

## Northwest PA BBVS Citizen Advisory Committee Meeting – April 14, 2022

### Present- via Teams:

Chris Cowan, Assistant District Administrator, BBVS 814-871-4401 [ccowan@pa.gov](mailto:ccowan@pa.gov)  
Alecia Beam, TWOC VR Supervisor, BBVS 814-871-4401 [albeam@pa.gov](mailto:albeam@pa.gov)  
Amy Adams, Clerk Typist III, BBVS 814-871-4401 [amyadams@pa.gov](mailto:amyadams@pa.gov)  
Linda Moore, The Sight Center of NWPA  
Priscilla Earhart, Keystone Blind Association 724-347-5011 [pearhart@keystoneblind.org](mailto:pearhart@keystoneblind.org)  
Jenn Lilly, Keystone Blind Association [JennLilly@keystonblind.org](mailto:JennLilly@keystonblind.org)  
Krysta Carson, Venango Blind Association [kcarson@venangoblind.org](mailto:kcarson@venangoblind.org)  
Jeanne Hicks, Guest  
Tina Smith-Armour  
Julie Kerns – Lawrence County

The meeting was called to order at 10:03 a.m. by Chris

Roll call – No Sign-In sheet as meeting was held virtually.

Chris sent out minutes of the January 13, 2022 meeting.

Minutes of the January 13, 2022 meeting – Motion to approve by Linda, seconded by Priscilla.

### BBVS Report

Chris: We have had a lot of changes at OVR and BBVS recently. We are open to the public as of April 4<sup>th</sup>. We have a few people come in for VRT lessons etc. We are happy to be open to the public. We do not have many walk-ins but is good to be open so people can come in as needed. Staff is teleworking two days a week, and then in the office or field three days a week, there is staff always in the office. We have had some big changes to the executive team in Harrisburg. Ryan Hyde is now the Acting Executive Director, Dawn has been promoted to the Acting BBVS Director, Marci Katona from Pittsburgh has been promoted to Acting BVRD Director, and Tracie Maillie has been promoted to Acting BCO Manager.

Linda: Where does that leave you Chris, and why are all the positions Acting?

Chris: I have been promoted to Acting District Administrator of Erie BBVS, but I will be doing both the DA and ADA duties. We are in good shape, we have good supervisors and good staff, and it has been a smooth transition. We are not making any changes to how we operate right now.

In a year we will have a new governor, and all these positions are appointed positions. If the new administration appointed other people, the Secretary of L&I wanted to allow the Acting people to move back into their old positions.

Linda: Is Dawn still in the Erie office, or is she moving to Harrisburg?

Chris: Dawn is teleworking right now due to being on medical leave. She's been busy on a lot of calls; it has been a good change. There has been a lot of action already out of central office regarding RSA compliance. We are moving on things to better serve the customers.

Chris: We have two new VRCs starting Monday, and we will be at full complement for counselors.

Linda: Who is gone?

Chris: Angelica resigned, and we have a second vacant position because we promoted Alecia to supervisor. Our new counselors, Latoya James and Craig Galvin will be starting on 4/18/2022. We also have a new social worker starting on 4/25/2022, Mary Wilcox, and we will be at full complement in the Social Work Unit as well.

Linda: Is O&M being filled?

Chris: We are currently looking, and it is currently posted. We did interview one person, and she ended up taking a job with the VA. It is really hard to compete with the VA and federal government wages. We are working with OA to post O&M intern positions again and are reaching out to the schools like Pitt and Western Michigan, etc., to try to get some O&M interns to move to O&M position.

Priscilla: Don't you have to have an O&M?

Chris: We are working with Jim Joyce, a retired certified O&M who worked in our office, and is now in Pittsburgh; he is willing to come back to supervise

Jenn: You can use off-site supervisors as well with interns; their teachers at the school can supervise as well.

Priscilla: We have had several requests for interns here, you could see how they are.

Chris: I would love to have those names and reach out to them. We are also contracting with LuAnne when she is available. We are also contracting with an agency in Jamestown NY. We are trying to meet the needs of customers as best we can; the VRTs are doing a lot of indoor safety, and travel safety. We are using contractors for cane safety and training.

Priscilla – Luanne's schedule has been very busy but if she can help, she will.

Chris: Our clerical 2 position, we are down to one person. We are hoping to post for that position as well so we can hire for that.

Linda: What is going on with Low Vision?

Chris: We are using Dr. Wagner, Dr. Wood, Dr. Freeman, and Dr. Straus-Watt mainly right now. One of the things we are putting together right now is a local outreach group. A couple of the doctors who are in Erie have customers they would like to refer to Low Vision but did not know who to refer to. We are putting together a mass mailing to send out to the eye doctors in Erie, and all our counties, to talk about our services. We will also be sending information to the hospitals, risk managers, case managers, school district nurses, home health agencies, and at the colleges, the Office of Students with Disabilities. Referrals have been extremely low during and coming out of the pandemic. One of the things we are really trying to do is let people know we are here and operating normally.

Linda: We have a long list of referrals and are transferring people back and forth. We have been two years without a doctor, and no nibble. The Low Vision doctor of my dreams applied, and the husband won't move. We are going to talk again in May, maybe he will reconsider.

Chris: If we hear of anyone, we'll let you know.

Priscilla: I have been telling staff to keep referring to you; if that is not happening, let me know.

Chris: I'll check the referrals that come in and where they come from. I know some are from LuAnne, regarding providing VRT and low vision services. We do appreciate any referrals that we have coming.

Chris: Goals: All of our units except for OM, VRTs, and SW units should meet their closure goals for this year. Successful closure is when we have provided all the services needed. Our VRC unit has been really short staffed, so we are about halfway there. We knew we were going to be short; we are at about 22 placements at this time, goal is 56. We have 10-12 more that we know are in the pipeline. Once a customer has been successfully employed for 90 days and met their goals, we can close them as successfully employed. We are struggling with being short staffed. There are a lot of jobs out there, but people are hesitant to get back into the work force. We are doing counseling with those people, encouraging them to give it a try.

I have been working with then new Acting District Administrator in Pittsburgh, Danielle Dawgiello. We have talked about your services at KBA and Jamie's AT services, and about the IDEAL, and she was going to reach out to talk about some of those services. They are very short-staffed as well, she was from the Washington area, and she was coming in looking for services.

Krysta: At the last meeting, we had said anyone with the information on the kids would send the information out; I have not seen any information? Could everyone send out their information to this group please?

Chris: We are going to start our summer program. Because it is starting later than we normally would, we are moving our dates to August, so it will be August 9<sup>th</sup> through August 11<sup>th</sup>. We will have 5-10 kids, school age to age 14, working with our VRTs. They will be working on some ILS, cooking, hygiene. We have reached out to the Sight Center about transportation for the kids and are coordinating with them. We are excited to be able to get back to the summer program; the pandemic closed us down on that. We were going to partner with the Erie Maritime Museum for the last one, and we decided not to do that this year, but may look at that in the future. We just did not have the time this year. We are working on picking students, and the program will be August 9<sup>th</sup> through the 11<sup>th</sup>.

Strive On will be taking place September 1<sup>st</sup> through November 17<sup>th</sup> this year, on Thursdays from 5-7 p.m. and they are targeting 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Applications are out for the fall already; the deadline is July 26<sup>th</sup> for that. Alecia will send out the applications to the people on this call. They have to be an active customer of BBVS, have an internet connection, computer access, and be working on assistive technology and post-secondary readiness; this is an online program. There has been a little whisper about bringing back the Summer Academy, the in-person program we had done. Right now, this is just a whisper so we will see what happens, if that is going to come back.

We also have been looking at getting students signed up, talking about the IDEAL program, and the VIP camp.

Linda: Jenn, are you doing a summer program this year?

Jenn: We have two tracks, so we can see what each student does; we hope they go to a summer academy or the TVI program. Summer academy focuses on college bound stuff.

### **Venango County Association of the Blind (VCAB)**

**Krysta:** I want to start off with a question to Chris. We had participated in a webinar with some of the BBVS people for our Link Program and we were asking questions and not getting any answers. Specifically, we have a subset of clients 18 and 55, and there seems to be a deficit for that age group; and we have clients with physical or mental disabilities and they are not a candidate for a work force. We can't seem to get those people services from BBVS?

Chris: We do have a Specialized Services for Adults program, which is very underfunded, for that age group; we try to serve those customers in our work program and hope they go to work. To be eligible for the Specialized Services for Adults program, they must have a doctor's slip that they are unable to work. If they are capable of working, but simply do not want to work, we do not really have a program for them.

If they want to work and are under 55 or have medical documentation that they are unable to work, that is when we can help.

Have people call us, a lot of people who are blind or visually impaired think they can't work, but it is our counselors' jobs to get you ready to work.

Krysta: I have a specific instance where we have a client with severe mental health issues, who is in and out of the psych ward; she was turned down and needs assistance in her home and was turned down for services. If she had a note from her psychiatric doctor would that suffice?

Chris: I would say if she has been documented by any type of doctor, that would be sufficient. We can talk more about that case outside of this meeting if you would like; I'd be happy to talk to you about that.

Krysta: That would be great; it is hard to get the BBVS rep in our counties to help.

Chris: We can talk more about that as well.

Krysta: We are working on getting our van; we have most of the money, and would be able to purchase one, but with the supply and demand, there is not a lot available that is within the amount of money we raised. We are waiting on another set of vans to come in. Hopefully by mid-summer we will have our vehicle and will start transporting clients. Clients seem to be really affected by the pandemic; they are not coming out, not doing things. They will reserve spot for transportation and then call and cancel. They are becoming agoraphobic on us and are just staying home. The clients with mobility issues have gotten worse. We are working with clients, trying to provide emotional and physical support, with calls and encouragement. At least once a quarter we call all our clients and have conversations.

Linda: I have a suggestion regarding this. We are having some of the same problems, and we have been having some of the older customers who are doing well call others in their group and invite them to come to the clubs; the peers seem to have a little more luck. We had a calling chain all winter long where the clients called each other, and that really has had a really nice impact on this group, making them feel closer, and more connected with friends, and they are able to encourage each other.

Krysta: I didn't think of that, as they call each other on their own now, but that might be great; "I've missed you at group", etc.

Krysta: The Lions Club picnic has been scheduled, and we have called people, and said "Guess what"! They are very excited. We did do one get-together, last year, went ok, but nothing like previous years. People love the picnic, there is no cost as the Lions Club feeds them. We are hoping to encourage enough people to come out.

Vision Bowl is on for later this year, again the first one in two years. We called people and told them to get their teams together, and they were very excited.

The Diabetic Prevention Program is moving along. Everyone loves LuAnn; she encourages everyone, and they love her. As a result, everyone in that class is doing amazing. We have one client in that group, and she does really well with him, and he takes everything to heart. We have ten altogether in this cohort and everyone is hitting marks. This has been a great experience for us, and we are hoping to continue.

We are going forward with access technology, focusing on magnification devices mostly, as that is most of our client needs. We are getting a new desk area for the back room to hold all that stuff. We are sending Mara to get certified in Access Technology training and virtual learning. It will be a little over \$1200 to get her certified, and whatever is left over will be added into the van purchase. We had a Clear Eye 2EZ donated yesterday, and when we showed it to clients, they were very excited.

Linda: Have you heard of Grand Pads? They are iPads for senior citizens, and they are super accessible; however, they cost about \$800.00.

### **Oil Valley Chapter for the Blind**

No report.

Krysta: They have continued to meet here at our office once a month, just met this last Tuesday. They are having some trouble getting people to come out, and sometimes they don't have a quorum.

### **Keystone Blind Association**

Jeanne Hicks: Tech Talks have been on hiatus due to the pandemic, but we have started back this year. Tech Talk groups try to pull people together who know nothing about tech. Generally, I introduce everyone, and have them tell why they are there, and the tech they use or don't use. We talk about the latest and greatest, do a presentation on a particular item, and then have a Q&A session. We have little individual sessions while people are socializing. I also will have guest presents come in who have dived deep into a specific thing. The first one, in Mercer County, went well; we had five people, and they seemed to enjoy the time. We had 10 people physically present and 3 people virtually in Beaver County yesterday; this went well. Lawrence county went well also, and we had 10-12 people. We only have Crawford County left.

We are continuing to grow, getting referrals all the time, older people who need assistance; I am really enjoying what I am doing. We are trying to group people in the same counties to save gas, and making virtual calls, etc. We met at restaurants for two of the Tech Talks, and we are currently meeting in the agency for all groups going forward.

Linda: How did meeting in the restaurants work?

Jeanne: We were able to get a room in the restaurant and it actually worked really well, we could have up to 24 in the restaurant; we were hesitant to move to the agency. We are working on a PAB grant; Priscilla has been working very hard on that.

Priscilla: Following up on what Jeanne was talking about: Yes, they had 20 people, and liked meeting in the restaurant. We had issues with people coming to the talks that had no interest in technology, and they were sitting at little booths by themselves, and having own conversations. Jeanne was hopeful that they would join in, but when you are transporting those people, that is your staff, gas, etc., you have to look at that as well.

Now that we have the AT grant, we will have equipment at the office. We are looking for offices that have group space. It makes the most sense that groups need to meet at the office where the AT equipment is, and where we can give demonstrations, etc.

We are all back to our support groups, and they are all up and running. With our AT grant, we are focusing on eye products; allowing for one android for people to try also. We are looking at all the Access Technology software, such as Fusion, Open Book, etc. GuideConnect is good for older users; H. We are looking at Freedom Scientific Open book, Kurzweil, Dragon, Microsoft Home Office.

We are getting laptops, all-in-one computers, which we will lend out for people to practice, and try some of those things.

We are also going to be getting an Echo Smart thermostat set up to show people. This is taking a lot of time, money, and training. Two staff at every agency are going to be trained for demonstrations and basic installation.

All of our staff is going to get a small amount of training on both phones and the OCR devices, to be able to give basic information. The two trained staff would be able to do demonstrations at the office. The only Access Technology is OCR devices, so we will stay with the OCR devices, text to talk, etc. We are getting all the agencies a desk setup. We anticipate clients actually coming in and sitting down and using and practicing on the equipment.

Chris: I would be happy to talk to you after the meeting about where we are with this.

Jenn Lilly: We are been very busy here. Right now, VRT staff is super busy; we have had a lot of referrals for outside of Mercer County; Crawford County, Lawrence County, etc. We are starting to do more cooking classes in Mercer County as well as Beaver County, and Lawrence County.

I continue to have a lot of people interested in the cooking classes. I will have an intern starting in May for VRT. She is doing low vision with us right now. She is completing her low vision internship this month, completing her VRT internship next month, and is hoping to go to Optometry school. She will be helping with our IDEAL program this summer.

Regarding low vision, we are swamped, scheduling into June. Dr. Freeman is here every Monday until July, with the exception of one Monday a month when he is in Beaver County in May and June.

Lot of referrals from low vision doctors; we are hoping to get them in to see our facilities. We are meeting with some doctors next week to give tour and talk about process. Dr. Freeman will hopefully be continuing education programs here.

Regarding the kids programming, we started Keystone Kids in Mercer County in February, and had a good turnout. We did a circus theme, and had a lot of fun with carnival games, etc. We had a few new kids this spring. Our next event is April 23<sup>rd</sup>, our Spring Fling, with crafts, music, and a treasure hunt. We are hoping to get new students to the Spring Fling.

With IDEAL, we have our mini IDEAL weekend from April 29<sup>th</sup> through May 1<sup>st</sup>, so that people can get a glimpse of what IDEAL is. A lot of students on this side of the state are afraid to go for four weeks. We encourage anyone who is interested, but we have limited space so let us know soon. There is no extra charge for this, but we do want them to be registered with BBVS. If they are not registered, we will get them registered. Most referrals are from professionals who have them register with BBVS. We have a maximum capacity of 12.

We have 10 students that are interested in the mini weekend for the IDEAL program for the summer. If anyone else is interested, send the information and we will put them on a waiting list. Acceptance letters for the summer program will go out in May so that the parents, students, and the BBVS counselors know they are accepted and can start the process.

We are fully staffed now for the IDEAL program, and we are working on funding for iPads for each of the students. We use Apple lab and if they complete program, they can keep the iPad. This worked really well last year, helped with reading the back of boxes, clothing colors, etc.

It also allowed us to have some access to the students, even if they were to have a doctor's appointment they had to go home for, etc. We can work with them in our hybrid model.

### **The Sight Center of Northwest PA**

Linda: Envision Blind Sports has collaborated with DSC and is moving to Erie, Penn State Behrend.

Priscilla: We have not gotten anything in some time now?

Linda: We have meeting with them tomorrow so we will pass that on.

Assistive Technology – SAIL – Sustainable Adaptations for Independent Living: The Grand Pads are really cool, but there are a lot of other things such as magnification devices.

We are expanding the children's garden and working on another module this year for older folks, such as standing gardens with wheelchair access.

The Diabetes Prevention Program: We have a lot of people involved, some graduating this month, and four new cohorts starting.

Save An Eye Game: We are prepping for this and will have a game at the end of July.

Support groups: We are trying to get people back out; we have walking groups around the neighborhood, trying to get everyone out walking and moving around more. We are doing some cooking classes, cooking things from the Diabetes Prevention Class.

Priscilla: Jenn, what are the dates for the Career Caravan?

Jenn: The June 21<sup>st</sup> through July 23<sup>rd</sup> program is for our students that are in 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and the August 15<sup>th</sup> through August 17<sup>th</sup> is for our younger kids. We will also have an all-kid outing on August 18, 2022. The program for our older students focuses on job readiness, college bound, etc. We are working on an agenda based off what we have done in the past as far as how we want to do it each year, so the students will have been exposed to all the areas by the time they graduate.

The day program for the younger kids is more about exploration, hygiene, ADLs, and learning new things. This year is about planting, and garden activities. We will keep them in the office so they can see how things grow through the fall. "Planting The Seeds" is the theme.

With all the kid activities, we want to make sure the kids feel connected, and have mentors, so we try to do activities for all the kids at the end of summer, something like a picnic, a ball game, or an amusement park.

Priscilla: We are recruiting for jobs, expanding the Boyer contract, this is happening in Mercer County; positions are available in both places. We are rotating, placing people in both places, training in both places. We need people in our production area in the back desperately; we do not have enough help to fill the orders.

I want to thank Julie for joining us. I would also like to introduce our newest member, Tina Smith-Armour, the new office manager in Crawford County. Tina has hit the ground running, and is doing a great job, adding people to our numbers. She will be starting her first support group; the first Access Technology group.

We are hoping to move our office soon, maybe to another office in this building, or another building,

Julie: Regarding outreach, the welfare office from Lawrence County wanted information about what our agency does; I will be making that presentation at the end of May.

The agency had large print and braille Agency services pamphlets printed and supplied them, so we are able to get these services out to people. We have to get agencies to remember that people with low vision need to see the pamphlets also to know about services.

### **PaRC Report**

Please see the attached PaRC Report submitted by Heidi.

### **Governor's Committee on Disabilities**

No Report

### **Next Meeting**

Meetings are scheduled for July 14, 2022 and October 13, 2022. Chris will send out the meeting minutes, agenda, and new invites.

### **Motion to Adjourn**

Meeting adjourned at 11:39 a.m. by Priscilla, seconded by Julie