district office
- The Berks County Transition Coordinating Council has a social media presence. Would it be possible to share infographics / small sharable with BCTCC and similar agencies to spread information at the grass roots level?

- CAC will start by looking at the approval process through Central Office – lawyers and media teams have specific guidelines to follow
  - Also look at other counties' CAC social media pages and draw up a proposal for Yvelisse to pass up to regional manager Susan Storm for review and first step of approval process
- Angel, Andrew, Sarita, Alli, and Yvelisse will meet to discuss the process and further ideas to pass up the line to Susan Storm

The OVR online pre-application process was discussed.

- Changes are in the pipeline from Central Office and will affect the online pre-application process across all DOs
- There are no current updates to relay to the CAC as VR staff has not been trained on new guidance
  - Updates likely to come in the next 2 months (January or February 2022)
  - More information on this will be relayed hopefully at the next CAC meeting
    - Yvelisse will send Angel the update when OVR knows more & provide a presentation / discussion at the next meeting

Items for the next meeting:

- Review the 3 listed goals for the CAC:
  - Improve outreach to the Berks-Schuylkill counties' disability community to increase the level of education about OVR Services
  - Figure out barriers to youths seeking employment, and produce ideas and creative solutions to collaborate with them and OVR to develop concepts to reach them and engage with them
  - Social media options to promote CAC and OVR services
- Berks County Workforce Development Board Study

No comments were made for the general good.

Motion to adjourn was made at 3:02 PM by Andrew and seconded by Judy.

Next meeting is scheduled for March 8, 2022 at 1PM.