

Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting
Monday, February 12, 2024
MINUTES

ATTENDEES:

Shari Brightful, Andrew Pennington, James Whitonis, Joe Thomas, Lora Swatko, Lynn Heitz, Mary Brucker, Melissa Good, Alexander Shay, Steve Whittaker, Andy Burstein, Julia Burrow

Ms. Brightful said she will send Suzanne Erb a message since she does not see her in the meeting. The group waited a little. Shari said she didn't want to waste people's time and started the meeting asking if everyone received the meeting minutes and for a motion to approve. Lynn Heitz made a motion to approve and Andrew Pennington and Melissa Good seconded. If all are in favor say aye so we can approve the minutes. All said aye, the minutes are approved.

Mary Brucker asked if everyone could hear her Jaws because she was trying to use video. Alex Shay told Mary she did not need to use video and we could hear her clearly. Mary said thanks.

Shari Brightful:

This is our first meeting of the new year and welcomed everyone. Is looking forward to having some meetings in person soon. It's always nice to see everyone in person.

Staffing:

- Shari reported this morning was very exciting as they had two new VRC's starting today. Has another Counselor starting on the 26th.
- Has completed another round of interviews and have recommended five VRC's.
- Annuitants Jill and Charlene have returned for the new year.

Goals:

- Has closed 61 cases.
- Is working to improve compliance scores. Moving customers through the process on a timely basis keeps them engaged and leads to better outcomes. Currently BVRs is looking at various options to move cases more timely.

Budget:

- Continuing to work with staff and providers on collecting reports and invoices for services rendered.
- The next Supported Employment meeting will be in person on July 9, 2024.

Miscellaneous:

- Everyone is excited about the Pre-ETS Summer activities.

- Is working with YAP to provide a My Work Experience.
- Is working with the School District of Philadelphia to complete applications with students interested in the DHOH Summer Academy.
- Is also working with HUNE on the Youth Ambassador program. Sharon Silverman assisted Luz Hernandez to develop a flyer to share with schools, families and community to generate interest.
- There are three Project Search Sites – Drexel, the School District, Girard College. The students appear to be enjoying their Project Search experience.

Lynn Heitz said she was in Washington a few weeks ago and met with Senator Casey and an aid. Lynn asked Shari about jobs, 14C certificates so they can be paid minimum wage. Lynn also asked about customized employment. Shari said providers are working hard to build up their capacity, don't have the staff to offer customized employment. We did not have many providers sign up in Philadelphia although we had the most throughout the state.

Melissa good explained as a provider what they have been going through and the cost. Is in the process of certification because many staff have left and this leaves them in a tight position.

Suzanne asked if she missed anything crucial at the beginning of the meeting. Shari went over some of the items she spoke on previously. Suzanne asked Alex if he and Joe would like to continue if there are no other questions.

Alexander Shay:

Staffing:

- An O&M intern is starting on February 20, 2024. This brings us up to three, full capacity.
- A Social Worker is starting on April 1, 2024.
- The BSR position posted. There has been an emphasis to make sure every BBVS office has a BSR to help counselors assist the VRC's in getting job placement.
- We just lost a counselor who resigned suddenly. Was only here two months. In addition to a 4th counselor, we are going to be posting for a 5th counselor. There is a hiring event coming up and hopefully we will find some candidates.
- We lost a supervisor, Arwa Mubaslat, that posting should be coming up soon.
- We are interviewing for a 3rd clerical.
- Hiring and maintaining employees is our focus.

Miscellaneous:

- Referrals are outpacing the quantity of applications we can handle, consequently we can not maintain the referrals.
- Pre-ETTs activity is very good, exceeded goal of 82, have 124.

- As far as fiscal, right now we have plenty of money to spend. There is no budget limit for the ILOB program. We have a lot of money obligated. There is a million dollars out there and we are trying to get bills paid.
- Summer Academy process wrapped up the end of January, we had 7 applicants. The Academy will run June 19 through June 28, 2024. This is not going to involve district office staff as it had in the past. Upon completion reports will be sent to the counselors.

Steve Whittaker asked about people becoming eligible, asked how the process runs. Alex said we take the application, verify if the customer is capable of working in the US with ID, medical documentation to demonstrate the need for the certificate of eligibility so we can look at the impairments, MSD or SD. We are a little behind this year on eligibility, 87% this year, last year 90%. We have received additional guidance from central office. Joe took on supervision of the VRC counselors and is looking at active reports to move the cases along.

Steve asked how BBVS is communicating with customers. Alex said, mail, phone calls and now we have resource accounts (which started during the pandemic). We receive referrals through a fax account as an email which is sent by providers and others. Alex said we have email and text. Joe stated most contact starts with a phone call, if we do not have a phone number, we contact the customer through mail. We also ask them if they want in person or virtual intake, most prefer virtual. Alex said if someone wants in person, we will facilitate this request. The systems are set up as a remote experience and are working well.

Andrew Pennington – asked if Arwa transferred and what happened to her caseload. Alex said she left the Commonwealth and Joe can explain regarding the caseload. Joe stated Central Office suggested we have vacant caseloads which are set up by geographic areas. Andrew asked what happens when a customer calls and the area is a vacant area. Joe said it is up to our discretion, sometimes the cases are taken over by VRC's working overtime. Joe also said he will be working overtime, taking on some of the caseload. Alex said this is a union environment and we have to follow the overtime equalization process. Right now overtime is voluntary. If needed Joe can work the overtime.

Andrew asked if you think we can bring out the vacant caseloads in district offices. He and Lynn have talked about how the caseload does not equal out as to the number of counselors. Would like to know where the vacancies are. Alex responded, vacant NE Philadelphia, SE Philadelphia and all of Chester County (which has the fewest cases). Currently, there are about 240 cases that are not being worked in overtime. Lynn asked if all the 240 cases are in all statuses. Steve Whittaker asked if they were aware of vision conferences in Philadelphia this year, which would possibly help in recruiting. Alex said there are hiring events coming up. We still require masters degree but now can be other than VR degrees. People do apply but as managers we need people who are a good fit. We are welcome to interview all. Central office is aware in the southeast there are issues. We want to make the positions attractive in order to hire and maintain employees. Unfortunately, we are feeling the brunt of this. Lynn Heitz said when you get a rehabilitation counseling degree she does not feel there is a huge emphasis on blindness. When people come to interview, Lynn feels there are a lot of people trained to work with other disabilities but are not equipped to work with blind individuals. Alex said this does

occur but we are looking in general for a well-rounded candidate. Thinks it would be wise if candidates googled blindness to find out what this might incur.

Steve Whitaker works with everyone here along w/people in Canada. They have a program to give them the training they need. They all go through an internship program. Alex said central office is doing what they can but there are other forces in place. We need to remain competitive in our region to attract high quality individuals.

Suzanne asked if there are any more questions for the OVR folks. She said she understands there are a lot of problems and we are not trying to point the finger at anyone. Understands you are trying to do the best you can with what you have.

Lora Swatko said there is a local group in the greater Philadelphia that serve blind and visually impaired individuals, Foundation Fighting Blindness. The director chose Philadelphia as their first market. The group will get together about three times a year (low vision providers, etc.), will have presenters that serve the community in employment, daily activities of living, etc., service opportunities, employment opportunities. If anyone is interested, they can email her or if they want to present. Suzanne Erb apologized that she could not make the meeting last week but said she has people from both groups. She and Lynn Heitz are representing consumer organizations, medical professionals coming into contact with people experiencing and sharing experiences with medical professionals. It is important for medical doctors to see “us” to see that there are things that can be accomplished by blind professionals, not just oh well, they are going blind and they can not do anything. Suzanne asked for her email address and Lora gave it to everyone - Lora.swatko@blindit.org. Andrew Pennington asked what organization this is regarding. Foundation Fighting Blindness, is the national organization setting up this Philly Forum. Mary Brucker asked if it is strictly for professionals or are clients encouraged to come. Lora said professionals right now. Suzanne said there are also professionals who happen to be blind and asked if there is anyone in the group from Philadelphia Corporation for Aging. She feels they would be a great organization to participate. Steve Whitaker said to reach out to medical providers also. Suzanne asked if there were, any more questions for Lora.

Suzanne Erb:

Suzanne presented. She informed everyone she is writing a book, had thought about doing this for a long time and has started and stopped many times. Since she is semi-retired she thought it would be a good time to start. Has been looking at “What color is your Parachute” written in 1998. Started taking notes and putting together an outline and is reaching out to people in other organizations. Asked everyone, since they are all professionals, what they think is missing in books. Wanted to know what everyone feels about her writing a book and if they have ever written a book. Suzanne said she thought this was a book whose time has come.

Mary Brucker said she thought the whole ordeal of a person who is blind and working with technology and how they would do this would be helpful. Also, career transition. Suzanne said she has thought about that is going to cover all disabilities because each disability has different

challenges. People think they have to change their career because they have become disabled and that is not always the case. Would be interested in getting together a committee to discuss how the book is progressing.

Shari Brightful said she is on several committees and always enjoys hearing the stories she shares and the passion she exudes. Feels stories keep people engaged.

Steve Whittaker said he has written a book and agrees you definitely need stories. Need to write them down.

Suzanne was thinking of doing podcasts in tandem with writing the book. Mary Brucker said she would love to talk with Suzanne also.

Steve Whittaker highly recommends the Envision University conference at Salus in April. Suzanne asked if there was a link and Steve said he would send it in an email.

Suzanne asked if anyone had anything else to share.

Suzanne asked about the next meeting, three months from now, some time in May. How about May 20th? It was agreed May 20, 2024 will work.

All in favor of adjourning, say aye. Several people said aye. Meeting adjourned.