



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

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Executive Committee Meeting Minutes for July 2, 2024, 2:00 PM to 3:00 PM

Committee Members (P = Present) (NP = Not Present)

William Paz De Melo (P)

Susan Tomasic (P)

Michelle Mitchell (P)

Lynn Heitz (P)

Joan Goodman (P)

Passle Helminski (P)

Julia Grant Barol (P)

Andrew Pennington (P)

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Present: Chris Harbert, Ryan Hyde, James Whitonis

Staff Present: Chris Todd, Michelle Gerrick

ADDITIONS TO THE AGENDA

There were no additions.

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

AGENDA ITEMS

Letter of Support for OVR's Creating a 21st Century Workforce of Youth and Adults with Disabilities Through the Transformation of Education, Career, and Competitive Integrated Employment Model Demonstration Project

- Mr. Chris Harbert reported that OVR is seeking the Council's support, they previously provided follow up from the Council member questions, and they spoke with Ms. Dawn Sokol Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS) who confirmed that the devices can be used for bioptic driving simulators to meet the individuals need seeking to drive who have low vision.
- Mr. Ryan Hyde reported that OVR is working to submit their proposal by the July 3, 2024, deadline. They have received 7 letters of support from different organizations including Client Assistance Program (CAP), PennDOT, Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), Bureau of Special Education (BSE), the State Board of VR, and would like to add the PaRC to that list. The biggest expenses for

the program will be purchase of the equipment which will be approximately \$3 million, funding for the Occupational Therapists conducting the evaluations, and any additional driving services. OVR will be sending letters of support on this grant to Helen Keller National Center, Ms. Michelle Mitchell's program, Workforce Development Board, and others that they are in direct competition with for this grant but want to support employment of people with disabilities within the Commonwealth.

- Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) changed the rules on this grant, allowing for any entity to submit a proposal, the last 2 were restricted just to VR agencies. RSA has received 800 letters of intent from across the nation.
- Ms. Lynn Heitz shared concerns about the safety of using bioptics for driving. She does not believe this is something that OVR should be investing in for individuals with low vision and would prefer a project that supports all individuals with employment opportunities.
- Ms. Michelle Mitchell inquired if OVR has approached PennDOT with housing the driving simulator equipment rather than having them only available within the Intermediate Units (IUs), so that the services may be available to more people including adults. Mr. Hyde agreed that is an interesting idea and explained that one reason OVR is using the IUs is because an Occupation Therapist (OT) must be present to perform the evaluations.
- Mr. Pennington explained that OTs will be funded through the grant and inquired what happens once the grant ends. Mr. Hyde explained that would be part of year-5 sustainability transition and they will start exploring fee for service agreements with the IUs at that time, so they may start billing OVR for the student evaluations. They may also ask for additional funding within the State budget, if necessary, when the grant is ending to support the project.
- Mr. William Paz De Melo explained that the IUs may not be accessible to all students with disabilities and inquired why they haven't considered housing the simulators in other places such as the CILs, Pre ETS providers, and PennDOT. Mr. Hyde explained that the project concept began well before the DIF grant was introduced. OVR was working with BSE to look into starting a pilot program for the driving simulators at the IUs. It is easier for OVR to contract with government entities and it is required for OTs to perform the evaluations and IUs have OTs on staff.
- Mr. Pennington stated that he has seen a lot of need for driving services from his perspective and that this is a noble cause. Anything that OVR can do to aid some of the needs for driving services to potentially gain access to transportation is important as transportation is one of the biggest barriers to employment.
- Mr. Hyde reported that the cost for a driving simulator and other equipment to be available at each of the 29 IUs is approximately \$100,000 per unit.
- Mr. William Paz De Melo explained that he supports transportation and the grant. The concern is the program being located in the IUs which don't have a great reputation for being accessible to students and families. Ms. Susan Tomasic explained that is their reputation, but this program may be a way to improve that.

MOTION was made by Ms. Susan Tomasic to approve the letter of support for OVR. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. Ms. Lynn Heitz and Ms. Michelle Mitchell abstained. The motion passed.

Public Request for PaRC Letter of Support

- Ms. Michelle Mitchell explained that she submitted a proposal for the grant that would support students from Elementary up thru Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE). This program will include CIE Navigators, immersive curriculum, connecting students to the VR system, connecting students to Pre Employment Transition Services (Pre ETS), parent involvement, Centers for Independent Living (CILs) involvement, housing support, advocacy, peer support, and the creation of a Community College Technical Assistance Center to create more inclusive post-secondary education programs across Pennsylvania. The goal of this program is getting students into CIE of their own choosing to pursue and maintain their individual employment goals and dream careers. Ms. Mitchell explained that she feels this program aligns perfectly with the PaRC mission and would love to have a letter of support from the Council.
- Mr. Andrew Pennington stated that he thinks this is a great idea and inquired if this was the same grant that OVR is asking for support from. Ms. Mitchell explained that their grant is completely separate from OVR's grant proposal and that they are in competition with OVR for this grant. She has also requested a letter of support from OVR.
- Ms. Lynn Heitz inquired how students that are blind or low vision would be supported through this program. Ms. Heitz explained that CILs do not work with the blind and low vision community. Ms. Mitchell explained that the proposal states CILs or like-minded organizations. Either another agency such as a blindness and visual impairment provider would be involved, or an entity would be brought in to work in collaboration with the CILs providing a more holistic approach. They will ensure that all students will be able to access and fully engage in the program.

MOTION was made by Ms. Lynn Heitz for the PaRC to submit a letter of support for Ms. Michelle Mitchell's project. Ms. Susan Tomasic seconded the motion. Ms. Michelle Mitchell abstained. The motion passed.

Draft Agenda Topics/Speakers: Full Council hybrid meeting 08/13/24

- Members agreed to provide questions for OVR District Office speakers and learn more about specific information including data regarding the number of people served, Pre ETS provided, employment training provided, successes, barriers, topics they may need advice on, how they are handling applications for services in regard to staff shortages, and what programs and practices are working and not working.
- Members explained that attending Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) meetings would be beneficial in learning more about the activities of District Offices.

- Ms. Susan Tomasic suggested the PaRC continue inviting speakers from the District Offices present during Full Council meetings and that PaRC should provide them with a list of topics they want covered in advance. Mr. Paz De Melo requested that be put on the next Executive Committee meeting agenda to identify those questions. Mr. Chris Harbert inquired if there was a specific District Office the members would like to hear from. PaTTAN Youth Engagement Professionals asked Mr. Harbert to inquire if PaRC would like for them to speak at the August meeting. Mr. Harbert also asked members to let him know if there are any IUs that are notoriously inaccessible as this grant could provide an opportunity to overcome and correct the accessibility issues.

Public Comment

- Ms. Passle Helminski inquired if Mr. Paz De Melo had an opportunity to sign off on the letter of support Mr. Matt Seeley, Esq. drafted in regard to Service Dog legislation. Mr. Paz De Melo informed members that as Chair he would need to get formal approval from the Executive Committee or the Full Council first.
- Due to Sunshine Act agenda requirements members shared concerns about asking for a motion to approve the letter of support as this was not a topic within today's meeting agenda. Ms. Tomasic explained that Ms. Helminski could sign the letter as the Chair of the PaRC Legislative Committee, as the Committee has already approved language regarding Service Dogs. Ms. Helminski explained that the Committee has not passed support of the Legislation referenced within the letter and could not sign the letter of support. Mr. Paz De Melo explained that the Service Dog language supports the spirit of the legislation and requested that the letter of support be added to the next Executive Committee meeting agenda.

Adjourn

MOTION to adjourn was made by Ms. Susan Tomasic. Ms. Joan Goodman seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.