

Northwest PA BBVS Citizen Advisory Committee Minutes– January 26, 2023

Call to order 10:04 am by Chris Cowan

Roll Call

- Chris Cowan, Acting District Administrator, BBVS 814-871-4401 ccowan@pa.gov
- Casandra Falkenhagen, VR Supervisor, BBVS 814-871-4401 cfalkenhag@pa.gov
- Heidi Tuszynski 814-969-3241 heidituszynski@gmail.com
- Priscilla Earhart, Keystone Blind Association 724-347-5011 PEarhart@KeystoneBlind.org
- Pam Masi, Sight Center of NWPA
- Krysta Carson, Venango Blind Association 814-676-1876 kcarson@venangoblind.org
- James Whitonis, Community Action Committee, BCO
- Jenn Lilly, Keystone Blind Association 724-347-5011 JennLilly@keystonblind.org
- Tina Smith-Armour, Keystone Blind Association

Approval of Minutes – Corrections Needed

- Krista – provided everyone with handout and BBVS was at the top of the list.
- Priscilla – Page 5 of 7: AT specialist's name needs changed from Jane to Jeannie. Page 6 of 7 Fundraisers was the wrong word – we are continually looking for employees for employment.
- Chris will have minutes corrected and sent out for approval.

BBVS Report – Presented by Chris Cowan

Staffing

- We have a new secretary of L&I, Nancy Walker. We got an email from her and she has kept some of the top aids and assistants in place. Appointments need to be made but it is a good sign for the agency that familiarity with the agency is there. She asked Jennifer Berrier to stay on as an advisor.
- Casandra Falkenhagen has accepted the role of acting assistant district administrator. She will be helping out with administrative activities and management of the office. She will continue to supervise staff in office (VR and VRT) and short time she will fill in for Alecia (SW Sup) while Alecia is on maternity leave from Feb to the end of April. Cassie has been with our agency for over 20 years and she worked in every program we have – she is a great asset to us.
- Erie continues to search for an OM Instructor. We now have help with recruitment from the Office of Administration. They have done a lot of outreach to the schools, ACVREP – Linked In and job boards. One posting just came down but we are posting it again. We recently had a meeting with BVRSP – they were struggling with OM too. There is a Nationwide struggle to fill this position. We will continue to post and get help from recruitment. We have a professor at Lock Haven who will contract with us in our easternmost counties, and we are getting her paperwork in place. We continue to have an OM instructor in our northern territories. We know KBA is able to help in summer. (Priscilla: Reach out to Luanne to see if she is available especially for dangerous situations and she will let you know if she can help.) BVRSP has an OM now and they can help if they have time. We have been using VRT to do some training for sighted guide, protective travel techniques and stairs in home. We continue to reach out to schools in hopes that there is a student looking for internships or graduating in near future.

Envision Success Program

- We completed our ESP program over the summer and will have our next program next summer for students ages 7-14. The program will be held in Erie County again at the BBVS office June 27-29th from 9:00 – 2:00 pm.
- VRTs are developing a program for independent skills and adding volunteer work to next year's program. They are planning on doing a volunteer project for the Soldiers and Sailors home.

BBVS Staff will be meeting next month to talk in detail about students who are interested in participating.

Summer Academy

- Will be held again June 24-June 30, 2023. It will be at Penn State University. Applications have been sent out and are due Feb 1st. The program is limited to 20 students.
- Last minute referrals – please call Chris or Cassie to see if they have openings.

BVRSP

- We had a meeting with BVRSP (Erika and Barb) to talk about the programs they have available. We have 1 person going for an assessment in Feb. They have excellent programs. Will start using their services more if we have people who need immediate OM or intensive training.

Sight Center of NWPA

- We had meeting with staff and discussed how our programs work. I will let Pam present about specifics when it is her turn.

My Work

- We have partnered with the City of Erie and Opportunities Unlimited to give 4-5 students the opportunity for an internship, paid employment. We have a meeting set for next week with the city and job coach to look at the jobs they have available. Program will run 4-8 weeks and 16-24 hours per week. The City is providing the work location and the jobs, Job Coaches will provide the supervision and BBVS is funding the job coaches, salaries for students, OM, and sensitivity training. We know our students can do all types of jobs and this will give them a chance to get into the community and show what they can do.

Venango County Association of the Blind (VCAB) – Presented by Krysta Carson

United Way

- The local United Way is partnering with VCAB and 9 other agencies to form a co-hort. They hired a marketing specialist to work for the 10 organizations. It is a flagship program and will run for 3 years. During the first year United Way will cover the cost of the marketing specialists salary and we get time with them to help promote our agency. The second year United Way pays ½ and the agencies pay ½ and the third year the 10 agencies take over entire salary. We live in Rural PA and no one can afford marketing – so United Way is providing something we can't afford on our own. The cost will be \$7,500 per year per agency. Levi Shallott is the specialist and is working with us to develop a marketing plan and a plan for events throughout the year.

Apple Action Non-Profit Grant

- I have completed training that will allow me to apply for a grant from the Apple Action Non Profit Resource Organization. The grant is up to 25,000 (which is guaranteed with completion of the training) will pay for something that will grow our agency. Chose to use it for one of our staff to take courses at Salas university to become a VRT. We took advantage of an email we had from Salas offering ½ price on tuition for this program. Within 1.5 years will have someone to provide the VRT services, something we have needed for a long time.

Restructuring

- Our agency will be 100 years old in 2027 and we are looking at restructuring, rebranding and growing our agency to make us relevant among our PAB counterparts.

Oil Valley Chapter for the Blind – Presented by Krysta Carson

They are working on providing CCTVs to local libraries for public use. They also adopted one client who is young and pregnant and putting together a care package with diapers and supplies to help her out a little bit.

Keystone Blind Association – Presented by Priscilla Earhart

Assistive Technology

- We hired a new AT Specialist. She did an internship with us in LV and VRT. CBVI will provide the training she needs to do this job. Expected Start Date: Feb 13th.
- CBVI offers virtual AT instruction all the time.

Employment

- We are very busy in our production area – we have added a 2nd line. Tool production has doubled in the last year. In order to keep up, need to bring on more staff. If you have anyone, please refer.
- Boyers – we still need people there – we continue to find more positions that customers with no vision can do if they have computer skills. The CAT (Computer Access Technology) program will be providing training for those on staff who need some help with computer skills. These positions cannot use any AT that takes a picture but we have found ways to make it work.
- We are always looking at contracting opportunities for individuals who are totally blind. (Chris wants Latoya to go and tour both facilities. Jen: Did task analysis on all the jobs at Boyers and broke them down into around 40 steps then we teach one step at a time. Everyone is cross trained but they learn one step at a time – it has been very successful.)

Crawford County Office presented by Tina

- We have grown so much – I had 6 new intakes this week. I have a lot of connections with hospitals and nurses. We have grown so much that we need a 4th driver. I have a lot of Annual Reviews Jan/Feb/March – that seems to be when people want services. We are also outgrowing our office space.
- We have been reaching out into the community to create awareness and do fundraising. We are involved in Crawford Gives and the Palmaro Program for donations. Clients also donate monthly – sometimes they send checks when they withdraw money from their IRAs.

Keystone Kids presented by Jenn

- We have been working on building our children's program - we have up to 10 kids – pre-pandemic we were around 3. The range in from 5-15 years old. We sent flyers to all the kids we know about in the area and to the IUs. We want to get kids from Crawford County – we know they are out there. (Chris: send us flyers and the Social Workers will send them to our customers.) Events are generally 1 Saturday per month. Planning on Career Caravan from June 19-22nd where 7-12th grade students can do some transition planning.
- Young Explorer's camp for ages 5-9 years old will be August 14-16th.
- IDEAL is happening again this year. We had full house last year and would like to do it again. July 4 – August 4th. Students ages 14-21 in transition from High School to independent living, employment or additional school. We are scheduling presentations about the programs. (Chris would like Jenn to present at one of the VR unit meetings.) Sent info to Alecia. We know that 4 weeks may be too long so start we are doing a pre program May 5-7 where the students can meet staff and see where they will be staying. Has been successful.

Low Vision Clinic

- Service is still booming. We get a lot of referrals from local Doctors and Crawford county. Dr. Freeman and Dr. Baldwin talk so we get a lot of referrals from Dr. Baldwin.

Support Group

- We have found that Young Adults who move here for work need independence skills. They are isolated. We want to put together support group for young working adults – social, budgeting, cooking. Please send any referrals, even if they aren't working.

Specific Customer Opportunity

- We are very excited that one of our young people will have a chance to go to BVRSP for training. He is in a tough spot and wants to learn. We contacted Erie BBVS, told them what we have been doing with him and they agreed to open him and send him to BVRSP.

The Sight Center of Northwest PA – Presented by Pam Masi

Staffing

- Pam Masi is now the Director of Operations. I started 6 months ago. My focus is on efficiency and effectiveness with programs, human resources and saving money. I have spent some time trying to get to know programs and getting to know staff by attending meetings and driving customers. I have been the Director of a couple agencies here in Erie including the Red Cross.
- Vicki Shields is our new Case Manager – She used to do the LV screening program for schools but since COVID the schools have gotten their own screeners so we are trying to find other ways to build partnerships and to support this service. The most important part of screening is to make sure the follow up is happening. There is 68% rate for failed eye exams so we want to make sure parents have services. In addition to case management for intakes she is learning and growing into the technology role. Our client number is up and transportation is thriving. We are making sure people are called back.

Meeting with BBVS

- Talked to Chris and his staff. We wanted to know how to get more interest from customers – social, activities. We have begun Translating Braille Documents and Braille information for customers who can't access information such as credit cards.

Children's Program

- We had a program at the Maritime Museum and 3 children participated – we are trying to find mix between career, school and fun activities. Trying to figure out the balance to keep kids interested.

Low Vision Clinic

- We are working with a partner and getting closer to finalizing this service. We have 200+ on a wait list for Low Vision. We are taking customers to Warren which is the closest LV specialist.

Diabetes Prevention Program

- We have partnered with the CDC. This program grew 137% from last year. We have new insurances that take the program. Highmark provides some funds for the program. We have been able to help pre-diabetics but we can also help people with diabetes with improving numbers by moving and diet. We are looking at adding staff and territory where we offer this program. We received a grant for underprivileged areas so that we can promote the program and sponsor people to participate in the program.
- Krista said that 9 of her customers benefitted from the program - A1Cs went down, weight was lost, inches in waist was lost, some could get off blood pressure meds, and some had increase in kidney/liver function.

PaRC Report - Presented by Heidi Tuszynski

- They sent their yearly report – will share it with Chris. The rehab counsel helps OVR work on Policies. The Governor took a long time to fill seats and when he did they were with new people so they are learning what they are doing in their roles.

Advisory Committee for the Blind of Pennsylvania (ACBP)

Governor's Committee on Disabilities - Presented by Heidi Tuszynski

- We will have to see what the new governor wants. There is a meeting scheduled for February. I like sharing what we are doing on this side of the state because they often only hear what is happening in Harrisburg.

Old Business

None

New Business

(Chris) Thanks to James Whitonis (BCO) Community Action Committee Liaison for attending.

Next Meetings – April 20, 2023

Motion to Adjourn: Jenn made a motion, Krista seconded it at 11:30 am.