

Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting
Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation and
Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
March 21, 2023.

Draft.

The meeting was called to order at noon by Cathy Long, Chair of the CAC. This is Cathy's first meeting in this capacity. Roll call indicated the following individuals to be present, either in person or on the phone:

Cathy Long, Chair
Cynthia Gibbs-Pratt, BBVS customer
Vicinta Molina
A gentleman whose name I did not get, Spouse of Vicinta.
Joseph Romeo
John Horst
Natalie Barbush, CAC Liaison for BBVS, Social Work Supervisor
James Whitonis, VR Specialist, Central Office
Patrick Kane, BVRS Liaison for CAC, and VR Specialist

James Whitonis spoke about the CAC website. Some information needs to be updated. He does have our flyer for the year 2023 and it will be added if we want. The 2022 flyer was posted. Meetings are listed as taking place at the Center for Independent Living in Camp Hill. He was asked to update this information because CAC meetings are occurring in the BVRS and BBVS Harrisburg District Office conference room, located at the Forum Place building, 555 Walnut Street, 8th Floor, Harrisburg PA 17101. Note: The Center for Independent Living of Central Pennsylvania (CIL)'s current location is 3211 North Front Street, Suite 100, Harrisburg, PA 17110.

James went on to discuss what the Reading CAC is doing. They are going to post their meeting dates on OVR's Facebook page: where, when, and looking for members. Avoid publishing information about speakers, especially if they are vendors. Do not advertise, since possibly a speaker/vendor works with OVR and receives compensation for the services that vendor provides but is not necessarily speaking to CAC's to attempt to drum up more business for vendor. If Harrisburg CAC wants to do this, contact Connie Moonan to get it done. Her information will be sent by Jim Whitonis to Pat Kane, who will make the introduction to Cathy Long. Also, the Chair of Reading CAC would like to meet with all CAC Chairs. Jim will forward Cathy's information to that Reading Chair. Jim said there are only six or eight chairs active. Some CACs are inactive. More on this topic when it occurs.

Pat would like our flyer to be put on the OVR Facebook page. Jim will review it. The only difference between the 2022 Flyer and this current one are the meeting dates. Jim did agree that this flyer would be good to advertise on the OVR Facebook page. Each quarter there is a phone number to call in. Although the phone number remains the same, the password changes and that occurs when the next CAC request for the password is submitted. It can and is submitted from BVRS and BBVS Harrisburg District via email to their customer list but depending on how long it would take to get permission to add that to the OVR Facebook page timely may not be possible. Jim Whitonis said the Reading CAC Chair is interesting in meeting with other CAC chairs. Cathy Long is also interested in conversing with other CAC chairs. Jim

will coordinate with the various Chairs and most likely disseminate information to the CAC liaisons for the Chairs to receive. Thank you in advance to afford us an opportunity to improve attendance at CAC meetings throughout Pennsylvania.

Approval of minutes from December 2022. These were distributed as an Attachment to an email disseminated prior to this meeting. Cynthia Gibbs-Pratt moved to accept minutes as distributed. John Horst seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

BVRS report: Patrick Kane. The annual goal is 269. And BVRS has 150 successful closures, this is 58% of the annual goal. We are on the third quarter and should be higher than we are this year. Counselors are working hard to get customers what they need for successful closure. Internships with the commonwealth: 35 students will be interns this summer throughout Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Johnstown and Pittsburgh in various capacities. Interns will also be working at Unique Source in Mechanicsburg, two interns at the CILCP and the CareerLink. Counselors have been advertising opportunity for internships for a few months. Interviews have been done just a week ago with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This summer there were more applicants than intern positions. This is a first. Some customers who applied may not have been selected.

Hiring: BVRS interviewed staff to be Early Reach Coordinators. These individuals typically are social workers and work with young children and their families. Two were selected but did decline. Apparently one applicant was selected elsewhere just after the interview here. The hiring process can take a while. VR counselors were interviewed six weeks ago and a month later job offers were made. One counselor who was interviewed six weeks ago will begin employment with BVRS in one month. This person is employed with the Commonwealth and wishes to work out at least a two-week notice with the current agency. Joe Romeo asked about minimum qualifications for VRC's. For all information with regard to this topic, look at employment.pa.gov.

With our new governor, people who were acting in their roles have been made permanent. Ryan Hyde is Executive Director, and for BVRS the director is Marcy Katoma. The BBVS Director is Dawn Sokol, and she works from the Erie District Office. She has a long history of working in BBVS. Mike Kirby is the Central Operations Director.

BVRS is heavily doing outreach projects. The Bureau has been working with local employers to get people with various disabilities jobs. Pat has been working with owners of a local coffee shop interested in hiring people with intellectual disabilities and today is National Down's Syndrome Day. This couple who opened the coffee shop have a daughter with Down's Syndrome, and the couple wishes to help some BVRS customers who qualify and can do the required work to be employed with the coffee shop. Pat also met with Hope Springs Farm in Hershey, who attended an event at Hershey Library. Hope Springs Farm will be involved in the My Work project this summer. OVR has funds to pay customers working in the My Work Program. A minimum of 15% of the OVR's budget must be spent on Pre-Employment Transition Services, so that would benefit highschoolers or people who have just graduated from high school. These students are getting real work experiences at employers and paid real money by OVR to work there. This is a win-win for employers who can get work out of the students but at least for the summer the young adults are paid by OVR, and not the employer's dollars. Perhaps some students who have finished high school will be asked to stay on permanently. In Harrisburg My Work students were on City Island doing beautification work and also in Camp

Hill Borough doing similar work. Throughout the Commonwealth about 300 students got work experience this summer through the My Work Program.

Joe ROMEO is working for a CIL in Lewistown. He wants his CIL in on the My Work action or to get an intern. Pat told Joe to email him. Joe indicated that all the students he works with have a disability.

BBVS Report: Natalie Barbush. First, a little about Dawn Sokol, who is the BBVS Director. She started with BVRS in 2005 as a VRC (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor). In 2006 she was promoted to ADA (Assistant District Administrator) at BBVS, and from there promoted, in 2012, to the D.A (District Administrator in Erie, PA. Dawn has been working as the Acting BBVS Director since March, 2022 and became Director in February, 2023. She has a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and a Master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling. She is a licensed professional counselor, a certified Drug and Alcohol counselor, and did graduate from the L&I Management Development Institute. Natalie continued on to read the credentials of Mike Kirby. He started his employment with BBVS as a clerical worker 17 years ago. Many positions and education for advance degrees plus his work experience; he is now the Director of Central Operations.

BBVS goals 07/01/2022 to 03/01/2023. VR has 319 customers, an increase of 21 customers since the last report in December 2022. The goal for closures is 52 and to date there are 10 successful closures. Pre-employment transition students goal is 84, which is a goal to serve those individuals. ILOB (Independent Living Older Blind) has 153. Specialized Services-Children's program (SS-C 217, and 14 individuals in Specialized Services-Adult (SS-A program. Social work closures so far are 46. The goal is 109. Orientation and Mobility (O&M) has 44 customers, and the goal is 102 for closures. So far 46 closures. VRT (Vision Rehabilitation Therapy) has 101 customers with a goal of 78 and 51 successful closures.

Staffing: Vacancies for the VRC, a VR Supervisor position, and a CA2 position. In process of hiring a counselor. The supervisor chosen withdrew, so that position will be posted again. CA2 posting went up on 03/14/2023 and is up for two weeks. Go to [employment.pa.gov](https://www.unemployment.pa.gov) for employment opportunities. One O&M (Orientation and Mobility) specialist retired. That position will be posted momentarily.

BBVS continues to prioritize Outreach, referrals, and hiring. BBVS continues to ask for assistance to get referrals. Referrals to date: VR: 91, an increase of 40 since the December report. Social Workers received 82 referrals (61 in ILOB, 17 in SS-C and 4 for SS-A) O&M has 53 referrals, and VRT has 91 referrals.

Five students/customers from Harrisburg District Office will be attending Summer Academy. One of our success stories has been selected to be in the OVR Annual Report. More details to follow after permission is granted. BBVS is exploring other community resources for outreach opportunities. Natalie listed agencies and facilities where BBVS visited and reviewed with these staff what BBVS does. One was at Essex House, Better Together Senior Expo, a church, the Friendship Center, YMCA, Perry County Area Agency on Aging (AAA) presentation, Thornwald Home presentation, King Street Ministry Center, Tri-County Community Action presentation, Lebanon AAA and a joint presentation with Lebanon V.A. (Veterans' Administration). BBVS is registering for senior expos throughout the year. There are at least five of them annually.

Natalie read into the record a touching success story about a BBVS customer and his adjustment to changes in his vision due to hypertension and several strokes. It took 10 minutes

for her to read, but was so worth it! However, the customer is still unemployed, but is now using and trusting his mobility cane and is socializing with people he has met. We wish him continued success and hope that competitive employment will be a goal in the future if other medical conditions permit it and also improve.

Cathy remarked that the American Council of the Blind (ACB) and Pennsylvania Council of the Blind (PCB) have a mentoring program to help people while waiting for adjustment to blindness services from BBVS. We may have some professional counselors among us but most of us are "have been there, done that" background. We can help people find resources and walk people through questions they need to ask professionals. We give generous listening skills to people resources for where to find simple things that will make one's life easier while adjusting to vision loss, lots of empathy, but no sympathy.

Cynthia expressed her feelings about her vision loss and the lengthy time it has taken for her to receive necessary services.

A man present spoke for his wife, who speaks Spanish. They were both present today. Natalie explained how the agencies use Language Line to hear customers and to be able to communicate back with customers. Ask for that. Pat asked the couple if the wife has a VRC and the VRC and supervisor were identified. I believe Pat wrote down the VRC and the supervisor's names for the couple. Hopefully a phone number or email address was also included.

Cynthia and Cathy reviewed the ACB Legislative Imperatives we hope to get passed and our conversations with legislators.

Since no other concerns were mentioned, Cynthia made a motion to adjourn. Cathy Long seconded.

Next CAC meeting will be on Tuesday, June 20, 2023, at the BVRS and BBVS offices, 555 Walnut Street, 8th Floor, Harrisburg, PA 17101. The meeting will start at noon and will close by 1:30 p.m. Please look for an email with the flyer for the next meeting as an attachment and also these minutes. Come ready to discuss any issues you have with BVRS or BBVS staff and your services.

Respectfully Submitted,
Cathy Long