



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

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ZOOM Full Council Quarterly Meeting

Full Council Meeting August 10, 2022 Minutes

Council Members: Present (P) Not Present (NP)

Jeanette Alexander (P)	Julia Barol (P)	Paul Fogle (P)
Lynn Heitz (P)	Michele Leahy (NP)	Michelle Paonessa (P)
Andrew Pennington (P)	Kara Donatucci Pham (P)	Laura Princiotta (P)
Susan Tomasic (P)	William Del Toro Vargas (P)	Rob Wallington (NP)

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Present: Luis Fontanez, Jr., Jessica Hanula, Ryan Hyde, Mike Jacobson, Ceena Jenkins, Marci Katona, Tracie Maille, Mark Maurer, Bill McLean, Cheryl Novak, Danielle Schmidgall, Dawn Sokol, Lee Ann Stewart, James Whitonis, Steve Wicht, Colleen Woodring

Stakeholders Present: Melissa Hawkins (Office of the Deaf & Hard of Hearing), Matthew Seeley, Esq. (Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council), Josh Towzey (State Workforce Development Board)

Guest Speaker: Ellen Strom (Chief Accessibility Officer, PA Office of Administration)

Project Staff Present: Michelle Gerrick, Christopher Todd

Moderator of Zoom Present: Nichole Wade

CART: Abby Estes

Interpreters: Libby Berlin, Jessica Bentley Sassaman

Guests: Corey O'Brien (Associate Creative Director, Deloitte US Delivery Center), Jessica Keogh (pending PaRC member)

CONVENE THE MEETING: Mr. Paul Fogle, Chair

- After welcoming remarks, Mr. Fogle read the PaRC mission statement

DISCUSSION OF AGENDA ADDITIONS/

- Mr. William Del Toro Vargas stated that he would like to make an addition to the agenda for a letter of support for PA House Bill 547 during the Legislative Committee update.

Mr. William Del Toro Vargas motioned to approve today's agenda with additions and past meeting minutes. Ms. Susan Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.

COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

Ms. Lee Ann Stewart, OVR Division Chief of Policy, Staff Development & Training

- Mr. Mark Maurer provided updates on the common performance measures. Reported that Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) evaluates OVR on six different performance indicators which include employment rate for the second and fourth quarters, median quarterly earnings of people who have exited OVR programs, credential attainment rate which is the percentage of people who are enrolled in education programs who earn a credential and then exit the program. The rules for Credential attainment rates vary for secondary and post-secondary students. The 2020 rate was artificially low because there was not a good way of capturing data at that time in place, resulting in a 0.3% rate for the Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2021. Preliminary results for the most recent Fiscal Year are about 15% credential attainment. Measurable skills gains are a metric for secondary and post-secondary students progress toward earning their credentials which can include verifiable skills progression, report cards and transcripts, credit hours with no failing grades, and progress reports from vocational or technical institutions. 2020 credential attainment rate was 38.2% and in 2021 it was 48.1% which are unofficial until approved by RSA. Employment rate for second quarter was 55.6% and 43.3% for the fourth quarter. Median earnings were \$4,414 per quarter. A link to the ETA9169 Annual report was provided; <https://rsa.ed.gov/wioa-resources/wioa-annual-reports>
- Ms. Lynn Heitz inquired of the 55% of individuals employed, what is the percentage from Bureau of Blind and Visual Services (BBVS).
- Mr. Maurer reported that those numbers are not specifically included in the RSA report annually and would not be available in the data for breakout as a performance indicator.
- Mr. Jim Whitonis provided report on the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) and reported that Temple is completing the current cycle and is winding down processing, surveying and final data collecting. RSA provided clarification that the CSNA Statement of Work will not be due until December

which provides additional time for changes. The legal department provided formatting changes and the leadership team provided a second review and provided two additional targeted goals that were also suggested by the Council. Those new targeted goals are to identify how many individuals over the past year who are deaf, hard or hearing, deaf, blind have used the OVR services and what communication barriers they have encountered and understanding the impact of the pandemic for OVR customers, determining if customers prefer remote or in-person meetings for employment needs, and understanding challenges and vocational needs of individuals with disabilities that are English as a second language learners. Previous budget for this project was about \$200,000 and has been increased this year to \$300,000 returning to the same budget levels prior to this current cycle.

- Ms. Michelle Paonessa inquired how will OVR identify dealing with barriers, surveys, or questionnaires.
- Ms. Lee Ann Stewart stated that once the new cycle is initiated Temple can be invited to attend Council meetings for members to share input regarding these important issues as this is a collaborative project.

VEHICLE MODIFICATION POLICY: Ms. Danielle Schmidgall, OVR

- Ms. Danielle Schmidgall provided report on the Vehicle Modification Policy which has been meeting monthly since April. Recently completed a draft of the policy which includes definitions attachment, consultation and screening forms for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) to use with customers, a brochure for describing the vehicle modification process and an updated customer understandings form for both vans and automobiles to highlight customer responsibilities. The work group was able to condense eight previous policy documents into one comprehensive document and hopes to present a draft to the Council and State Board by December 2022 and have final approval by March 2023. Ms. Michele Leahy is the PaRC Representative on this work group.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- No public comments were provided.

PRESENTATION: Ms. Ellen Strom, Chief Accessibility Officer, PA Office of Administration

- Ms. Ellen Strom informed attendees that she has been Chief Accessibility Officer for over two and a half years and provided a presentation that describes the Accessibility Program, its strategies, policies, and accomplishments. Digital accessibility opens the world to about 20% of Pennsylvanians who have disabilities and provides independent access to information and services online. Strategies for

accessibility includes the phrase learn, plan, and do. Accessibility will take a few years to accomplish and will also include a continuous process that will never go away. A learning program called Access Academy was purchased to provide staff with trainings and a platform that contains an accessibility testing tool kit. In 2021, Provided an update to the accessibility policy that has been in place since 2006 by adding a definition for digital content and services that goes well beyond the original focus of websites. Implemented plans and industry standards for accessibility of all current and legacy content, provided guidelines for web content accessibility including revised 508 standards and more. Included details for all parties responsible for accessibility including all agencies, Information Technology (IT), procurement offices, vendors, and suppliers. Provided assessments which include governance, risk management, compliance, communications, policies and standards, regulatory, fiscal management, development life cycle, testing and validation, talent management, and training. Training includes both e-learning and in person instructors. Testing includes both an automated tool and wizard that provides steps for manual testing and catches 100% of accessibility issues. Implementation of the platform included a one-year pilot program for each IT delivery center under each of the agencies under the Governor's jurisdiction which included digital directors that manage the public web presence for each agency. Currently on year two of the program and have incorporated additional delivery groups, enterprise groups, security staff, technology office, IT groups, and increased training and tools for all agencies. The maturity assessment and road map include a multiyear strategy that includes multiple methodologies such as Agile, accessibility requirements that include research with people with disabilities, and planning that ensures accessibility is included within the budgeting process, design specs, alt text, hidden accessibility content, coding for accessibility, good use of syntax, testing for screen readers, and Assistive Technology (AT) testing. Other project requirements should include developer demos on accessibility, accessibility included in your definition of done, monitoring for accessibility upon launching a product, and incorporating customer feedback. Job Access With Speech (JAWS), Zoom Text and Fusion have been purchased for all employees to use as an accommodation and for testing. The vision is for Pennsylvania to be a state where everyone, citizens and employees alike, can access the digital information and services they need. The Accessibility Center of Excellence is designed to build team awareness, meet training and standard's needs, provide governance and oversight, partnership and consultation with teams to ensure accessibility steps and processes, and providing services at the enterprise level to ensure standards, best practices, and metrics can be attained by each team. Center of Excellence is currently made up of three people. Long term goals include at least one accessibility champion in each IT delivery center, all teams

incorporating automated, manual, and assistive technology testing, incorporating groups to perform audits on accessibility and training, accessibility procurement, a centralized budget for accommodations, ensuring a user research and user testing program service with people with disabilities, an accessible document review and remediation services, and a governance service.

- Ms. Michelle Paonessa inquired how will you identify and resolve barriers to surveys and questionnaires. Inquired if feedback in general is received from individuals themselves. Inquired if the trainings were mandatory or not?
- Ms. Strom stated that she receives a lot of questions and feedback directly on accessibility issues regarding documents.
- Ms. Lynn Heitz stated that she has concerns about the accessibility of all state websites and documents and recommended having members of the disability community outside of state employees assess the projects mentioned today.
- Ms. Strom stated that she would like to further discuss and agrees that she would like to be able to do an audit to ensure that everyone is learning how to use the tools and are doing a good job.
- Ms. Tracie Maille stated that the member had previously brought up concerns regarding accessibility testing within OVR and has reached out to staff that utilizes a screen reader, indicated they have assisted with testing and fixing forms, pointing out accessibility issues with employee self-service, troubleshooting braille printers for IT, suggesting hardware improvements for Assistive Technology (AT) users, testing out pilot laptops, rolling out AT versus Operating System (OS) issues and evaluating new applications like DocuSign, addressing long-standing accessibility issues in Commonwealth Workforce Development System (CWDS), assisting with regression testing, finding accessibility issues within applications, and reporting them directly to the developers. A JAWS user / VR specialist for accessibility support has been collaborating with Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (COPA) agencies to ensure programs, apps, and documents and processes are developed with accessibility in mind. They have been testing success factors, testing technology used for onboarding new employees, testing limited English courses and documenting their findings, developing the OVR-wide AT interest group starting in October, AT training request processes, and the development of the assistive technology committee. Was also provided feedback from staff for the deaf and hard of hearing and deaf/blind population.
- Mr. Andrew Pennington inquired about dates for optimization, implementation, and goals for the state to be fully compliant with accessibility goals.
- Ms. Strom stated that the goal is for continual improvement and to continue to take steps to get better year over year.
- Ms. Melissa Hawkins thanked Ms. Ellen Strom for her presentation and stated that she wanted to ensure that Ms. Michelle Paonessa's questions were answered

regarding receiving feedback from, and meeting accessibility needs for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, and/or deaf blind. Ms. Hawkins stated that she is grateful for the collaboration and ensuring that technology is implemented for embedding captioning, putting interpreters into graphics, and other accessibility components for those who are deaf and hard of hearing maintain consistency throughout the entire Commonwealth to ensure everything is universally accessible.

- Ms. Jessica Keogh inquired how accessibility milestones are being measured.
- Ms. Strom stated that their metrics include using a well-known accessibility testing tool through a well-known consulting firm, planning to use a conformance scoring system that measures accessibility guidelines provided in Section 508, meeting industry standards to improve use experience.
- Mr. William Del Toro Vargas stated that he hopes the Council can work in partnership with the Accessibility Team and would like to ensure people have full accessibility when applying for OVR services and that the OVR website is accessible.
- Ms. Dawn Sokol, Acting Bureau Director for the Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS) stated that she and Mr. Russ Goddard have been involved from the beginning when working with Workforce and CareerLink as they are embarking on digital design and digital application projects with the forethought to involve staff from the deaf, hard of hearing, blind and visually impaired populations.
- Ms. Michelle Paonessa inquired if the trainings are mandatory.
- Ms. Strom stated that trainings are required for those involved in the AMP project, are optional and available to all other employees, and long term will be rolled out and made required for all Commonwealth agencies.
- Mr. Luis Fontanez informed attendees that as he is currently specializing in CWDS remediation and help desk support. The CWDS application in and of itself, both the client-facing side, as well as the employee-facing side is actively being remediated and worked on to improve accessibility and usability. The CWDS 15.6 release will be going live this August, there are no less than three long-spanning accessibility improvements that are going to be made. And those are directly hitting the preapplication. Their goals are for the systems and evaluation division to ensure that with each succeeding OVR release beyond 15.6 are making accessibility, as well as usability improvements for those individuals who are blind and visually impaired. Informed attendees that he uses assistive technology and has direct access to developers and addressing hot fixing, data fixes, change requests or issues as part of the release cycle. Having worked with OVR since 2016 is an employee of OVR and specializes in screen reader usage and was a client of OVR at one time. Improvements made to CWDS including the 15.6 release are made on both the employee-facing side and client-facing side.

OFFICE OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION (OVR) DIRECTOR'S REPORT:

Mr. Ryan Hyde, OVR Acting Executive Director

- Mr. Ryan Hyde provided report on OVR staffing, financials, statistics, and summer programs. There are at least 150 positions listed currently mostly for direct service positions, counselors, and social workers. In July the minimum experience and training requirements were updated for the VRC position which expands the degrees that would allow people to qualify to be a rehab counselor and will now include rehab, mental health, special education, social work, human services, psychology, business administration, human resources, public admin, and others. The Fiscal Year ending on June 30, 2022, OVR was able to successfully assist 5,420 individuals obtain competitive integrative employment and provide services for about 14,000 students receiving Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre ETS) this past year. There has been an increase in referrals since March 2022 but have not quite reached pre-pandemic levels. Rapid Engagement began in July with statewide training and is a philosophical approach to provide services as quickly as possible implementing eligibility determination, writing a plan and starting the first service to ensure customer engagement. The Order of Selection was opened on August 8, 2022, received positive public comment two weeks prior to the opening, and have updated case management system to allow those Significantly Disabled (SD) and Non-Significantly Disabled (NSD) cases to proceed. A press announcement was provided, and more information will be provided to the community through offices and other communications. The State Plan was accepted by RSA on July 1, 2022. Credential Attainments are tracking in the right direction and is very good for post-secondary students. OVR is currently in a carryover period which allows OVR to carry over money for an additional 12-month period that has been matched, currently spending the 2021-year grant and have until September 30, 2022, to invest all money into their program. The carryover amount is estimated to be around \$100 million. March through June saw a spending increase of \$1.2 million and an increase of \$4.7 million in July. Reported many improvements to the Hiram G Andrews (HGAC) physical location including replacement of 12 acres of roof which will cost several million dollars. Other renovations include updated bathrooms, HVAC improvements, and security upgrades. Anticipating maybe as much as \$6 million will be invested in college students based on the changes that the board made. Predicted spending of about \$10 to \$13 million in pre-employment vision services this summer. Possibly serving around 7,000 students over the summer in work-based learning and for exploration, post-secondary education and different academies. Summer programs and academies take about one year of planning which was affected by the pandemic. My Works Program saw participation of about 325 students at 60

different work sites. Program included projects that allowed students to build gardens, landscape architecture, build playgrounds, run industrial and construction equipment, perform carpentry and electrical work, restore a pump track, and repair parks throughout the Commonwealth. Reported on several Summer Academies held at HGAC, and 30 summer internships expanded throughout the Commonwealth. Four interns have been asked to stay and maintain employment through the Fall. Discussing work-based learning and importance of transition and collaboration at the current Transition Conference with a few hundred staff.

- Mr. Andrew Pennington inquired if the Civil Service position was posted and if it was a customized employment position or supported employment. Inquired how many customers came off from the wait list from the SD and NSD categories.
- OVR was able to work with Office of Administration (OA) to provide a specific service position dedicated to a particular customer. Currently trying to expand to another agency for non-civil service positions due to the many rules of hiring for civil service. Reported that a few hundred came off from the waitlist for SD and NSD with potential increases and increased eligibility.

PaRC FISCAL REPORT: Ms. Jeanette Alexander, Member at Large

- Ms. Jeanette Alexander reported on the fourth quarter Fiscal Report April totaled \$1,103.60, May totaled \$4,002.72, June totaled \$1,382.70. Total expenses for the fourth quarter were \$6,489.02. Please note on a prior report that went out the balance at the bottom was dated 3/31/22. That was incorrect and has been corrected and updated to reflect 6/30/22. The council's remaining balance as of June 30th, 2022, is \$64,022.33. The expenses continue to be lower due to ongoing concerns with the impact of COVID. There's not been as much traveling, majority of the meetings and conferences have been virtual. That has saved on travel expenses and accommodations.

Ms. Jeanette Alexander motioned to approve the PaRC Fiscal Report for April, May, and June 2022. Ms. Susan Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.

ROLE OF HEARING OFFICERS & MEDIATORS / DUE PROCESS

- Ms. Tracie Maille reported that there has not been onboarding of new hearing officers in some time and they are taking a look at that process. Legal representation will be reviewing documentation and helping to determine a firm standard operating procedure. The Council will be given an opportunity to decide where they would like to be inserted within the approval process.

- Mr. Paul Fogle inquired if there was Federal Law regarding the Council's role in the approval process. Stated the Council received documentation previously about Council's responsibility is providing approval.
- Ms. Tracie Maille stated that OVR leadership has been reviewing increased collaboration and partnership as mandated and wanted to see if the Council would like to be involved in that standard operating procedures.
- Mr. Paul Fogle stated that he would like to hold further conversations on what OVR needs from the Council in terms of formal approval for hearing officers and other issues such as policy changes.

COUNCIL DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION ITEMS:

- Regarding PaRC Legislative Committee, Mr. William Del Toro Vargas reported that members participated in Legislative meetings on August 9th where the conversation focused around the lack of accessible transportation. Members recommended a possible statewide study initiated by the General Assembly regarding the situations and happenings of the state's public transportation systems. Data and information collected by the study would be focused on a county-by-county basis for the purpose of providing real solutions for all Pennsylvanians. Legislative staff of Representative Dan Miller requested a letter of support from the Council for House Bill 547 which establishes a Department of Accessibility and Inclusion. Inquired if the Council would like to be included in the process of creating this letter. Informed members a follow up letter regarding the transportation will be sent to each Legislator and/or staff that met on August 9th. Legislative Committee will be meeting again in December and encourages members interested to consider joining the Committee.
- Mr. Paul Fogle requested that the Full Council be copied on the letter of support.
- Regarding the PaRC Governance Committee, Ms. Susan Tomasic reported that members were in process of updating the Bylaws, Handbook, tracking membership and meeting attendance, and reviewing internal policies. She encouraged members to join the committee.
- Ms. Michelle Gerrick (staff) reviewed the Executive Committee Goals and Budget.
- Members discussed concerns with the continued delay with the appointment process in the Governor's Office to include receiving the Oath of Office form in a timely manner. Ms. Jessica Keogh said that she has been appointed for membership but cannot perform duties of Council since she has yet to receive the Oath of Office paperwork.

Ms. Lynn Heitz motioned to approve Ms. Michele Leahy as the PaRC Representative on the Employment First Oversight Commission (EFOC). Ms. Susan Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Following today's meeting, letter of recommendation will be provided to Mr. Steve Suroviec (Chair of EFOC) for the Governor's consideration of appointment to the EFOC.

Ms. Jeanette Alexander motioned to approve Ms. Lynn Heitz as PaRC representative on OVR's Financial Needs Test workgroup. Mr. Andrew Pennington seconded the motion. All were in favor.

Ms. Susan Tomasic motioned to approve Ms. Julia Grant Barol as representative to OVR's Supported Employment workgroup. Ms. Jeanette Alexander seconded the motion. Mr. William Del Toro Vargas abstained. All were in favor.

Mr. William Del Toro Vargas motioned to approve Ms. Michelle Mitchell's application for membership to the PaRC to fulfill category of Certified Rehabilitation Counselor. Ms. Julia Grant Barol seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Following today's meeting, application, resume, and letters of reference will be provided to OVR for the Governor's consideration of appointment.

Mr. William Del Toro Vargas motioned to approve Ms. Lorie Brew's application for membership to the PaRC to fulfill the category of Parent Training and Information Center. Ms. Julia Grant Barol seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Following today's meeting, application, resume, and letters of reference will be provided to OVR for the Governor's consideration of appointment.

COUNCIL WORK TIME

- Mr. Paul Fogle informed members about potential for creating and updating a presentation for outreach to Citizen Advisory Committees, conferences outside of the Council and OVR District Offices, District Administrators, System Administrators, counselors, and other OVR staff. Mr. Fogle recommended this project for the Social Media / Outreach Committee. He also suggested that the Governance Committee be tasked with creating a presentation for new member orientation. Mr. Fogle asked members to provide any additions or recommendations within the next week for the Council's letter providing information to speakers regarding accessibility. Mr. Fogle reported that an Ad hoc Committee will be established and chaired by Mr. William Del Toro Vargas to build the Council's relationship with Hiram G. Andrews Center (HGAC). He encouraged members who are interested to join the Committee.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Ms. Lynn Heitz inquired if Mr. Paul Fogle had received information she sent via email about hearing officer positions documentation research that she had located within the Rehab Act.
- Mr. Paul Fogle agreed to review that information and hold discussion on that with OVR leadership.

ADJOURN

Ms. Lynn Heitz motioned to adjourn. Mr. William Del Toro Vargas seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.