

**Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting**  
**Monday, May 15, 2023**  
**MINUTES**

**ATTENDEES:**

Alexander Shay, Joseph Thomas, Dave Bautista, Pat Petrone, Suzanne Erb, James Whitonis, Andrew Pennington, Lynn Heitz, Melissa Good, Transition Consults' Otter.ai (guest), Andy Burstein, Lora Swatko, Mary Bruker, Mike Hess

Suzanne Erb called the meeting to order, welcomed all and asked everyone to introduce themselves which they did.

Suzanne said she is changing things a little, would like Lora and Mike (guest speakers) to take over. Lora said Mike is having difficulty getting through on Teams.

Ms. Erb asked for approval of the minutes. Asked if anyone had any questions or suggestions. Lynn Heitz made a motion to approve, Melissa Good seconded. The minutes were approved. Steve Whitaker will send the minutes to the Rehab Council.

**Presentation:**

Suzanne first came into contact with Lora and Mike thanks to a discussion with Montgomery County Association for the Blind and thought it would be a good idea for them to be guest speakers for our committee.

Lora Swatko stated they want to identify individuals who would be a good fit for BIT's (Blind Institute of Technology) program. She has vision and hearing loss herself.

Mike Hess took over as he was able to access the Teams portal. He is the Executive Founder of BIT and is located in the Denver area. Mike is also the Executive Director of BIT. He has been legally blind his entire life. Mike has always worked in tech and one day realized he was always the token blind person and started doing some research, and that was how the Blind Institute of Technology started. BIT is the acronym for Blind Institute of Technology. It is a non-profit agency, paid to find talent within the disability community to fill positions (Google, AWS, Microsoft, Intuit).

The Sales Force CRM ecosystem was accessible. BIT had seven students in the first class and six found employment. Sales Force is a fully funded workforce development initiative for persons with disabilities. Sales Force reached out to BIT and BIT became their training provider in 2020. BIT's training program is the first nationally recognized force with blind and visually impaired persons. They have a 25% certification rate. 100% of the people who became certified gained employment.

Lynn Heitz asked if they also provide training for companies who have taken away the accessibility. Mike said yes, they work with organizations to help them with that as well.

Suzanne Erb asked if they do any kind of software testing, website accessibility and accessibility analyst programs as well? Does BIT get people industry recognized credentials? In addition to the CPACC, do you also help people get WAS certification? Mike replied they train people on this. In order to be certified, clients need 3 to 5 years of experience.

Lynn asked if they are registered with the Commonwealth of PA to serve our customers? Mike said it is difficult to get paperwork through. They are not chasing vocational rehabilitation dollars. He has had a meeting with Joe Thomas but the process is not easy. Alex Shay said they can set up a meeting with our counselors, he is happy with the accessibility they offer but realizes it is not for everyone. Alex is anxious to get the provider agreement going with Mike.

Suzanne asked - once somebody has a good background with assistive technology and the strengths and inclination to do that kind of work, they don't need to be a BBVS customer, they can just contact you directly, is that correct? Mike said yes, they do not need to be Vocational Rehabilitation customers. The people they serve have to be discipline learners and digital detectives.

Lora Swatko asked how we can get this word out to your organization since everyone is not on the call. Suzanne said everyone will get a copy of the minutes and BIT can present at statewide conventions, NFB, etc. Other consumer advisor committees they can contact. Andrew Pennington is on the rehab council. Suzanne asked Andrew to give Lora information on the council. Andrew asked what she wanted to know. Suzanne said this is another place for information, every once in a while the rehab council puts out a newsletter and maybe this information can be on their newsletter or they can also come and present. It depends on BIT's availability. Andrew asked James Whitonis to send a copy of the schedule for other BBVS offices. James said yes, he can do that.

Andrew Pennington asked if you have to have a college education to enroll in the program. Mike said no, next month they are starting an apprenticeship program with youth. Andrew thinks this is an excellent opportunity. Mike said they have partnership with Fortune 100 companies and are trying to get employment with them.

Mary Brucker asked if there are some assistive technology conferences that are held and also through the American Printing House for the Blind where you can get your information disseminated. Anyone who is interested in pursuing Blind Institute of Technology, do they have to be employed? Mike said they can work with the individuals and make sure they have that opportunity. Suzanne said in terms of assistive technology conferences, CSUN and ATIA, and the national conventions for NFB and ACB. Also, the exhibit halls for any of the conferences. Mike replied he does not prefer to attend conventions, he would rather have conversations similar to this.

Lynn, said in addition to the state and every month they try to do educational reaches and white canes connect podcast in connection with the NFB of Pennsylvania. Mike said that is the type of

reaching out he prefers. Lynn will share their information with the folks who take care of that. The greatest equalizer.com or .org has great information out there with testimonials with individuals they work with. Asked Alex to get this information out to everyone.

Andrew asked if Philadelphia BBVS, since BIT is not chasing vocational rehabilitation dollars, would that be an avenue for BBVS to work with this program? Alex said yes, the customer needs to be motivated and driven in order to be a good fit for the program. Discussed if it is a good fit for the customer and how it may be funded.

Mary Brucker - contact blind abilities, they have a podcast. Might be a good place to explain the product.

Mike said BIT does not do it all, you have other vendors that are qualified to do this. He appreciates your time and your interest today.

Suzanne thanked Mike Hess and Lora Swatko for presenting today and said she is sorry she missed both of them when they were in Philadelphia.

### **BVRS REPORT:**

Dave Bautista

- Dave introduced himself, he is the ADA for BVRS, and said Shari Brightful and Sonali Hampton are unable to join us today so Dave will provide the updates.
- As of April 2023, we are at 44% of our successful closure goal.
- BVRS wrapped up VRC interviews during the 1st week of May. We have concluded the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Counselor interview as well.
- Dave reported the counselors are working on LEAN where they are sorting, straightening, shining, standardizing and sustaining their caseload, which are the 5S's in LEAN. The goal is to remain efficient with their caseload by serving customers who are active and closing cases where we are unable to reach the customer.
- The fiscal year will end on June 30, 2023. The VRC's are working on purges and making sure that invoices and reports are obtained from the providers we work with.
- For Pre-ETS, we are working with YAP for MyWork experiences for the summer. Yap will have the ability to serve 13 students. The Transition Team is talking with their students to get them connected to these experiences.

Suzanne asked Dave if there was any follow up for providing Pre-ETS services since earlier this year, thinks April, BVRS had a meeting with some providers and state people. Dave said they are working on this with various people and hope to see something soon. Suzanne said there was

a conference in Hershey and a lot of people from Workforce Development and OVR were there. Suzanne would like to see more interaction between both because she feels Workforce Development does not really understand how much BVRS and BBVS can do for their customers.

## **BBVS REPORT:**

Alex Shay

- Alex stated this is his first meeting in several months, he has been out on paternity leave and wanted everyone to know the twins are doing well.

- Alex reported on the status of positions within BBVS:

We had a VR Counselor and a CA2 start on May 1, 2023. Alex said he has learned to appreciate clerical more now than in the past. We now have two out of three clerical positions filled.

The ADA position is now posted.

VRT is in process, we are waiting on a conditional offer.

Reposting for Social Work and Orientation and Mobility.

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

- Alex reported on statistics:

VR Program has 45 successful closures out of 99.

Social Workers are seven away from the closure goal.

O&M Program have achieved their closure goal.

VRT Program is almost at their closure goal.

We have had 252 new cases with VR

Independent living is up 237 cases from last year at this time

- BBVs summer academy has returned, although a little different. It will be a one-week program. Philadelphia has seven students expected to attend.
- We have 12 students enrolled for the Ideal Program, the Center for Blind and Visually Impaired in Chester.
- Asked Joe if the TVI program is going on, Joe said he is trying to get them to start it up next year
- Overbrook School for the Blind is taking new referrals for their Financial Literacy Program.
- 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.
- IMS clean Logic – manufactures personal products, in Bucks County. Right now we have about 12 people in their training program although there are issues with transportation since it is in Bucks County.
- Pre-ETS transition services for blind students - working with Lynn Heitz to see how we can get this off the ground, a program at the Franklin Institute, possibly a STEM program. Looking to do this some time in the fall.

Suzanne Erb asked if there were any questions or if anyone had anything to share.

Lynn Heitz reported they held the National Bell Academy virtually this year, the Braille Summer Reading program. We will provide the materials, this is not to teach Braille, but to get them up to speed with reading Braille. Sent a proposal to Dawn Sokol to do Braille instruction virtually, need to get things done in CWDS and then Dawn can send out the information.

Lynn stated they have come in contact with a provider who inserts their own interests in access technology reports and does not respect what the individual needs to do to attain their educational goal. Lynn thinks the provider needs to be notified of informed consent. Recommendations need to be between the counselor and the customer, not the provider. Lynn said she feels this is an issue that should be addressed. Alex said he agrees with Lynn, perhaps should get together with providers yearly to meet and go over the processes. Lynn said she has a meeting tomorrow with CAP and the provider regarding a report they submitted.

Lynn said she is very excited regarding the pre-ETS program and working with the Franklin Institute. She would like a copy of the provider agreement if Alex could send it to her.

Suzanne asked if anyone had anything else they had, anything going on with their agencies they would like to bring to the attention of the group.

Suzanne asked when we want to schedule our next meeting, looking for a Monday in August. August 21, 2023 at 10:00 A.M. has been decided.

Suzanne made a motion to adjourn and wished for everyone to have a good summer.