



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

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Full Council Quarterly Meeting Minutes May 8, 2024

Council Members: Present (P) Not Present (NP)

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|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Julia Barol (P) | Sylenthia Dent (P) | Paul Fogle (P) |
| Joan Goodman (P) | Lynn Heitz (P) | Passle Helminski (P) |
| Twana Jones (P) | Jessica Keogh (P) | Michele Leahy (P) |
| Michelle Mitchell (P) | Michelle Paonessa (NP) | Andrew Pennington (P) |
| Kara Donatucci Pham (NP) | Susan Tomasic (P) | William Del Toro Vargas (P) |

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Present: Ryan Hyde, Dana McKinney, Deborah Schwartz, Denise Verchimak, Chris Harbert, Cheryl Novak, Craig Schield, James Whitonis, Andy Wagner, Jessica Crum-Lasko, Tammy Burke, Chris Cowan, Jannathul AyubKhan, Christopher Zakraysek, Douglas Rand, Kim Robinson, Ralph Roach, Jim Marker, Chris Palmer, Megan Gardner, Susan Storm, Kathy Schrader, Marci Katona, Randall Loss, Jim France, Hillary Hubbell

Stakeholders Present: Melissa Hawkins, Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH), Matthew Seeley, Esq., Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), Jeff Iseman, Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), Heather Snyder, Step Up, LLC, Kadie Trauder, Step Up, LLC, Dale Verchick, Disability Rights PA, Angel Torres, Reading BVRS Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC)

Project Staff Present: Michelle Gerrick, Christopher Todd

Moderator of Zoom: Nichole Wade

CART: Tori Holland

Interpreters: Ashley Shenk, Jessica Bentley-Sassaman, Laura Schupp, Shannon Strunk

Guests: Rachel Hudson, George Palmer

WELCOME & OPENING REMARKS: Paul Fogle, Chair

MOTION was made by Ms. Passle Helminski to approve today's meeting agenda. The motion was seconded by Mr. William Del Toro Vargas. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Passle Helminski to approve the past meeting minutes from February 14, 2024. Mr. William Del Toro Vargas seconded the motion. Ms. Michele Leahy abstained. The motion passed.

**PaRC FISCAL REPORT (3rd QUARTER): Michelle Mitchell, Member at Large
ACTION: Approval of PaRC 3rd quarter Fiscal Report**

- The Council's budget from July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024, is \$80,000.00. The fiscal report includes Council expenses in the 3rd quarter which includes January, February, and March 2024. Expenses in January totaled \$3,333.60. Expenses in February totaled \$2,270.00 and March totaled \$7,668.73. 3rd quarter expenses totaled \$13,272.33. As a reminder, total expenses in 1st quarter were \$19,107.92. Total expenses in 2nd quarter were \$6,816.53. The total amount spent in quarter 1, 2, & 3 is \$39,196.78. The remaining balance is \$40,803.22.

MOTION was made by Ms. Lynn Heitz to approve the 3rd Quarter Fiscal Report. The motion was seconded by Ms. Michele Leahy. All were in favor.

**ELECTION OF PaRC OFFICERS FOR FY 2024 – 2025: Susan Tomasic,
Governance Committee Chair**

Ms. Susan Tomasic conducted a Roll Call vote for Chair of the Council for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-2025. Ms. Tomasic instructed members to announce their vote for either Mr. Paul Fogle or Mr. William Del Toro Vargas. The results are as follows:

Julia Barol – **Not present**
Sylenthia Dent – **Paul Fogle**
Paul Fogle – **Paul Fogle**
Joan Goodman – **Paul Fogle**
Lynn Heitz – **William Del Toro Vargas**
Passle Helminski – **William Del Toro Vargas**
Twana Jones – **Abstained**
Jessica Keogh – **Paul Fogle**
Michele Leahy – **Abstained**
Michelle Mitchell – **Paul Fogle**

Michelle Paonessa – **Not Present**
Kara Pham-Donatucci – **Not Present**
Andrew Pennington – **Paul Fogle**
Susan Tomasic – **William Del Toro Vargas**
William Del Toro Vargas – **William Del Toro Vargas**

Ms. Tomasic announced that Mr. Fogle has been elected as Chair. Ms. Tomasic conducted a Roll Call vote for Vice Chair of the Council for FY 2024-2025. Ms. Tomasic instructed members to announce their vote for either Ms. Michelle Mitchell or Ms. Passle Helminski. The results are as follows:

Julia Barol – **Not present**
Sylenthia Dent – **Michelle Mitchell**
Paul Fogle – **Michelle Mitchell**
Joan Goodman – **Michelle Mitchell**
Lynn Heitz – **Michelle Mitchell**
Passle Helminski – **Passle Helminski**
Twana Jones – **Michelle Mitchell**
Jessica Keogh – **Michelle Mitchell**
Michele Leahy – **Abstained**
Michelle Mitchell – **Michelle Mitchell**
Michelle Paonessa – **Not Present**
Kara Pham-Donatucci – **Not Present**
Andrew Pennington – **Michelle Mitchell**
Susan Tomasic – **Passle Helminski**
William Del Toro Vargas – **Passle Helminski**

Ms. Tomasic announced that Ms. Mitchell has been elected as Vice Chair. Ms. Tomasic conducted a Roll Call vote for Member at Large of the Council for FY 2024-2025 which only has one candidate. Ms. Tomasic opened the floor for nominations for Member at Large. There were no nominations. Ms. Tomasic instructed members to announce their vote as either yes, no, or abstain. The results are as follows:

Julia Barol – **Not present**
Sylenthia Dent – **Abstained**
Paul Fogle – **Yes**
Joan Goodman – **Yes**
Lynn Heitz – **Yes**
Passle Helminski – **Yes**
Twana Jones – **Abstained**

Jessica Keogh – **Yes**
Michele Leahy – **Abstained**
Michelle Mitchell – **Yes**
Michelle Paonessa – **Not Present**
Kara Pham-Donatucci – **Not Present**
Andrew Pennington – **Yes**
Susan Tomasic – **Yes**
William Del Toro Vargas – **Abstained**

Ms. Tomasic announced that Ms. Barol has been elected as Member at Large and reminded members that these positions will become valid at the next meeting.

NEW BUSINESS: Committee Chairs
Executive Committee: Paul Fogle, Chair

- Mr. Paul Fogle explained there are 2 members whose terms are expiring at the end of the Fiscal Year. Ms. Michele Leahy was recognized for her work on the Social Media / Outreach Committee in terms of revamping the Council’s social media presence, new website, logo, and much more regarding Council outreach efforts. Ms. Michelle Paonessa was recognized for her work with accessibility regarding the deaf and hard of hearing community and participation with the Policy Committee, OVR Audiological Services Policy workgroup, and Impartial Hearing Officers Ad Hoc Committee. Ms. Lorie Brew has retired from the PEAL Center and thus submitted her resignation from the PaRC at the end of April 2024. Currently there are vacancies on the Council for the categories of representation for Parent Training and Information Center (PEAL Center), Business / Labor / Industry, Pennsylvania Department of Education / Bureau of Special Education, State Workforce Development Board, Young Adult, and Veteran, There will also be vacancies for the categories of representation for Mental Health and Sensory Disabilities / Deaf and Hard of Hearing as of July 12, 2024.
- Ms. Michele Leahy suggested that OVR and other PaRC stakeholders post Council vacancies to inform the public and diversify applications received by the Council. The Council posts this information on their social media pages and PaRC Bi-monthly Newsletter. Ms. Lynn Heitz suggested the information be shared on different social media sites and listservs.
- Mr. Pennington inquired if there has been an applicant from the Workforce Development Board. Mr. Ryan Hyde reported that he was informed that an applicant should be forthcoming soon.
- Mr. William Del Toro Vargas inquired if there is an opportunity to have Ms. Michele Leahy’s term on the Council extended until a replacement for her category of

representation is identified. Ms. Tomasic explained this process is referred to as 'Until a Successor is Qualified (USQ)' and that USQ would provide the right for anyone leaving the Council to stay until their replacement has been named unless as a Federally funded agency it is not allowed at the Federal Level but she does not believe that is the case for the PaRC. Mr. Chris Harbert reported that questions regarding USQ are currently being reviewed by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) Chief Counsel. Members explained that one of the main concerns with USQ would be allowing those members to maintain voting rights and be reimbursed for Council related travel. Mr. Hyde explained that Ms. Deborah Schwartz, PA Labor & Industry, Office of Chief Counsel is present today and after discussion believes that members remaining under USQ would be able to maintain the same rights and responsibilities as other members. This will be reviewed and provided in writing within the next few weeks. Members agreed that for now it is a simple matter of asking members terming off if they would like to continue with the Council. Mr. Fogle explained that the issue of USQ will be revisited during the August Full Council meeting, if necessary.

- Mr. Fogle announced that he will be setting up a workgroup to work with Mr. Chris Harbert on defining roles of PaRC and the State Board and strengthening collaborative efforts between the 2 groups. Mr. Del Toro Vargas volunteered for the workgroup. An email will be sent to receive volunteers for the workgroup.

MOTION was made by Mr. Pennington to approve Executive Committee goals for Fiscal Year 2024-2025. Ms. Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.

CareerLink Committee: Andrew Pennington, Chair

- Mr. Pennington reported that the CareerLink Committee continues to hold discussion on PA Workforce Development projects and grants, PA Internships program, ADA Comprehensive accessibility assessments and Assistive Technology of CareerLink locations, affiliate sites, services, and trainings. The next Committee meeting is scheduled for May 21st from 1:00 PM to 2:00 PM.

Governance Committee: Susan Tomasic, Chair

ACTION: Approval of revised PaRC Bylaws

- Ms. Tomasic reported that the Governance Committee has been busy working to update the PaRC Bylaws. Revisions include:
 - Officer term limits stating that additionally, no member may serve more than 2 consecutive times in any 1 office.

- Remove language that allows for the State Board calling of Council Special Meetings.
- Expanding maximum Standing Committee membership requirements from 7 to 9 members.
- Monitoring of Committee waiting lists by the Governance Committee.
- Increase to the attendance of meetings with Legislators requirement, stating that attending at least one meeting per Fiscal Year with a State or Federal Legislator to inform and educate about the Council’s mission.
- Ms. Tomasic explained that if approved, the revised Bylaws will go into effect on July 1, 2024, as will the officers’ term.
- Mr. Pennington inquired about PaRC member attendance requirements for Committee meetings. Ms. Tomasic explained no changes were made to this requirement and that the Governance Committee tracks attendance of meetings and provides a warning letter to any member that is not fulfilling their obligations.
- Mr. Del Toro Vargas explained it is important to note on record that the Council cannot allow any Council Chairperson to appoint members to Committees or as Committee Chairs. The Council is an elective body.

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski to approve the revised PaRC Bylaws. Ms. Barol seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Governance Committee will be holding new member orientation scheduled for July 11, 2024, from 2:30 PM to 3:30 PM. Committee continues to work on membership, recruitment, attendance, Bylaws, Member Handbook, Policies, and Procedures, and the overseeing of elections of officers. Next Committee meeting is scheduled for June 20, 2024, from 2:30 PM to 3:30 PM.

Legislative Committee: William Del Toro Vargas, Chair

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski to approve the Legislative Committee goals for Fiscal Year 2024-2025. Ms. Sylenthia Dent seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski to approve updated PaRC State Position Paper. Ms. Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Mitchell to approve updated PaRC Federal Position Paper. Ms. Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Barol to approve PaRC support of S.3118 and H.R.6296 Senate and House Bill Short Title as Introduced: Home and

Community-Based Services (HCBS) Relief Act. Ms. Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Mr. Pennington to approve PaRC support of S.2522 and H.R. 5102 House and Senate Bill Short Title as Introduced: ABLE MATCH (Making Able a Tool to Combat Hardship) Act. Ms. Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Mr. Del Toro Vargas reported that the next Committee meeting is scheduled for May 20, 2024, from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM. Meetings with Legislators and / or their staff will be held virtually on May 30 and 31, 2024. Full Council has been provided calendar invitations to attend these meetings. Encouraged members to run for Committee Chair and explained the importance of informing and educating our legislative and executive government about the Council’s mission. Chairmanship for the Committee is a lot of work and time consuming. This should be taken into consideration when volunteering to serve.

Policy Committee: Lynn Heitz, Chair

Audiological Services Policy – Ms. Cheryl Novak

ACTION: Approval of OVR Audiological Services Policy

Appoint Ad Hoc Committee to research best practices for improving response rates on Customer Satisfaction Surveys

- Ms. Cheryl Novak, OVR reported that the Audiological Services Policy workgroup first met in 2022 and has been working on updates to meet the technological improvements since the last time the policy was updated to streamline procedures. The policy was approved by PaRC’s Policy Committee and Executive Committee and has been brought forward for a final vote.
- Ms. Lynn Heitz reported that the Policy Committee has voted to bring the Audiological Services Policy forward to Full Council for approval.

MOTION was made by Ms. Mitchell for approval of the Audiological Services Policy. Mr. Del Toro Vargas seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Ms. Heitz and Mr. Fogle explained that Policy Committee and Transition Committee have been working diligently regarding the concerns of Customer Satisfaction Surveys. The Committees met with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) to hold discussion on their revamping of their survey process. Mr. Fogle announced that he will be appointing an Ad Hoc Committee for the surveys to assemble a list of initiatives the Council would like included for this project.

- Mr. Hyde explained that Council members may provide input on what the Customer Satisfaction Survey process would look like including frequency, point in the case, and number of customers. This information would need to be put into a statement of work which will impact the cost and complexity of the project. Additional considerations include if a third party would be given access to customer information and data sharing. More information from the MRC has been requested including further details on methodology and scope.
- Members explained the Ad Hoc Committee would also include work to ensure the surveys are accessible for those that read or speak a different language, provide surveys in Braille, and that they are accessible for screen readers. Ms. Julia Barol informed members of an accessibility feature called "Translate Live" which provides translation to other languages and connects to Braille. Mr. Del Toro Vargas explained that the surveys should include questions about language access and that it would be helpful for OVR to provide phone calls to customers to ensure surveys are being received.
- Mr. Fogle explained the timeline for this project would begin in early 2025 at the earliest due to procurement process. Mr. Hyde explained there are more than 20 agreements being worked on with procurement at the moment. This process takes months and includes development of a statement of work, review of the legal department, posting, award, and purchase orders. Mr. Fogle explained the first step will be appointing members to an Ad Hoc Committee, setting a date to meet with OVR, and to start working on providing recommendations on the scope of work.

Social Media Committee: Michele Leahy, Chair

ACTION: Approval of updated PaRC Brochures targeting Businesses/Employers, and the general public

- Ms. Leahy reported the Social Media Committee meets the first Wednesday of each month at 9:30 AM. Engagement has increased, and the Committee continues to work with the digital media team that provides consistent social media posts. PaRC launched their LinkedIn and Instagram pages in October 2023, engagement has increase from 0 to 60. Encouraged members to share the PaRC's social media pages to increase followers and stressed the importance of receiving and sharing OVR employment success stories. Beginning in July, Ms. Joan Goodman will serve as Committee Chair and Ms. Tomasic as Committee Vice Chair. As of July, there will only be 2 members on the Committee which is the public face of PaRC. Encouraged members to join the Committee and provide input. Recent Committee work includes developing PaRC brochures for Veterans, businesses, and the general public. Committee would like to see the PaRC Newsletter shared with OVR

counselors and more involvement with OVR District Offices to disseminate this information and increase awareness. Encouraged more cross posting with stakeholders.

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski for approval of printing the PaRC brochures. Mr. Del Toro Vargas seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Mr. Del Toro Vargas stated that Ms. Leahy has done an incredible job leading the Social Media Committee in developing a social media presence and ensuring accessibility.

Transition Committee: Julia Barol, Chair

ACTION: Approval of Committee Goals for FY 2024-2025

- Mr. Del Toro Vargas explained disappointment about the Act 26 numbers for Philadelphia Pre Employment Transition Services and recommended Transition Committee add this topic to their goals. Ms. Barol agreed to look at having extensive conversation on Act 26 Reports as part of the Committee goals.

MOTION was made by Mr. Del Toro Vargas to approve the Transition Committee goals. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

Ad Hoc Committee - Hiram G. Andrews Center (HGAC): William Del Toro Vargas, Chair

- Mr. Del Toro Vargas reported that the Committee continues to receive updates from CTI at HGAC regarding successes, barriers, collaboration with school districts, and accessible curriculum.

Ad Hoc Committee - OVR Hearing Officers / Mediators: Andrew Pennington, Chair

- Mr. Pennington reported that the Committee continues to discuss the scope of an Impartial Hearing Officer / Mediator training. Office of Chief Counsel has confirmed discussion the development of training, standards, and requirements with the Committee. Committee has also continued to discuss formalizing PaRC's involvement in the process. Mr. Del Toro Vargas inquired if the State Board of VR is involved in these discussions. Mr. Pennington explained that the Committee is solely discussing PaRC's role in the process. The Committee was convened due to

several conflicts in regard to the individuals that were submitted to the Council. There are currently 3 active Impartial Hearing Officers.

OVR DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Ryan Hyde, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), Executive Director

BUSINESS SERVICES

Dana McKinney, Business Services Outreach Division (BSOD), Division Chief

- Ms. Dana McKinney reported that the statewide and local Business Services Teams work to develop positive long-lasting partnerships with businesses, Community Rehabilitation Providers, Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, schools, and many other organizations. Recently partnered with Ms. Barol to provide trainings to businesses. The recording of those trainings will be posted online. Business Services is fully staffed and has 7 specialists dedicated to making statewide connections and providing technical assistance to local OVR field staff. Currently in process of hiring Business Services Representatives for each District Office. Additional services include continuum for job seekers with disabilities, continuum of services for businesses, workplace to work, informational interviews, and mock interviews. They are working with Unemployment Compensation on help desk training program through InspiriTec which has helped 162 people referred to this program. Commonwealth Internship Program is currently working to have 30 interns placed throughout the state. MyWork is their student work-based learning experience program that is partnering with local communities, municipalities, and nonprofits to employ more than 1,000 students.
- Mr. Pennington inquired on the efforts regarding significant barriers to individuals gaining access to Customized Employment. Ms. McKinney reported they are working with new staff and Ms. Barol and will be able to provide more information on that.
- Ms. Sylenthia Dent inquired how a business would request information about OVR Business Services. Ms. McKinney reported that they could reach out to their local District Office. There are not Business Representative in all District Offices yet but there is a Business Services Supervisor in each office that handles partnerships, and a list is on the website, or they can reach her directly.
- Ms. Michelle Mitchell inquired if they have considered operating similarly to a temp agency connecting customers to various positions, customizable positions, and providing outreach to local District Offices. Ms. McKinney reported they are collecting employers across the state. Mr. Hyde reported that usually a business will inform OVR on what positions they are having trouble filling and then OVR will match customers in that field with the businesses.

- Ms. Lynn Heitz suggested that OVR hire blind mentors to work with new staff to provide a better training. Blindness is not included within the curriculum, counseling books, social work textbooks and there are some misconceptions and a lot of stigmas with employers about the abilities of blind individuals and their ability to hold down a full-time job. Ms. McKinney reported that they are partnering with an experienced Business Service Representative in their Pittsburgh Office along with BBVS staff to help support those Business Services Representatives and there is also a designated Business Services Representative Specialist that will be coordinating all training.
- Ms. Joan Goodman inquired what is being done at the High School level regarding the MyWork Program to provide connections. Ms. McKinney reported that counselors provide outreach in the schools and Business Services staff provides information about the MyWork program with High Schools in all District Offices.
- Mr. Del Toro Vargas inquired how OVR ensures they are in contact with diverse businesses, those that speak another language, and if there is a plan in place for this. Explained that members of the Hispanic community are going to want to develop a relationship person to person rather than through an interpreter and that the cultural aspect needs to be addressed. Ms. McKinney explained OVR ensures they are inclusive of all languages and disabilities, they meet with the public monthly, partner with Global Wordsmith that provides language interpreting services. They are working on updating outreach materials in multiple languages.
- Mr. Pennington inquired what large businesses OVR is working with, if those partnerships are being leveraged, and if there is a strategic plan to follow up and develop those relationships which could lead to potential for Customized Employment. Ms. McKinney explained they have partnerships with CVS, Amazon, and others and they do have a lot of individual community business partnerships. She has found that small businesses want to give back at the community level and are very interested in employing people with disabilities. These partnerships are being leveraged. They are hopeful that hiring Business Service Representatives to follow along with customers will continue to develop relationships and leverage their connections.
- Ms. Heitz explained that many years ago as an employee of Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS) her coworkers that were multilingual informed her that they were not allowed to use alternative languages because they were not being paid as an interpreter. Inquired why an individual that is multilingual is hired to address customers but is not allowed to use that skill.
- Mr. Ryan Hyde explained that he does not know if that is still true. OVR has collectively bargained staff that may not be permitted to perform duties outside of their job descriptions. This is determined at the level of the Office of Administration (OA) not OVR. OVR continues discussions with OA after having

previous discussion with Mr. Del Toro Vargas on this issue. The current administration recognizes that need and that things can be done differently. OVR has inquired multiple times with OA about a pay differential or other solutions.

- Mr. Hyde recognized Ms. Leahy and Ms. Paonessa for their work and advocacy over the years. Also recognized that Council members are doing a lot of work on their own time as this is a volunteer position.
- Mr. Hyde reported on the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Conference. RSA's new Commissioner Mr. Danté Allen talked about the hoops that customers must go through, the application process, focus on providing opportunities that create purposeful, meaningful, and fulfilling lives and careers for people with disabilities so they can realize their dreams, and not just focus on entry-level work. He also talked about increasing equity, raising expectations, and priorities of true partnerships, deeper engagement, showcasing success, assistive technology integration, Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration and what AI will mean for people with disabilities moving forward. Reported there is a focus on data collection, RSA provides data dashboards which are used to make decisions within the program. He encouraged using data to maximize funding, quality employment outcomes, and ensuring a return on investment. States were advised to ensure they are producing measurable skills gains and credential attainment leading to Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE). RSA stressed importance of VR Counselor focus to ensure they are qualified, properly trained, compensated, given opportunities for advancement and growth. Counselors should be in the community and also encouraged to look at ways to use technology to provide services and accommodations.
- Mr. Hyde explained that RSA reported there were 70,000 new applicants for services across the nation in 2023. \$300 million was returned through the allocation process and only \$91 million was redistributed. One of the reasons why so much money is being returned is that states were not able to provide enough Pre Employment Transition Services (PreETS). OVR does not have that problem in Pennsylvania. \$46 million was spent on PreETS in 2023 nationwide serving more than 280,000 students. OVR accounted for roughly 28,000 of those individuals which is 10 percent of total served in PreETS. Services provided in Pennsylvania for PreETS are plateauing due to funding and staff limitations.
- OVR will be partnering with Deloitte, Case Management System contractor, that is presenting in July a general information session for staff on AI. This will include what AI technology is available and how it may affect accommodations.
- The Federal Department of Human Services issued new guidance on nondiscrimination on the basis of disability in programs or activities receiving Federal financial assistance which is regulated under section 504 of the Rehab Act.

Members were encouraged to review summaries available online. Policy team will be doing a deeper dive into the document.

- OVR is working with RSA on the State Plan and will be providing language on exploring the possibility of adding a bachelors level position. Performance Indicators were negotiated with RSA and will be inserted into the State Plan.
- State Board motions that were approved for increasing the Financial Needs Test (FNT) to \$100,000 will expire June 30 because OVR is being flat funded. FNT and the college formula will be reverting back to prior policy. They will be asking the Board for a motion to continue the exemption of HGAC Services and for a motion to clarify the expected family contribution as that term has changed under FAFSA.
- CTI at HGAC had a 75 percent placement for students that graduated in 2023. Their Career Services Department has expanded due to higher placement rate.
- Mr. Hyde reported that Pennsylvania was flat funded and OVR will not receive the Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) increase of \$10 million. This will affect funds for additional service cost increases. OVR will have Federal carryover money remaining that is being used rapidly. Proposed Federal budget for 2025 also has VR flat funded again. OVR will be seeking reallocation that number will be known around September 2024. OVR is proposed to receive a \$787,000 increase in the State Budget which could potentially draw \$2.9 million in Federal funds. Due to flat funding expansion of some intergovernmental agreements with school districts and providers have been paused. Several projects have been paused at HGAC as well.
- Mr. Pennington inquired if all State Board motions will expire this year and what the exact number for the carryover would be. Mr. Hyde explained all Board motions will expire and they will ask the Board to renew HGAC services to keep classrooms full. The carryover number is not yet known but it will be between \$20 and \$50 million depending upon how much is spent over the summer.
- Ms. Heitz explained that the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) is only working on their training program under BBVS. BEP used to have over 100 vending or lunch stands across the Commonwealth and this is one of the biggest employment programs for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Understands there are staffing issues and inquired if they have the capacity to work on more than one project at a time. Mr. Hyde explained that many locations may never reopen due to employees teleworking, the cafeterias closing, and not enough people working in those buildings to make it financially viable for a blind licensee to operate. BEP has a new director, they lost their coordinator again, all agents have been changed over again so it is a complete rebuild under the new director. OVR aspires to do better but it has been a challenge due to staffing and a variety of reasons.
- Mr. Del Toro Vargas explained the Council will be holding meetings with State Legislators in late May and inquired how the Council may inform or educate Legislators about necessary funding for OVR to best serve Pennsylvanians and

their employment goals and if there is a number to advocate for given the flat funding. Mr. Hyde explained that OVR supports the Governor's budget as proposed. There is a \$787,000 increase being proposed within the State budget. The State Board, Council, and others may advocate for additional funds if they would like. OVR supports the Governor's budget, and they are appreciative of the attention he has given to people with disabilities. OVR has been flat funded at the national level, and they were told this is because other states are returning money and U.S. Congress determining that the VR program does not need more funding nationally. The Federal flat funding does not allow Pennsylvania to cover increased costs.

- Mr. Del Toro Vargas inquired if OVR has employees in each district focused on delivery of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) to meet the area of needs in communities and if OVR has DEI certified personnel on staff to focus on just DEI. Mr. Hyde explained that OVR has DEI included in job descriptions and employees perform specific tasks related to DEI. OVR provides robust in-service trainings which include information about different disability types, share experiences from diverse backgrounds, culture of different groups including the LGBTQA and ethnic backgrounds.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Ms. Michele Leahy explained she is speaking as a private citizen, not as a PaRC member, and stated that she doesn't think OVR is putting enough effort into the Benefits Counseling piece and Social Security benefits. There has been a lot of overpayments and a lot of misinformation. She also stated that as a business owner she explored becoming an OVR provider and understands the flat funding is going to make that more difficult. Reimbursement rates for providers specifically in the benefits planning arena is extremely low for the amount of time to deal with an overpayment of \$60,000 versus \$10,000 is a \$250 reimbursement. This can be up to 10 hours of work for a provider. There needs to be more focus on helping constituents truly understand how Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs), 401Ks, pensions, and all of those sorts of things are provided by employers are impacting Social Security recipients. Employers are getting Federal incentives and they are not understanding the long-term impact of how people with disabilities who rely on social services such as waivers and job coaching are not being addressed on the business end. As OVR is being more business savvy and developing relationships with businesses, they are not letting those employers know the pitfalls of Social Security, and really being able to counsel their constituents and participants with how employment impacts benefit.

- Mr. Fogle read Public Comment questions that were previously provided by Ms. Angela Mill, parent. Question 1. Does OVR mandate their customers to complete FASFA if they are attending college? If so, why? This is a concern for families who do not have income to report due to social security benefits. Question 2. If someone has services through OVR in PA but is accepted to college in another state - does the student still get service in PA or should they apply in the temporary state, they will attend college? Can they have two concurrent cases in two states? Mr. Hyde explained that yes, the FAFSA is mandatory for all customers attending college/post-secondary. The FAFSA is required because OVR is obligated to seek comparable benefits and financial aid through PELL and PHEA is a comparable benefit, especially if the family were low income, they would receive more aid from outside sources reducing OVR's burden. They would not have to apply to the state the school is in, OVR sponsors students out of state routinely. However, there are reasons where a "dual" case is appropriate/allowable if there are significant service coordination needs for attendant care or other support services where it might be appropriate. But if they are just "going to college" it is probably not necessary. They do have to fill out the FAFSA or OVR will not provide tuition assistance. The person's counselor/supervisor should be able to answer these and other related questions.
- Mr. William Del Toro Vargas stated that he is providing Public Comment as a member of his community and explained that he is very disappointed that in 2024 we are still having a discussion at the beginners' level about interpretation and translation. He provided concerns about having Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) translated. He explained that he is disappointed that there are language and cultural barriers and stated that other disability agencies such as Department of Human Services (DHS) and Pennsylvania Department of Education that ensure they have everything interpreted or translated in print and visit community members. Explained that it is a cultural barrier to have to use an interpreter when you have OVR counselors that speak a native language. He inquired if we need to go to the Governor or agencies to see action and that we are still having these conversations without action. He explained that Commonwealth Workforce Development Systems (CWDS), surveys, and Google translate are not fully accessible.
- Ms. Lynn Heitz provided Public Comment as president of the National Federation of the Blind Pennsylvania and explained that when she applied for Social Security all that she put down was that she was blind, and she received information in Braille. She explained that this doesn't happen at the state level and that the Braille printer has not been used since she left the Philadelphia District Office. She explained that there is an ability to target employment through the Civil Service Commission and believes that Business Services Representatives hired in BBVS

need to be blind, know what it is really like to walk the walk and talk the talk. She explained that you cannot teach that, you have to live it, you cannot put sleep shades on somebody, give them a cane for an hour and know what it's like to travel with a cane or dog to get to and from employment. She explained that the D in Diversity also stands for discrimination as there are rehabilitation counselors for the deaf and hard of hearing, OVR pays interpreters for these positions but when a blind person gets a job at BBVS they have to pay their reader out of pocket first, then wait months for reimbursement. She explained that blind individuals with BBVS can't get a driver to go to a customer's home to do rehabilitation, provide orientation or mobility services. She explained that there is a disconnect and that there was a lawsuit against the Commonwealth to allow blind individuals to have reader services on the job.

- Mr. Matthew Seeley, esq. inquired about the Board motions ending and if services for the Most Seriously Disabled would be ending. Mr. Hyde explained that the Order of Selection will not be changing and will remain open. Those Board motions are specifically related to FNT and college funding.
- Mr. Seeley, esq. commented that he would like for Mr. Hyde to consider all the other entities that are flat funded when considering how flat funding is actually a cut to funding, and that yearly his organization is flat funded. Mr. Hyde explained that he does understand.
- Ms. Sylenthia Dent explained that she is not providing Public Comment as a PaRC member but as a parent and that she is disappointed in the providers selections in Beaver County because her son has been waiting to be placed in his paid work experience since January and inquired if wait times for placement are still an ongoing issue why students cannot go to another county. Ms. McKinney will follow up directly with Ms. Dent regarding her question.

STAKEHOLDER UPDATES

Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) - Melissa Hawkins, Director

- Ms. Melissa Hawkins reported that the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) serves all 67 counties, are a staff of 5, provide advocacy for anybody that has any type of hearing loss and also provides information and refers those to appropriate agencies when needed. ODHH does not provide direct case management or duplicate OVR services but works alongside OVR all the time. ODHH oversees Pennsylvania's Act 57 Interpreter Law which requires interpreters to register with their office. ODHH has been given funding for the Support Service Providers (SSP) services which is a community service for individuals who are deaf blind.
- Ms. Heather Snyder reported that she is the owner of Step Up Services and a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing, having taught at the Nazareth School

District for 20 years and is now an Early Intervention Provider as well as a business owner. She can only hold the contract for SSP Services, they have 3 staff that have accessed different parts of the deaf blind community, they have held the contract since March 2023 and serve deaf blind customers in Pennsylvania. Their SSPs have provided 4827.75 hours of work. They just took their 1442nd request for services and currently serve 71 people with 38 SSPs who are trained by ODHH. She reported that she recently traveled 1300 miles visiting 20 deaf blind customers in different areas of the state. When working with customers they provide connections to OVR, inquire about their employment goals, provide connections with BBVS, and promote ODHH.

- Ms. Kadie Trauder informed attendees that she is deaf blind, has Usher Syndrome, and provided her background in Information Technology (IT) with a business degree. She explained that she previously worked in the Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living (LVCIL) as the Sign Language Program Coordinator for 3 years and was a stay-at-home mom for about 15 years. She worked with BBVS to reenter the workforce and requested to work from home because she didn't want to depend on transportation. She was hired at Step Up Services as an Administrative Assistant to perform outreach and data collection duties for the SSP program. Ms. Trauder explained that her vision has changed over the years and that she required accommodations and uses Zoom Text with a large 36 inch monitor allowing her to see her screen and work independently which is a really fulfilling feeling for her. Ms. Trauder stated that she appreciates the work she does, knowing that the deaf blind community is feeling empowered and independent. She thanked BBVS for providing the accommodations to successfully complete her work and Ms. Hawkins for providing the opportunity to join their team.
- Ms. Hawkins reported the SSP program requires a lot of collaboration between ODHH, Step Up, the deaf blind community, and their SSPs. LVCIL provides their training through Helen Keller National Center all around the state. There are 2 trainings scheduled in the Fall in Allentown and Pittsburgh which have a very large population of deaf blind individuals.
- Mr. Fogle inquired if the Direct Support Professional Crisis effects staffing needs of the SSP program. Ms. Hawkins explained that Direct Support Professionals is very different form SSPs which is providing community hours to help somebody who is blind with reading mail, going to the grocery store and is community based not attendant care. Ms. Snyder reported that they have seen a great need but are not in a crisis mode because they have flexible schedules, and the deaf blind community has been open minded to receive services when available. Trainings will continue to fill staffing where services are needed.

- Mr. Del Toro Vargas inquired if Step Up has collaborated with Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PATTAN) deaf blind project. Ms. Snyder reported that she is a mentor for the Intervener Program and that this program will somewhat feed into the SSP program when consumers are appropriate for SSP services. To receive these services, you have to be able to make an informed decision. Ms. Snyder has met with the Pittsburgh School for Blind Children, worked with consultants from PATTAN, does not refuse providing services but meets individually at IEP meetings for students at the Transition age. The age one can start receiving SSP services is 18. They can train the school staff to understand what a SSP is, how to make the transition from school, and how to support families. Ms. Snyder reported that her coworker is deaf herself and has become nested in the deaf communities in Philadelphia within churches and locations in neighborhoods to speak directly about services, make connections, and provide outreach. Mr. Del Toro Vargas agreed of the importance to be present in these communities in person to ensure people are informed about these services and recognized Step Up for their efforts.
- Ms. Hawkins reported that to receive SSP services there is not a requirement of any specific level of deafness or blindness. Some type of hearing loss and some type of vision loss is required. There is a lot of variances for SSP services, some SSPs know sign language, you do not have to be legally blind and legally deaf to receive services from Step Up.

Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) – Susan Tomasic, Chair

- Mr. Seeley, esq. inquired what number Step Up is looking for in regard to funding and what that funding would go toward. Ms. Snyder explained that staffing is needed as is working with their clients on a more one-to-one basis to then connect them to services.
- Mr. Seeley, esq. reported that the State Plan for Independent Living deals with all things disability in Pennsylvania and basically sets the course for more Federal funding for disability related services for the next 3 years. This process is currently ongoing. A draft of the Plan is available on the SILC Facebook page and will eventually be available on their website.
- Mr. Jeff Iseman reported that the Governor proposed funding increase for public transportation is \$283 million or \$1.4 billion for 5 years. SILC is accepting comments on the State Plan for Independent Living which will be voted on during their May 30th Board meeting. The Plan must then be approved by Independent Living Directors, OVR, and submitted to the Federal Government by June 30, 2024. Ms. Tomasic explained that everyone can access and leave comments about the State Plan.

Employment First Oversight Commission (EFOC) – Michele Leahy, member

- Ms. Leahy reported that the Employment First Oversight Commission is collecting a lot of data regarding the State Dashboard and working to ensure all data regarding employment is not duplicated. EFOC is promoting employment and gathering data to recommend services, funding, and promote CIE.

OVR REPORTS

Quarterly Progress Report 2020-2024 State Plan Goals Jim Whitonis, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist

- Mr. James Whitonis reviewed the current Goals and Priorities of the State Plan and provided information on what goals and priorities OVR considers to be achieved, not achieved, or partially achieved.

Altoona District Office

Andy Wagner, DA-BBVS

Craig Schield, DA-BVRS

- Mr. Andy Wagoner is the District Administrator for the BBVS Altoona District Office and provided an update on staffing. There is a Mobility Specialist position open and they continue outreach for staffing. They provided an offer for a Business Service Representative. Goals for their office of 33 successful employments was reached recently and include meteorology researcher, customer service, and teacher. Their Independent Living and Older Blind program successfully closed 173 individuals, Specialized Services successfully closed 8, Vision Rehabilitation Therapy successfully closed 204, and all agencies with their programs have exceeded their goals for the fiscal year. Ms. Helminski provided information about Service Dog Training available in Ohio and the Erie area.
- Mr. Craig Schield is the District Administrator for BVRS in Altoona District office and reported that one of their customers received an award during the PA Workforce Development Conference, provided an inspiring speech, and hopes to be able to share a video of the event. Their office has hired numerous staff and there are 4 vacant positions. Their district covers 5 counties including Blair County, Bedford County, Center County, Huntington County, and Fulton County and all of which have MyWork programs established to provide services for students. They are working in collaboration with BBVS on several large projects including the INVEST project providing CIE.

- Mr. Del Toro Vargas recommended members receive summary reports from the District Offices to provide input. Inquired if each office has their own individual goals based on barriers and needs of the communities. Requested being provided the data regarding these goals. Requested report from Citizen Advisory Committees (CACs). Mr. Hyde reported each office is provided statistical goals driven by closures and outcomes. Will follow up regarding request for data. Mr. Schield reported that CAC meeting information is provided to Mr. Whitonis and is happy to share or answer questions on those topics. Reported that each office sends success stories, annual reports, and quarterly reports to Central Office.
- Mr. Fogle reported there is a CAC Chair meeting scheduled for this summer.
- Ms. Leahy inquired if success stories from local offices need to be approved by OVR to share on PaRC social media and newsletters. Mr. Hyde confirmed that information needs to be reviewed and approved by OVR to be shared with the public.
- Mr. Del Toro Vargas inquired if information about programs being paused due to flat funding is being shared with the community, CACs, and those receiving services. Mr. Hyde explained that programs being pared back will not include this year's summer programs, those decisions will be made beginning in September and October. Information about flat funding is shared at all public meetings.

COUNCIL WORK

Conference Reports:

2024 PA Department of Education (PDE) Annual Conference – Jessica Keogh

- Ms. Jessica Keogh provided a slide presentation regarding the 2024 PDE Conference which included information on the sessions she attended that were most impactful as a special education teacher, advocate, and person with a disability. Topics during the sessions included parent methodology, addressing skill deficits, executive functioning and reading, navigating systems frameworks, fostering a sense of belonging, and amplifying student voices. Practical suggestions included allowing space for students to hold discussion about different happenings within the school or community, allowing students space to process their feelings and emotions, allowing students more involvement in their transition planning, and making activities more fun or engaging. Considerations for transition planning and policies should include how it might affect sense of belonging. Additional considerations included how to share conference information with all stakeholders, PaRC providing a 30 minute presentation on the work of the Council at the PDE Conference, having a PaRC resource at the Conference, outreach sessions, and sharing resources.

National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Council (NCSRC) / Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Spring 2024 Conference – Julia Barol, Michelle Mitchell, Andrew Pennington, William Del Toro Vargas

MOTION was made by Ms. Tomasic to table the reports from the NCSRC and CSAVR Conferences to be provided during the August Full Council meeting. Mr. Del Toro Vargas seconded the motion. All were in favor.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Mr. Jeff Iseman provided Public Comment regarding the Federal Legislation called the SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act which would raise the current asset limits from \$2,000 to \$10,000 for individuals and from \$3,000 to \$20,000 for married couples.
- Mr. Del Toro Vargas provided Public Comment as a member of the public that Individual Plan of Employment (IPE) should be translated into other languages or braille because people need to understand what they are signing and that this is an informed consent issue. People need to understand policies, requirements, and what information they are releasing to OVR. This is an issue with OVR and rarely sees this happening within the education system or within the Department of Human Services. Parents need to be considered as well in regard to Pre ETS. The parent is authorized to provide signature.
- Ms. Keogh provided Public Comment as a community member and agreed with Mr. Del Toro Vargas that the informed consent is provided, and we need to ensure educators are providing the services and need to be informed when requesting signatures.

ADJOURN

MOTION was made by Ms. Tomasic to adjourn. Ms. Twana Jones seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.