



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

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Legislative & Public Awareness Committee Minutes for February 23, 2024

Members Present (P)

Not Present (NP)

William Del Toro Vargas (P)	Julia Grant Barol (P)	Lynn Heitz (P)
Michele Leahy (NP)	Paul Fogle (NP)	Joan Goodman (P)
Michelle Mitchell (NP)	Jessica Keogh (NP)	Passle Helminski (P)
Sylenthia Dent (P)		

OVR Staff Present: Chris Harbert

PaRC Staff Present: Chris Todd

ADDITIONS TO THE AGENDA: None

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND PAST MINUTES:

MOTION was made by Ms. Joan Goodman to approve today's agenda and past meeting minutes. Ms. Lynn Heitz seconded the motion. All were in favor.

AGENDA ITEMS:

Update on Collaborative Projects

- This topic was not discussed.

Review of Feedback on State and Federal Position Papers

- Members reviewed drafts of the State and Federal Position Papers which included feedback and comments from OVR. Members requested the following information, follow up, and edits for each of the State Position Paper sections listed:
 - **Full Funding:** "PaRC recommends that the VR Transfer be set at \$50M for SFY24 to ensure PA OVR has adequate funding to manage operations and provide services." This language has been given its own bullet point.
 - **Expedited Employment:** Add a bullet point to Expedited Employment stating, "The PaRC recommends that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania review an Expedited Hiring System to be a model employer and to comply

- with the spirit and intent of the PA Employment First Act.”
- **Collaboration of Services for Persons with Neurological Injuries in Pennsylvania:** Members requested information on State agencies providing services to persons with neurological injuries including the amounts of funding to strengthen these services, the current funding amounts, and description on why they need more funding. Members suggested getting more information from Office of Long-term Living (OLTL) and Office of Traumatic Brain Injuries.
 - **Adequate Funding of the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH):** Members requested information on specific funding amounts and line items to be provided by ODHH. Members asked ODHH Executive Director be invited to attend a Committee meeting to provide additional language for this section of the Position Paper.
 - **PaRC supports the following regarding Centers for Independent Living (CILs)** Members requested more information or clarification on input for this section.
 - **Transportation:** Members requested that Ms. Passle Helminski work with staff to break down the language into smaller sections. Ms. Helminski agreed and asked to include information about the Blind community.
 - **Disability Caucus:** Members requested an additional bullet point be added that PaRC requests a public hearing on PA disability services. Members requested information on which specific State agencies have been advocating for a Disability Caucus.
 - **Employment First Oversight Commission (EFOC):** Members requested language be added that states, “The PaRC supports the recommendations made by the EFOC be followed in the latest report.” Or “The PaRC is in full support of the EFOC recommendations made to the Executive Office, Legislature, and individual State agencies.” There is also a mission, vision, and core values statements that could be added in addition to the link to the latest EFOC report.
 - Members explained that this may be the first time an Executive Director provided input for Council Position Papers and that these efforts are very much appreciated by the Committee. Members requested the following information, follow up, and edits for each of the Federal Position Paper sections listed:
 - Opening paragraph, members requested number of customers served by VR and students served be added to the first paragraph just before the last sentence with the following language, “The Council supports the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation who produced the following statistics in 2023. This document summarizes the Council’s position on key federal laws and policy issues.” Members requested data be shared with staff to place in this section on customers served and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) numbers served. Public data from the Department of Education indicates there are approximately 168,158 students between the ages of 14 and 22 eligible for Transition Services in Pennsylvania. Members requested the number of students being served. Members requested the most updated data regarding adult services, deaf and hard of hearing, and blind and visual

services.

- **WIOA:** Members requested "Title IV" be added to the section title.
- Members suggested replacing the first bullet with the following, "Keep VR a mandatory program with State funding to match Federal dollars at a 21.3% to 78.7% rate."
- Increase funds for the Older Blind Program to better service the growing aging, blind population. Members agreed to add specific language of a 75% increase over the next 5 years and requested this amount be reviewed by Mr. Ryan Hyde.
- **Implement changes to the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD):** Members agreed to add specific language, "to focus on supporting staff through offering scholarships and specific funding to increase skills and credentials over time."
- **Transportation:** Members agreed to add language asking for additional funding and requested a recommendation for what percentage to include. Members also discussed adding language about increased accessible public transportation including rail.
- **The Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act:** Members requested this be a topic for the next Committee meeting.
- **COVID-19:** Members discussed including language regarding the impacts that COVID-19 had on mental health/ isolation and increased mental health funding so that employees may return to work. Members also discussed including language to educate Legislators about the increase in work from home employment opportunities, increased funds for VR, and trainings/ educating employers regarding accessibility.

Preparation for Meetings with State Legislators

Determine meeting date/times

Legislative Offices

Talking Points

- This topic was not discussed.

Public Comment (3 minutes per attendee)

- Ms. Passle Helminski provided public comment and stated that recently Libre's Law was passed but information regarding interference with service dogs was taken out of the law. Informed Committee of importance of placing language regarding service dogs back into the PaRC Position Papers to encourage Legislators to put information about interference back into Legislation. Recommended Council also focus on who could be sponsoring this Legislation if interference is put back into State Law.
- Members agreed that language regarding service dogs should be included in the PaRC's position papers.

Schedule Next Meeting

- Members requested polling for March 8th and 15th.

Adjourn

MOTION was made by Ms. Julia Barol to adjourn. Ms. Lynn Heitz seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.