



# Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

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## OVR Policy & State Plan / Customer Satisfaction Committee Minutes for March 7, 2023

### Members Present (P)

### Not Present (NP)

Lynn Heitz (P)  
Julia Grant Barol (P)  
Paul Fogle (P)

Michelle Paonessa (NP)  
Susan Tomasic (P)  
Jeanette Alexander (P)

Robert Wallington (P)  
Jessica Keogh (P)  
Andrew Pennington (P)

**Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Staff Present:** James Whitonis, Cheryl Novak, Lee Ann Stewart

**Project Staff Present:** Chris Todd

**Interpreters Present:** Sharon Costa

### CALL TO ORDER

This meeting was conducted through Zoom. Ms. Lynn Heitz called the meeting to order at 2:30 PM.

### ADDITIONS TO THE AGENDA

There were no additions.

### APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND PAST MINUTES

***MOTION was made by Ms. Julia Barol to approve today's agenda and past meeting minutes. Ms. Susan Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.***

### DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION ITEMS:

#### **Discussion for the Development of a Draft of Description (a) of the 2024-2028 State Plan**

- Mr. Jim Whitonis provided review of the development of Description (a) which may use the current document as a guide and include the same format with updated resources listed. Including a commendation may not be required but providing

positive feedback can be beneficial. New recommendations from the Council will need to be included and OVR will create a response for each of those once a draft is provided. OVR Leadership team met recently, the voice of the Council has been heard, as increased services for the Blind and Visually Impaired for both OVR and HGAC has been discussed to be focused on in the State Plan goals.

- Recovery Efforts from the Many Impacts of Covid-19 Recommendation: Mr. Paul Fogle stated that there is a large gap when supporting and providing services to potential customers that have experienced Covid and/or Long Covid and inquired if that would be appropriate to include in the recommendations.
  - Mr. Whitonis reported that Covid and Long Covid studies will be included in the next Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) and could be included in one of the goals. Once the upcoming State Plan reaches the modification stage some of that data and information may already be made available to update that goal.
  - Ms. Lynn Heitz suggested listing a recommendation for OVR to expedite services / cases for individuals that had cases put on hold or were delayed due to the impacts of Covid. Has received reports from potential customers that experienced delays in services during the Covid mitigation efforts beginning in March 2020 and ending in March 2022.
  - Ms. Jessica Keogh stated that as an educator she works with Young Adults who are not getting a lot of responses from OVR for requests for services since Covid-19. Suggested including a timeline for expedited services in the recommendation for those who have experienced delays due to the impacts of Covid-19.
  - Members suggested providing recommendation for any inactive cases remaining open since before or during Covid-19 (March 2020 to March 2022) and/or remaining in a waiting period to receive a measurable activity within 30 days of the finalized adoption of the State Plan. A measurable activity could be defined as direct contact with a customer.
  - Members stated that since Covid-19 began, RSA 911 data shows that one third of closed cases are reported due to lack of contact. Members suggested listing three different types of attempted contact be required as email, phone call, and mail. Three attempts of contact are currently required with proof. Suggested also requiring one personal interaction, in-person meeting, web-based meeting, or phone call.
- Leverage Resources, Heighten Understanding, and Provide Additional Staff Trainings in All OVR District Offices to Better Serve Customers with Mental Health Needs Recommendation: As the Client Assistance Program (CAP) representative, Mr. Andrew Pennington reported that he understands many OVR customers with mental health (MH) needs may be in crisis and drop out of OVR services due to unmet needs. Suggested a recommendation that all DOs interact with MH services in their area to better serve the MH population. After reading the CSNA report regarding unserved and underserved populations, what stuck out in particular was information

regarding people who have a Mental Health diagnosis. While attending a Philadelphia CAC meeting OVR staff reported that they are providing training for their counselors that are providing services to those with MH needs. Suggested recommendations include OVR to leverage resources for those with a MH diagnosis by interacting with Mental Health resources in their region for all District Offices to better serve their customers.

- Members agreed it would also be important to provide training for employees to learn about how to identify behaviors that may exhibit Mental Health needs. Members reported that the Philadelphia District Office (DO) understands that Mental Health is often not included in the information provided to counselors and they are working to heighten understanding of the population and obtain necessary resources which would be important for all DOs. The 988 resource and crisis hot line is being updated to be a MH resource and could be utilized by OVR to contact on behalf of an individual.
- Empower Individuals Paid Subminimum Wages Through 14(c) Waivers to Obtain Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) Recommendation: Ms. Julia Barol suggested a recommendation regarding the high number of individuals due to Section 511 that are not moved into competitive employment. Stated the number was approximately 70% of individuals that wanted to work in the community and have not received services to gain employment in the community. Reported that there is a need to identify barriers of moving individuals from the 14(c) workshop setting to competitive based employment.
  - Ms. Lynn Heitz stated that there may not be a lot of success in moving individuals out of workshops until the people running the workshops are no longer allowed to maintain their 14(c) status. Some of the people running these workshops may be making a lot of money and convince families of individuals it is in their best interest to stay at sub-minimum wage employment.
  - Ms. Barol stated that we need to get the data that would identify the root cause of the 70% to determine if it may be: communications with the workshops, decisions made by families, individuals being found in-eligible for services, lack of contacts available outside of the workshop to families and individuals, or lack of benefits counseling being proposed from the start. Stated that the Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) grant will go a long way to help but is not going to impact every individual that wants to work in competitive employment. Reported that 10% of those working in a 14(c) workshop are in Pennsylvania, which is well over 5,000 individuals.
  - Members agreed to provide a recommendation to move forward with the SWTCIE grant as quickly as possible to help OVR to identify individuals and barriers.
  - Ms. Keogh stated that it is important to include creative solutions and presentations regarding the SWTCIE grant and 14(c) workshops from people

with full professional and lived experience to ensure better outcomes for participants.

- Ms. Heitz agreed it is imperative that people with disabilities are included in the process and having lived experience brings a lot to the table. This should be included when seeking out data to determine who is there and why they are not in CIE and inquire if they have they spoken with someone who does work in a competitive field.
- Clearly Defining Integrated Employment Settings Recommendation: Ms. Barol stated that she inquired about Clean Logic during the February 15<sup>th</sup> Full Council meeting. Reported that Clean Logic is a business located outside of Philadelphia that is looking to hire a majority of people with disabilities. Currently 50% of their employees have a disability. All employees' wages are above minimum wage. Voiced concern that if 75% of employees have significant disabilities it could be considered congregate care and that we need to identify where that line is, what is acceptable and not acceptable to be able to have an impact on existing employment models.
  - Ms. Heitz agreed and inquired if the individuals employed at Clean Logic are having their accommodations met and if the workplace is accessible for employees to do their job. The Clean Logic model may not fall under Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE). Suggested that we need to pull the definition of CIE from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and ask where entities who are hiring 75% of people with disabilities and inquire where that model fits within the definition.
  - Ms. Barol believes it is a legitimate job and is concerned about the organizational goal to hire all people with disabilities, which would not be a community-based workplace. Believes that if the workplace is not CIE, OVR should not be in support of the model. Stated that congregated employment needs to be clearly defined.
- Ms. Heitz stated that she does not feel there is an emphasis put on outcomes. OVR is spending a lot of funding on college tuition but there may be a disproportionate amount of customers' placement for lower-level jobs to higher-level jobs. There has to be a greater emphasis put on raising expectations and not just dealing with the lowest common denominator.
- Ms. Lee Ann Stewart reported that there has been a big change at the Federal level as OVR no longer puts the weight as they once did on the number of rehabilitations. The focus has shifted to measurable skill gains, credential attainment, and looking at quality work. Suggested having Mr. Mark Maurer provide statistics regarding OVR closures at a PaRC Quarterly Meeting to help inform the Council about these changes to placements.
- Mr. Pennington stated that it's also important to discuss informed choice as individuals have the right to make decisions about their own job goals. OVR does not have the capability to decide job placement for customers. Data shows the top ten employers that OVR works with, and it would be interesting to see data on all job opportunities being afforded to individuals with disabilities. Individualized Plan

for Employment (IPEs) are amended at the will of the customer. Customers have to sign off on changing job placement goals. If someone was to be forced to take a low-level job after receiving a four-year degree and/or credentials they should reach out to CAP to assist with advocating on their behalf.

- Ms. Heitz stated that on the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS) side there is not a lot of ability to assist an individual that is actively trying to search for a job. Stated that there is not as much assistance available for a blind person to get assistance, knowledge, or confidence to go to a job interview as a blind person. 99% of the job readiness services offered by Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRS) is not accessible to individuals receiving services in BBVS. Other services such as Early Reach is not being offered to BBVS customers. Suggested the recommendation as a heightened interaction and collaboration between Early Reach Coordinators, Business Services Teams to the capabilities of the BBVS customers and BVRS customers.
- Mr. Pennington inquired if that can be a recommendation because if services are not accessible, they should be. BVRS and BBVS have heightened their collaboration but would like to see a seamless opportunity for all individuals including those with blindness and visual impairments.
- Mr. Fogle stated that one of the resources the Council is tasked with using to provide these recommendations is the Customer Satisfaction Surveys. Upon review on a monthly basis the response rate has remained very low. Suggested providing a recommendation about increasing accessibility and response rates for the Customer Satisfaction Surveys.
- Ms. Heitz requested that staff provide a rough draft based on today's discussion for member review to work on language in preparation for upcoming meetings.

### **Schedule next committee meeting**

- Ms. Heitz requested polling for a meeting to be held April 11<sup>th</sup> from 2:30 to 3:30 PM.

### **Adjourn**

***MOTION was made by Ms. Julia Barol to adjourn. Ms. Susan Tomasic seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.***