

## **CAC MEETING MINUTES - February 5, 2021**

The meeting was held telephonically via Skype. It began at approximately 10:00 a.m. on Friday, February 5, 2021.

In attendance: Shannon Austin, OVR Executive Director; Tom Burgunder, Co-Chair; Rich Fisher; Lynn Fox, WPSBC; Carla Hayes; Christine Hunsinger; Greg Lazare, PaTTAN; Terri Lucas, PAB employee; Bob Nagy; Barb Peterson, BVRSP; Spero Pipakis, guest presenter from BBVS; Larry Shock, BBVS Assistant District Administrator; Sarah Vogel, BBVS District Administrator; Joe Wassermann; Michael Zaken, Co-Chair.

Shannon Austin came to the meeting and asked for our help, particularly PCB's help, with the SSP program. She talked to us before we got to the business of the agenda.

Shannon wanted us to understand the status of the SSP program. Melissa Hawkins from the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing should be part of the discussion as well. Shannon said that OVR and the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing are working on an FAQ document so people can clearly understand the changes in the SSP program. They are hoping for a line item in the budget for the SSP program with the funding coming out of "GGO"(?) funds. It has not been determined at the time of this CAC call whether the State would be broken down into two or four sections for future bids on the SSP program. However, at the time of the call, the State was broken into two different areas to administer the SSP services by contracted service providers through March with an emergency purchase order.

The State will be bringing in a consultant to train people from the winning bidders properly on methods for the bidders and service providers. The State decided the program should run out of ODHH rather than OVR.

Rich asked what the criteria for the organizations to bid on the program would be. Shannon told us she had not been a party to the development of the criteria, but there would be training for the winners from a recognized national consultant in this area. Tom asked why the CIL, who had been running the program for 5 years, was removed from the current group of providers. Shannon explained their program ended in September 2020, and all reimbursement had to be requested by December 31, 2020. The roadblock to the program running through any part of OVR, be it BBVS or the OVR offices, is that OVR funds are to be used to promote employment. Therefore, those above OVR decided the program should run out of ODHH since not all people using SSPs actually have

employment goals. And the RSA Monitoring report was already asking for some corrective actions of the State of Pennsylvania.

Shannon pointed out that the program can expand to all Deaf-Blind individuals in Pennsylvania, not just those who were using it before the CIL lost its contract. There is an estimate that there are 1.2 million possible people with hearing and vision loss who could qualify for this program in the State.

The State is also attempting to figure out a way to reach people in more rural areas of the State who may not have been served with this program in the past. They are hoping that by dividing the State geographically, it will be easier to manage the different kinds of services for different parts of the State - urban, suburban or rural. Mike Zaken made motion and Carla Hayes seconded to approve minutes. The motion carried.

### **Staff Updates – Sarah Vogel:**

The office has been unable to hire staff. Jim Joyce, an O&M Specialist, retired end of December 2020. They now have two O&Ms, two VRTs, two VRC, two social workers, one social work supervisor, no VR supervisor, one clerical, one DA and one ADA. Waiver request has been submitted for the social worker, clerical (CT2) and VR supervisor positions. O&M and VRT have been requested, but since the office isn't back to work with client in-person contact, those requests are recognized for the future. There were to be conversations with the Secretary of Labor and Industry about the waivers.

Chris asked about the job sharing and case sharing solution to the understaffing. Sarah's response was they couldn't do that quickly because of issues with determining the statistics and work units, geographical considerations and union considerations. They decided to deal with the staffing shortages through internal reorganization. They got overtime and have clerical doing VR referrals, which are in the neighborhood of about 100 referral backlogs. Other employees have overtime to process other workloads.

### **Pre-ETS Programming:**

Summer Academies were not off the table at the time of the meeting. An employment and work readiness program was advertised both on The Department of Education and BBVS websites. strive-on is supposed to begin in March. Sarah said she had registered her first participant on the day of the CAC Meeting. This program is Open to all job goals both post-secondary and immediate employment.

They had 40 students set up Statewide. Greg said Karen Walsh-Emma told him there were 36 already signed up. He also said that PaTTAN had spoken to stakeholders about this program. PaTTAN offered support but that would be insufficient, so Doug Williams contracted to work with BBVS to support the programming.

A specific BBVS Programming is STRIVE ON a New Pre-ETS BBVS Program which consists of weekly evening programming with employers and others to give job seekers more information. First session runs from March through May 27, 2021 from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. using Teams. Topics include self-advocacy, assistive technology and employability.

Spero Pipakis pointed out a fall session will be part two, but you had to attend the spring session to attend the fall session. Spero also pointed out that the creators of the program came to him, Rob Hodapp and Jeff Seaberry to get recommendations for panel members for this program. They are looking for both employers and blind individuals who are working at jobs.

Chris asked if there would be a way for individuals to offer their perspectives to the classes. Sarah said that she would send email to Karen Walsh-Emma, who is the person in charge of the program, to get more information on that topic.

### **Western PA School for Blind Children:**

Collaboration and Coordination of Programming, Pre-ETS: WPSBC and BBVS had just started talking about this issue as the pandemic closed down the school and employees were working from home. The communications went from the school to BVRS to BBVS for the early reach and other students asking for assistance with training, programming and learning what services were available.

Lynn Fox summarized service requests for the school. They want group Pre-ETS, early reach, parent training, vocational training, IEP issues to be addressed. Also IEP invites for BBVS people to be coordinated through the BVRS or BBVS office which serves the student at WPSBC. There was to be another call in February to do more coordination between BBVS OVR and WPSBC since all could be involved in a student's program depending on the complexity of the student's disability. They are also working on the issue of 511 kids with likelihood of noncompetitive employment giving employees training on how to get the student to OVR for assessment if the IEP doesn't have competitive integrated employment as a goal. Early Reach is for somewhere between middle school and high school Pre-ETS. They have identified a group of students with vocational likelihood for group Pre-ETS services. Sarah asked

Spero to speak on that topic. He said that he has not yet been able to observe a class. It is important they take the OVR training material and make it accessible and meaningful for students who have a visual impairment. Lynn made a positive thank you to the BBVS people for their work in implementation of this program.

Tom asked Lynn to give a profile of the kind of students at the school taking advantage of the program. Students all have some visual impairment, have other disabilities, could be non-ambulatory, could be non-verbal. Training is imbedded in Assistive Technology like augmented communications, use of a power wheelchair, additional adaptation of orientation and mobility training, along with intellectual disability level of which is unique to each student. The curriculum for each student takes into account his or her special needs. The school is focusing on strengthening community ties with a student after he or she leaves school. This could be job coaching, assisted living, a Discovery evaluation, and could also depend on the resources available where the student will be living after graduation. The old way of looking at Day Programs for students may not be a resource available to them, and sheltered employment is much less likely to be available.

### **Instructional Staff Returning to the Field:**

Sarah got approval in August or so if conditions warranted instructional staff to go back into the field. They did do some training but don't have the go ahead for returning staff to the field.

Rich asked for clarification that there was funding available for the drivers of visually impaired employees once staff can go back into the field. Sarah said that it was available. She didn't have information about when they would actually have staff back in the field or when staff would be in office full time.

### **Business Services Update - Spero Pipakis:**

They had worked out how the job fair would work with a vender with an accessible platform, but that contract was not signed off on by the time of the meeting. That meant that there was no date for the event. It is hoped that the job fair would be in the spring with a follow-up meeting in the fall to coordinate with NDEAM. Spero and Sarah are working on a systematic set of procedures of what the BSR is available to do for either a client or an employer.

They are working on a better brochure for employers, focusing on what BBVS can give them, a comprehensive referral form, and working on individual and group programs. He is happy about the Job Club model believing that it will get a better commitment from clients to the job search. He gave examples like a

client who is in her sixties who puts in three applications a day. Job leads can disappear overnight so everyone has to think about moving more quickly on leads.

Spero is happy about the new information going out to employers for what BBVS can do for them. Inspiritec wants to hire as many as 1000 employees over the country with vision loss. Joe asked who this company is. This company is related to UniqueSource which used to be Pennsylvania Industries for the Blind and handicapped. Unique Source is affiliated with Ability One. Inspiritec was contracted by Pennsylvania Unemployment to handle many of the unemployment issues for the state. Work from home jobs are probably how these positions would be filled. They envision them as the first responder on the phone or computer for people who then refer the customer to the proper person based on the particular situation. That means that they would probably need minimum training. There is also the hope that if a person does well for Inspiritec, they will be hired by the state when state positions become available.

Spero has not yet been able to find out how well the state system would work with assistive technology. The State was not willing to put the assistive technology on their Azure servers, so it was put on the individual computers that employees get to work with the systems, but he had no reports at the time of the meeting about accessibility. He has already had several clients wanting to investigate Inspiritec employment. He pointed out that there has to be a relationship with the employer, his client and perhaps a company contracted to help the employee get set up in the system. They have found a way to use OJT money to help people get started on these jobs.

Another company is PeopleShare - working on health insurance enrollment. This company will train people to pass the State health insurance enrollment tests to be considered an expert or certified in the area. Spero isn't sure how accessible the system would be for people using assistive technology. He also doesn't know how well the State testing system will work with assistive technology. PeopleShare says that as people improve their skillset, they can move to become employees of Optimim, the company that PeopleShare works with, and expand to be licensed in more states as Health Insurance advisors. PeopleShare acknowledges that some of their trainees will eventually go to other insurance companies to enroll people in health insurance.

Spero had no accessibility answers at the time of this meeting because he didn't yet have any candidates for positions with PeopleShare.

Tom asked Spero about Accessible Pharmacy and whether they had hired additional visually impaired employees. Spero was enthusiastic about Accessible Pharmacy, but he didn't know about additional hires. He had heard that the gentleman hired in Western PA was not able to continue in his job. Tom also asked Bob Nagy about his employment situation testing websites for accessibility. Bob is still part-time.

Spero mentioned that the February 2021 BVRSP class for PROMOTE, which teaches the use of windows and the MS Office Suite, had been moved to a later date.

**Order of Selection information – Larry Shock:**

Status of Wait List - Pittsburgh BBVS office has 24 customers who have been informed they can be taken off the waiting list. In January 2021 four people went off of the list who had only gone on the list in November 2020. The other 20 people who can come off the waiting list are from earlier waves and have not yet had their cases resolved because of contact issues. This is a problem for the whole State because there are 125 such cases for all BBVS offices.

There are 100 OVR referrals in the backlog. With only 2 VR counselors, it is difficult to get to all of them. They are being screened so that Job Retention people can be moved to the top of the list. Sarah confirmed that the oldest lead in referral status is probably about a year old.

Sarah confirmed that people go into Interrupted Status instead of closed out status if their medical conditions warrant it. Counsellors talk to their supervisors when they think that clients should go into Interrupted Status, but that is a result of the conversation with the client and based on answers from the client. That status isn't necessarily offered to the client. In order to put a person into Interrupted Status, the employment plan has to have been set up. They cannot go from referral to Interrupted Status. There are 12 in Interrupted Status.

Tom asked whether there is a discussion with a client who gets tired of looking for jobs and says close me out before he is put into closed out status or Interrupted Status. This would presumably be someone who already has an employment plan. Sarah said there should be a discussion with the client because you cannot reopen a closed-out case if it was closed out unsuccessful. It can be reopened within a year if it is post-employment training. We asked the question about how the file is documented that this discussion existed. Sarah told us the file should be documented.

**Collaboration between the Dept. of Education and BBVS:**

Sarah said they see many levels of support from different school districts, in different counties, and using different intermediate units. Collaboration can be no cost services, can be PRE-ETS, and BBVS can't tell school districts which services they should provide. There is a MOU being rewritten between BBVS and Education.

**Competitive employment for people with MH issues:**

Aspire Program - Sarah had no information about whether BBVS could use that program to fund any services for those who have both mental health and vision issues. Tom mentioned Discovery and Customized Employment. Sarah asked that we send out information pertaining to the Aspire MOU.

Telework information as far as how successful it is and when employees will be back in the office. There was no additional information at the meeting.

**New Business:**

Student IEPs from Greg: There is a movement for students with IEPs to begin advocacy earlier than the transition years. Could there be collaboration between OVR or BBVS and the Department of Education to identify regions or school districts not adequately preparing students for life after graduation to bring training to the district or region involved? Could there be a way to determine if school districts, or particular counties, are less ready for life after school. He requested that all of OVR be able to forward such feedback to PaTTAN or somewhere in the Department of Education to create better future education. Sarah mentioned that Kim Robinson, the OVR Transition Chief, would be the person most likely able to get that sort of feedback on a Statewide basis.

Chris asked if any of the information from older Summer Academy sessions could possibly help identify deficiencies. That information might either be too old or not collected in a meaningful way. Greg acknowledged that the Department of Education participation in Summer Academy helped that agency see deficiencies in what students were learning in school, and therefore it caused changes in information given to teachers.

Greg brought up the bi-optic driving question. The Department of Education is thinking about how to deal with this issue and driver training in the schools. But is BBVS thinking about it for students once they are out of high school? Sarah said she knew there were questions and ideas being circulated through BBVS about this issue, but she at first thought the law had not been passed. We pointed out the law had been passed, but the implementation and regulations involved in the training were still under construction. Larry thought this was encouraging so that some people could have more mobility. Rich asked if the

correction was to 20/40, would the people still be eligible for services from BBVS. Larry didn't know because they would only have that correction for driving or some other times when using these glasses or appliances.

Carla brought up the home-schooling issue for visually impaired students for supportive services. Sarah asked if Carla was talking about BBVS Services or Educational Services, and Carla said both. Particularly, students who move to Pennsylvania from other states with different funding streams have questions. Sarah pointed out that anyone can refer someone too OVR so there is no need for a professional to do the referral.

Greg mentioned the Department of Education has been working on recognizing inaccessible documents for students now that everyone is doing remote learning. There is grant money available for internet access for students, or at least there are several ways to address the lack of internet. Remote learning is different from home-schooling because home-schooling is not necessarily affiliated with a particular school district.

Meeting adjourned at 11:55 a.m. Chris Hunsinger made the motion, and Rich Fisher seconded the motion to adjourn. Next CAC Meeting is Friday, May 7, 2021 beginning 10:00 a.m. via Skype.