

**Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting**  
**Monday, February 27, 2023**  
**MINUTES**

**ATTENDEES:**

Shari Brightful, Joseph Thomas, Pat Petrone, Suzanne Erb, Aaron Anderson, Lynn Heitz, Andrew Pennington, Lora Swatko, Melissa Good, Steve Whittaker, Shavon Mason, James Whitonis, Marci Katona, Transition Consults's Otter.ai (guest), David Mann, Mathematica (speaker)

Suzanne Erb called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone.

Ms. Erb asked for approval of the minutes. Shari Brightful made a motion to approve, Andrew Pennington seconded. The minutes were approved. Steve Whitaker will send the minutes to the Rehab Council.

We are changing the format of the meeting for today, the guest speaker usually speaks now and other business follows but today the speaker will take the last position.

**BVRS REPORT:**

Shari Brightful

- Shari reported on staffing, Sonali Patel was promoted to Acting Assistant District Administrator in December 2022; welcomed three new staff since January as VR Counselors, Tiffany, Ike and Marnet. We are scheduling interviews for one Clerical Assistant 2 and a Rehab Counselor for Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Michael Cohen and Maureen Sullivan have been promoted to Supervisors and there has been a posting for a VR Counselor which will be coming down on March 1, 2023. If anyone knows someone interested in the position, ask them to apply.
- Safety - working with staff on maintaining safety coming into and leaving the office and when in the community in light of a recent event that happened at the Market Frankford Line. Spoke regarding customers who are inappropriate in how they speak with staff in person or over the phone and how to remove themselves from these types of situations.
- The Executive Team came to Philadelphia to engage in a Meet and Greet with staff, Ryan Hyde, Marci Katona, Dawn Sokol and Sue Storm, a Regional Manager. They were very attentive to staff concerns and shared updates with everyone regarding agency initiatives.
- Goal – Managers – As of February 8, 2023 we continue working on our compliance scores with the VR staff. Improving these scores will assist us in ensuring customers are moving

through the VR program in a timely manner and receiving the necessary services to be successful. We are working on shaping different strategies which is an ongoing process.

- Budget – LaKeysha McLaurin is working with the management team to offer in-person and virtual support to providers in understanding how to complete reports and submit invoices for services they have provided. We are still having difficulty getting providers to submit reports and invoicing in a timely manner. The supervisors and managers have been working with staff to call and email providers/vendors.
- At our last staff meeting Dr. Fish was a guest speaker and spoke with the staff regarding his testing of OVR customers. We send referrals to him for psychological evaluations. Dr. Fish wants us to help create a comfortable testing environment for customers to assist them to do their best during testing situations.

Upcoming items to be on the lookout for:

- PRE-ETS Provider Summit to assist us with summer programming. This will be held virtually on March 21, 2023, from 1:30 to 3:00 p.m. via Teams.
- Project Search/Project Career Launch – we just completed the Skills Assessment Day last week which went well and are waiting on an update regarding how many people attended.
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing Summer Academy – the program will run from Sunday, July 16 to Wednesday, July 26, 2023, for a total of ten days at Penn State Main Campus. The application deadline is June 1, 2023. Anyone with an open case can reach out to their VRC. If they do not have an open case, they can connect to the VRC/ERC assigned to their high school.
- Reach – looking for training programs, CRP's or employers who are knowledgeable about working with returning citizens from correctional institutions. We need individuals who have experience working with persons with traumatic brain injury.

Andrew Pennington asked Shari where BVRS is in regard to compliment of staff. Shari reported we interviewed five counselors but only three accepted and were onboarded. Is working on filling a CA2 vacancy, one Early Reach Coordinator and one Business Services Rep. We probably need more than the full complement in order to serve the public in a timely manner.

Andrew stated CAP sees a lot of cases of people with mental health problems. They intervene on behalf of a lot of customers with mental health issues. These individuals need proper diagnosis and treatment in order maintain individuality. Shari identified – mental health first aid – there is a large population of people with mental health problems who need treatment. With the pandemic they were not treated as best as they could, which worked for some and others it was difficult. Is working on getting resources for staff, finding a way to develop rapport so they can talk with the customers. How do you have the conversation to see if you are getting the proper treatment? Staff were being threatened in person and over the phone. They need to feel safe in their environment. We do have a guard in the reception area to alleviate issues.

Lynn Heitz asked Shari if there is any way to get additional positions because there are so many customers coming in. Shari stated she does not make that decision but does advocate for more positions and would like the agency to add to our compliment.

Steve Whittaker asked Shari what kind of wait list does BVRS have? Shari said there is no wait list, we are responding to application requests within five days. We assign cases every week and call or send a letter to the customer. Steve asked what the length of time is for evaluation of service. Shari - first meeting over the phone, 60 days to determine eligibility. The goal is not to wait 60 days and usually it is not 60 days. For the IPE, staff has 90 days, the goal is not to wait 90 days, but to start as timely as possible. Steve asked if they actually track the time it takes to make these goals. Shari said there is a team that tracks data and reporting. Our goal is to improve our compliance. Our percentage is not what she wants it to be which would be 100% but we are working toward that goal.

Andrew Pennington stated there are times when you have to wait for the individual to submit information in order to proceed with the case, several factors to keep in mind to maintain compliance. Shari responded we are always seeing our customers being in a crisis situation and we are not built for crises. Customers need many other services before we can move on with a plan. Steve Whitaker said he worked as an occupational therapist and has seen this type of thing, maybe this could continue as a conversation in the future to work this out.

Suzanne Erb said she hopes the gentleman from central office can take this information back because Philadelphia office does need additional support.

Suzanne asked in terms of mental health services are BVRS and BBVS working jointly in the area of mental health? Yes, BVRS and BBVS meet monthly.

### **BBVS REPORT:**

Joe Thomas

- Joe reported on the status of positions within BBVS:

Have a new VRC starting on May 1, 2023.

One of the CA2's is no longer with us. We have interviewed for a CA2 and have recommended one and hopefully can hire another from the group we just finished interviewing.

Alex Shay is due to return at the end of March.

We are currently interviewing for a 4<sup>th</sup> VRC.

Have approval to interview a 3<sup>rd</sup> VRT.

Hopefully we will get approval to hire an O&M Specialist.

Suzanne Erb asked Joe to explain the positions. Joe stated the VRC is a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, CA2 is a Clerical Assistant, VRT is a Vision Rehabilitation Therapist and O&M is Orientation and Mobility Specialist.

- Joe noted closures to date:

VR Program has 39 successful closures out of 99  
Social Work Program has 32 successful closures out of 90  
VRT Program has 45 successful closures out of 72  
O&M Program has 56 successful closures out of 72

- BBVS is involved with the following summer programs:

OSB – Overbrook School for the Blind is taking new referrals for their Financial Literacy Program.

Summer Academy – the list of attendees has been chosen and they have received emails. There are nine clients from the Philadelphia Office. Summer Academy will run from June 24 to June 30 this summer.

My Work Program will start in the summer of 2024. Currently working on getting the program at Longwood Gardens. Students will get paid for assisting there as this is a learning opportunity.

- Collaboration with BVRS is at an all-time high, we try to stay in communication, have a monthly meeting which is actually called a collaboration meeting.

Lynn Heitz questioned opening employment for a 4<sup>th</sup> VR Counselor but there are five in the office and asked if you are not able to hire for the 5<sup>th</sup> person. Joe responded it is his position but needs to be left open since he is temporarily working out of class and the position can not be filled until he is permanently in another position.

Shari Brightful stated Joe has been very helpful and collaborative. We also have a Safety Committee and he and Alex have brought strong relationships with BVRS.

Shari informed everyone Marci Katona, Bureau Director of BVRS is on the call asked if Marci would like to introduce herself.

#### Marci Katona, Bureau Director of BVRS:

Ms. Katona wanted to take an opportunity to say hello and thanked everyone for being a part of the Citizens Advisory Committee. Marci has been attending some of the CAC meetings in order to observe and see what we can do to help our community.

Andrew Pennington indicated he truly appreciates there is more collaboration with BBVS and BVRS and is really happy about it.

Suzanne Erb welcomed David Mann from Mathematica, the guest speaker for this meeting.

David introduced himself. He is a Senior Researcher at Mathematica, is a former OVR customer and lives in Bucks County. David gained employment at his current employment through OVR and currently serves on several disability committees. A PDF and PowerPoint presentation will be provided.

Mathematica and OVR are collaborating, on a test basis, on a new demonstration project, a new evidence-based service to help youth with disabilities transition to competitive integrated employment. The new position, a Services Transition Expiration Counselor, in addition to the VRC will help youth formulate career goals. This will further strengthen the relationship between OVR and external partners.

A five year grant was provided to implement and test the program. The partners are OVR, Mathematica and the University of Maryland.

The age group to be served is youth, 16 to 24 who have not opened a case with OVR. The intent is to deliver services in the Philadelphia area and possibly Norristown. The demonstration is expecting to enroll 700 youth. They will be entered into one of two service categories, TED services and standard services. Mathematica will conduct a rigorous evaluation of the demonstration and report impacts publicly.

The timeline is as follows:

- Year 1 – setting up the project.
- Year 2 and 3 – enrolling young adults and service provision.
- Year 4 – continue providing services.
- Year 5 – analyze data and report findings.

David stated they are creating an advisory board and need volunteers, people familiar with policy and state requirements and asked if anyone on this committee would like to volunteer. People who have lived disability experience and are familiar with the program landscape. If anyone would like to become a team member, they can email him at [dmann@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:dmann@mathematica-mpr.com).

David then asked if there are any questions.

Suzanne Erb asked if there will there be any specific training available to the agencies such as job corps, etc. as to people who have disabilities. David explained the process. Suzanne then inquired if they will build disability etiquette training into the program. David said currently it is not built into the program but thinks this is something we can offer if people are interested. Suzanne inquired when do you expect accepting actual clients for the project? What are the criteria you are looking for? Obviously, age, and are there any disability limitations? David responded all disabilities, no restriction as to what type of disability. Suzanne asked if this will also include BBVS? David said yes and also BVRS.

Shari Brightful stated when Wayne Trout retired, he spoke with them regarding CAC and discussed the people involved with CAC bring informed and great information. There are some things we do not see because we are not out in the community. Shari hopes you will all be able to volunteer for the board and indicated it would be quite beneficial.

Lynn Heitz asked what type of time commitment there would be for this advisory board? David replied once or twice for a couple of hours the first year, years 2 through 5 once a year. Maybe 4 to 5 hrs. the first year and subsequent years one or two hours. Lynn asked how many people are you looking to add to the committee? David answered at least eight but no more than 12. He would hope to form the committee within the next two to three weeks because they would need input and thereafter about 8 weeks later.

Suzanne Erb indicated this is beneficial to OVR and OVR customers and also to other people who may not have been working as well with people who have disabilities as they have in the past. Said she would like to be on this committee. David replied, that would be great and he would like to have her. Aaron Anderson said he would also be interested. David said anyone who knows the policy and program landscape would be beneficial on the committee. Aaron said he has some customers who are not registered with OVR. Melissa Good will pass this information on to the director of CIS. David said he spoke with the director last week.

Suzanne thanked David Mann for coming to the meeting today and presenting.

Suzanne Erb asked if there are any additional things going on in the community that people would like to share or any new business for the group?

Steve Whittaker indicated older adults are a terribly underserved community. He gets the feeling they are not a priority and are not given resources they may need, it is in general a social problem. Steve said he feels we have to keep people engaged and employed after they reach retirement age and asked if this is something we are thinking about or are working on. Lynn Heitz replied, once upon a time, the Philadelphia BBVS had six social workers. This goes back to what she has spoken with Shari and Joe about, there are not enough employees to serve the population. When Lynn left BBVS there were only three social workers. They cannot do their job properly when they have the overwhelming cases they have.

Suzanne Erb asked if there is anything going on at CIS? Melissa Good said they are still in a holding pattern, everyone has been coaching this week. They cannot take on any more customers at this time, they are hiring and need more employees to keep up with the volume.

Suzanne asked if anyone else had anything they wanted to discuss?

Suzanne then asked when we want to schedule our next meeting. The meeting will be scheduled for May 15, 2023.

Melissa Good said the board meeting is next week, which is an open meeting. Melissa will send the Zoom link to Shari Brightful who will send out to all members.

Suzanne Erb made a motion to adjourn – Lynn so moved, and Andrew seconded.