



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

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Full Council Quarterly Meeting August 13, 2024 APPROVED CORRECTED MINUTES

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

Christie Cyktor (P)	Sylenthia Dent (P)	
Joan Goodman (P)	Lynn Heitz (P)	Passle Helminski (P)
Twana Jones (NP)	Jessica Keogh (P)	Michele Leahy (P)
Michelle Mitchell (P)	William Paz De Melo (P)	Andrew Pennington (P)
Kara Donatucci Pham (NP)	Julianna Rodrigues (P)	Susan Tomasic (P)

Ex-Officio Member Present: Julia Barol, Pennsylvania Association of People Supporting Employment First (PA APSE)

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Present: Ryan Hyde, Chris Harbert, Denise Verchimak, James Whitonis, Cheryl Novak, Anna Griffiths, Dana McKinney, Drea Ranck, Dawn Sokol, Jill Moriconi, Susan Storm, Tammy Burke, Jim France, Chris Palmer, Douglas Rand, Chris Zakraysek, Kim Robinson, Melissa Wert-Thrush, Krista Sloan, Shanae Stallworth, Marci Katona, Jessica Krum-Lasko

Stakeholders Present: Melissa Hawkins, Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH), Matthew Seeley, Esq., Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), Natasha Fletcher, Pennsylvania Training Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), Robert Schramm, Office of Chief Counsel, PA Department of Labor & Industry, Jeff Iseman, Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), James Martini, PA Workforce Development Board, Hunter Steinitz, Pennsylvania Training Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), Hayley Penn, Pennsylvania Training Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN),

PaRC Support Personnel Present: Michelle Gerrick, Christopher Todd

Moderator of Zoom: Nichole Wade

CART: Tori Holland

Interpreters: Jill Buracker, Joshua Baugher, Ashley Shenk, Laura Schupp

Guests: Mary Lubowicki, George Palmer, Angel Torres

WELCOME & OPENING REMARKS: William De Paz Melo, Chair

- Members agreed to remove the Quarterly Progress Report on State Plan Goals from the agenda and add discussion of Ex-Officio members to the agenda.

MOTION was made by Ms. Sylenthia Dent to approve the past meeting minutes. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Susan Tomasic to approve today's agenda with amendments. Mr. Andrew Pennington seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Ms. Tomasic explained that it is typical for Ex-Officio members of a Council to sit at the table and be given an opportunity to speak like all other members. Ex-Officio members can provide recommendations and input but cannot vote.

MOTION was made by Ms. Tomasic to include Ex-Officio members at the table and in the Council's discussions. Ms. Michelle Mitchel seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Mr. William Paz De Melo explained that Ms. Julia Barol is not currently a member of the PaRC as there was an issue with the Governor's Office regarding nominations. This issue is being addressed by OVR. As Chair Mr. Paz De Melo explained he can appoint Ms. Barol as an Ex-Officio member. She may ask questions as any other member is allowed. Mr. Ryan Hyde explained that OVR received a letter from the Governor's Office a couple of weeks ago about Ms. Barol's reappointment and that she was removed. OVR has contacted their liaison with the Governor's Office several times and they have not been provided clarification on a path forward.

PaRC FISCAL REPORT (4th QUARTER)

MOTION was made by Ms. Michelle Mitchell to approve the Fiscal Report. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

CHAIR REPORT:

- Mr. Paz De Melo explained that Full Council meeting dates and format being proposed for Calendar Year 2025 are February 12 (virtual only), May 7 (hybrid), August 13 (hybrid), and November 12 (virtual only).

MOTION was made by Mr. Pennington to approve the Full Council meeting dates for 2025. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Mr. Paz De Melo provided a reminder regarding attendance and explained that members should make their best attempt to show up to Full Council meetings in person. Requests to attend virtually should be made through the Governance Committee.
- Mr. Paz De Melo informed members he is appointing an ad hoc committee to study the mission of both the Council and the Pennsylvania State Board of VR and to prepare a report on the feasibility of potentially combining the two. Ms. Mitchell will be co-chairing the ad hoc committee and any member interested in volunteering to serve on the committee should contact Ms. Mitchell directly. Mr. Ryan Hyde explained that the difference between the Board and the Council is very different in the law, the roles of the Board is policy-setting, and the roles of the Council is advisory. A presentation could be provided to explain the differences and Mr. Rob Schramm, Office of Chief Counsel may be available to hold discussion on this topic.
- Mr. Paz De Melo reported the ad hoc committee in addition to building a report will start educating the public about the differences between the Board and the Council through the Social Media Committee. The Council is Federally mandated, and the Board is mandated by State law. The PaRC Legislative Committee will also provide education to Legislators on the differences between the Board and Council. OVR and members of the Board are invited to participate in the ad hoc committee.

MOTION was made by Ms. Passle Helminski for the PaRC to hold a retreat with the Pennsylvania Board of VR. Ms. Lynn Heitz seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Mr. Paz De Melo inquired what Mr. Andrew Pennington's thoughts are regarding the feasibility of combining the Board and Council. Mr. Pennington explained there are 2 separate laws that dictate the positions of the Board and Council and is unsure how the PA Department of Labor & Industry (L&I) could be tied in with the PaRC as Secretary Walker is considered a member of the State Board and there are very clear duties stated in the State law. The duties are very straight forward and came about prior to the development of State Rehabilitation Councils (SRCs). Mr. Pennington suggested that the ad hoc committee ensure the laws are looked

at very aggressively and as Mr. Hyde suggested consult with Chief Counsel to discuss what this potentially looks like. Mr. Pennington explained these opinions are his own and not opinions of the Client Assistance Program (CAP). Mr. Pennington suggested there should be a hold on advocacy within the Legislature until there is a full understanding of what the position is.

- Members held discussion regarding holding Committee meetings as work sessions that would not require quorum, public notice ads, or allow for voting. Mr. Robert Schramm, Esq., Office of Chief Counsel stated that he is not the Council's attorney and explained that as a public body the PaRC is covered by the Pennsylvania Sunshine Act. Members are allowed to conduct fact-finding outside of public meetings, but deliberations and votes must take place within public meetings. Members shared concerns that deliberation may need to take place during Committee meetings in addition to fact-finding and that the public should be informed of and allowed to attend Committee meetings. Mr. Paz De Melo explained that the Executive Committee meetings would remain public. Members shared concerns that all members of Committees should be provided an opportunity to deliberate and provide input on the Committees' and Council decisions.

MOTION was made by Ms. Lynn Heitz to table the discussion regarding Committee meetings. Ms. Joan Goodman seconded the motion. The motion passed.

- Mr. Paz De Melo explained that the discussion has been tabled and will be sent to Governance Committee to further discuss.

NEW BUSINESS: Committee Chairs

CAREERLINK COMMITTEE: Andrew Pennington, Chair

MOTION was made by Ms. Tomasic to approve of the CareerLink Committee goals for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-2025. Ms. Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE: Susan Tomasic, Chair

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski to approve of the Governance Committee goals for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-2025. Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski for the approval of forwarding Ms. Cindy Duch's application, resume, and letters of reference to the Governor for consideration of appointment to the PaRC representing the category of Parent Training and Information (PEAL Center). Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski for the approval of forwarding Mr. Rob Wallington's application, resume, and letters of reference to the Governor for consideration of appointment to the PaRC representing the category of Business/Labor/Industry. Ms. Heitz seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski for the approval of forwarding Ms. Kait Gillis' application, resume, and letters of reference to the Governor for consideration of appointment to the PaRC representing the category of Workforce Development Board. Ms. Heitz seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Helminski for the approval of forwarding Ms. Mallory Irwin's application, resume, and letters of reference to the Governor for consideration of appointment to the PaRC representing the category of Young Adult. Ms. Dent seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Heitz for the approval of adding Commonwealth Technical Institute at Hiram G. Andrews Center Ad Hoc Committee to list of PaRC's Standing Committees. Ms. Keogh seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Ms. Tomasic explained the Governance Committee held discussion and is proposing that the Social Media Committee be merged with a new Committee with the working title of Action Committee. An Action Committee is meant to hold discussion on issues that do not fit into other Committees such as the Direct Care Worker Crisis, collaboration with Office of Long-Term Living, topics that impact workers with disabilities. Merging the Committees may allow for additional voices to be included within these discussions.

MOTION was made by Ms. Mitchell to create an Action Committee. Ms. Goodman seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Goodman to move the work of the Social Media Committee into the Action Committee. Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Goodman for the approval of creating mentoring program for new PaRC members. Ms. Keogh seconded the motion. All were in favor.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE: Passle Helminski, Chair

- Ms. Helminski reported that meeting with Legislators will be scheduled for early October and that all members are required to attend at least one meeting with Legislators per year.

MOTION was made by Mr. Pennington to approve the 8 action items listed on the agenda which include approval of revised State Position Paper to include Service Dog language, approval of removing HB342 from the State Position, approval of adding [HB1834](#), [SB1094](#), [HB2419](#) to the State Position Paper, approval of adding [HR7208](#) to the Federal Position Paper, approval of purchasing MYPLS Communication Connection Service for FY 24-25, approval of Letter to PA General Assembly regarding protection of Service Dogs, approval of Letter to Senator Casey regarding protection of Service Animals, approval of Letter to Commissioner Allen regarding the affect CIE has on Waiver Services and Medical Assistance, and approval of Letter in response to CSAVR Action Alert informing of potential budget cut to VR services at the Federal level. Ms. Heitz seconded the motion. Ms. Dent voted nay. The motion passed.

POLICY COMMITTEE: Lynn Heitz, Chair

MOTION was made by Ms. Mitchell to approve the Policy Committee goals for FY 2024-2025. Mr. Pennington seconded the motion. All were in favor.

SOCIAL MEDIA COMMITTEE: Susan Tomasic, Vice Chair

- Ms. Goodman recognized Ms. Michele Leahy for her work on the Social Media Committee which included the PaRC website, social media pages, and many other outreach efforts.

MOTION was made by Ms. Heitz to approve the Social Media Committee goals for FY 2024-2025. Ms. Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Tomasic to approve of the PaRC Veteran brochure. Ms. Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

TRANSITION COMMITTEE

- Mr. Pennington reported that the Transition Committee continues to hold discussion and receive updates from Bureau of Special Education (BSE), OVR Youth Ambassadors, Transition Navigators, Early Reach, Act 26 Reports, customer satisfaction surveys, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education and Transition Conferences.

AD HOC COMMITTEE - HIRAM G. ANDREWS CENTER (HGAC): William Paz De Melo, Chair

- Mr. Paz De Melo recognized Ms. Jill Moriconi and her team from the Commonwealth Technical Institute at Hiram G Andrews Center (CTI at HGAC) for all the wonderful work they are doing.

OVR DIRECTOR'S REPORT

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

- Mr. Ryan Hyde shared that PA State Board of VR member Mr. Joseph Drenth passed away unexpectedly last week, asked attendees hold a moment of silence in recognition of his work and to keep him and his family in everyone's thoughts and prayers.
- Mr. Hyde provided report on internship programs, My Work program, CTI at HGAC events, Transition Conference presentations, and the Pathways to Partnership grant activity.
- Mr. Hyde reported that it is likely there will be flat funding for OVR for Fiscal Year 2025. OVR met with teams from Senator Robert Casey and Senator John Fetterman legislative offices who shared concerns regarding funding for the VR programs and last year's enactment of the Fiscal Responsibility Act which prevents the Federal government from growing more than 1 percent annually. Programs that have a built in increase such as OVR's that were to receive an inflationary increase have become a target for keeping the budget stable at 1 percent growth. OVR is experiencing significant cost increases due to number of customers that are applying, students' services, escalated personnel cost, shared services increase, and IT costs. Most of the carryover from the past Fiscal Year will be obligated. OVR continues to provide advocacy to Senator's Offices and share implications of

another year of flat funding. The Federal budget will likely be delayed and result in a continuing resolution. It is extremely challenging for OVR to plan for Calendar Year 2025 without knowing what the budget will be. OVR has looked at several reductions to keep a similar number of people being served. OVR issued new guidance for Pre ETS to continue serving the same number of students but changing the length of programs and amount of reimbursements.

- Members provided recommendations regarding the funding for transition services for students under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), providing better guidance and collaboration with the Bureau of Special Education (BSE) on determining how to receive additional supports for OVR.
- OVR lost an increase of \$13 million for the past Fiscal Year and may lose an estimated \$20 million in less than a 12-month period. OVR continues in advocacy efforts, allowed the college policy and Financial Needs Test (FNT) policy to revert back, reviewing office space allocations, paused capital improvement projects at CTI at HGAC, paused the replication of the School District of Lancaster program, and will be holding discussion with the State Board of VR regarding the Order of Selection.
- Members provided recommendations regarding advocacy efforts for provider rates through the Office of Long Term Living (OLTL), potential for combined or braided funding for services through OLTL or Office of Developmental Programs (ODP), providing education to customers and students about OLTL and ODP, collaboration and outreach with OLTL and ODP, and keeping counselors well informed about flat funding. OVR will follow up regarding member recommendations and may be need advocacy for increases to the State budget. OVR will follow up with talking points and those amounts to the Council. Members suggested a written statement be provided to the Council and public regarding the impacts flat funding may have on services.
- Mr. Hyde reported that member suggestions regarding the Customer Satisfaction Surveys were recently discussed in meetings with Deloitte, OIT, and Workforce Development. They have begun introductory conversations on potential of using a shared system for ability to conduct text-based surveys, QR code based surveys, and other options which are all in the exploratory phase. Conversations also involved the Office of Administration's Enterprise system.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Ms. Michele Leahy provided Public Comment and explained that Medical Assistance for Workers with Disabilities (MAWD) does not assist people that have been working and not receiving waivers. They are receiving retirement funding and never needed those services and have become eligible for Waivers. As soon as

they leave employment, their retirement savings become unveiled. Therefore, they are getting kicked out of their Waiver programs, they are getting kicked out of their services, and they are getting kicked out of their housing. As soon you leave a job, you are no longer eligible for Waivers or any of those services. So, there is no true counseling going on for those leaving employment on maintaining Waiver services in regard to there is not proper medical in regard to MAWD. Ms. Leahy explained that people that are between 40 and 59 that are her clients that are becoming disqualified from benefits due to excess resources through employment may not have received benefits counseling and suggested that this needs to change.

- Ms. Lynn Heitz provided Public Comment and thanked Mr. Hyde for everything he is doing. Ms. Heitz explained that this is going to be a really difficult time, and she wants to let him know that he does have her support.
- Mr. Paz De Melo provided Public Comment and explained that he wanted to echo Ms. Heitz, that Mr. Hyde does have the Council's support or at least his support and support of his community. Mr. Paz Del Melo explained that even though OVR is flat funded, we will find a way to make sure we provide more access to services and support for diverse communities. Mr. Paz De Melo thanked Mr. Hyde on behalf of his organization for presenting at the Transition Conference. Even though people were not in the room, having that information readily available is extremely important. One of the things that he learned, it was the first time they had the Deputy Secretaries and Directors in one room, and they are hoping to grow that next year.
- Ms. Sylenthia Dent inquired about informing students of the College Policy. Mr. Hyde explained that all students should have received a letter informing them of the reasoning for changes to the formula that would be reverting. This was sent by all District Offices to their customers. The maximum is \$14,122 depending upon if you are a Social Security recipient and there are multiple formulas depending on where in the education process students are and if they are Social Security recipients which is all outlined in the College Policy.

OVR REPORTS

Financial Needs Test Policy

- Ms. Cheryl Novak reported that the Financial Needs Test (FNT) policy had increased the income allowance to \$200,000 and now that those Board motions have expired the policy workgroup is reconvened to review and make minor tweaks to the policy which is being reviewed by OVR Executive Team and legal team. Public Comment will be open starting August 30, 2024, to September 20, 2024, and public meetings will be held on September 11, 2024. Draft of the policy

will be shared with the PaRC following Public Comment and presented for a vote during the November Full Council meeting. Changes included clarifying Waiver language and requirements. Mr. Hyde explained that CTI at HGAC and Pre ETS will be exempt from FNT under the policy as OVR does not want to create any unnecessary barriers for students to participate. Costs will remain the same regardless of the number of students enrolled at CTI.

District Office Report

- Ms. Shanae Stallworth is the District Administrator for the Norristown District Office and reported that they have hired 13 new employees since December 2023, 10 of them are VR Counselors, 2 are Early Reach Counselors, and 1 is Business Services Representative. There are currently 32 VR Counselors with 10 vacancies for the position. Their previous successful rehabilitation goal was 470 and they achieved 481. Counselors are working 5 to 20 hours of overtime a week to fill in for the overtime caseloads for vacancies. Ms. Mary Berry-Shields is a strong advocate who has supported the Norristown Community Advisory Committee (CAC) really well and they are looking for someone to fill that Chair position. During their next Board meeting they will be discussing the MY Work program in the Delaware County area that collaborated with the Youth Advocacy Program.
- Ms. Natasha Fletcher is the Youth Engagement Specialist for the Eastern Region of the Commonwealth for the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) and reported that the flat funding has significant implications for youth with disabilities particularly in education and support services. The Youth Consumer Advisory Committee (Youth CAC) is crucial as it aims to integrate youth perspective into discussion for OVR and consists of young self-advocates that are passionate and knowledgeable about the OVR system. The Youth CAC engages with the community, works to raise awareness of funding allocation, can monitor effects of flat funding, and play a crucial role to ensure the need of youth with disabilities are prioritized and addressed.
- Mr. Paz De Melo provided recommendations for PaTTAN including continuing education for Special Education liaisons and other positions, extensive training for Transition Services under the IDEA, providing appropriate tools for Special Education Professionals, ensuring school districts are providing services, and engagement with the Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs).

STAKEHOLDER UPDATES

Client Assistance Program (CAP)

- Mr. Andrew Pennington reported that the PA Client Assistance Program (CAP) continues to take individual cases and that caseloads are at a high level. Recognized Mr. Hyde regarding Waiver language included in the memos for the adjustment in terms of college funding. He also appreciates the work of the District Offices working with CAP regarding certain clients that may be drastically impacted.

Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH)

- Ms. Melissa Hawkins is the Director of the PA Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) reported that there has been a lot of movement in their office regarding the modernization of Act 57 which is currently [PA Senate Bill 1274](#) which would require all interpreters to be registered with ODHH defining them as a Qualified Interpreter. The Support Service Provider (SSP) program has an average of 500 community hours a month for individuals who are Deafblind, and trainings are scheduled for October 5, 2024, and November 2, 2024. A webinar is scheduled for August 20, 2024, for the SSP program. The Advisory Council for Deaf and Hard of Hearing is scheduled to meet on September 13, 2024.

Statewide Independent Living Council (PA SILC)

- Ms. Susan Tomasic reported that Statewide Independent Living Council (PA SILC) new State Plan on Independent Living was committed at the end of June 2024. They are awaiting final approval from Administration for Community Living (ACL). Their new website has been launched and can be visited at <https://pasilc.org/>.

COUNCIL WORK

2022-2023 Annual Report update

MOTION was made by Ms. Susan Tomasic for approval of the Covers for the PaRC Annual Report. Mr. Andrew Pennington seconded the motion. All were in favor.

Conference Reports: 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 Paz De Melo

- Members reported that the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) is going to begin partnering with the Association of People Supporting

Employment First (APSE) and will receive a presentation regularly from the Executive Director during the NCSRC Spring Conferences. NCSRC plans a deep dive on SRC related legislation and will receive updates from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) their national initiatives over the next 2 years. The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) laid out a new path for VR agencies and how to prepare for flat funding. The next era employment policy is based around services and strategic partnerships for win-win outcomes. An emphasis on Rapid and Meaningful Engagement provided win-win scenarios, using different forms of communication such as text messaging, mail, and email. They also laid out strategies to engage youth and engage within 5 days of meeting with a counselor. CSAVR discussed 3 tiers of potential funding for VR programs including braiding, sequencing, and blending. Pre-employment Transition Services unique music therapy model to engage students and youth on the Autism spectrum utilizes music therapy to begin process of exploring employment, job goals, and resumes. Advancing impact for VR with Federal partners came from representative from Social Security Administration and covered reimbursable funds, Pre ETS, and the flat funding issue.

Other

- Ms. Tomasic recommended that Ms. Barol reapply for membership. Ms. Barol provided permission to reuse her previous application and will send an updated resume. Mr. Paz De Melo explained that if needed they can expedite the process and hold a Special Meeting if necessary.
- Ms. Heitz inquired about the ad hoc Committee to address Customer Satisfaction Surveys. Mr. Paz De Melo recommended that the Policy Committee and the Transition Committee collaborate to hold meetings to develop goals and recommendations for the survey process and response rates. All Committee meetings are open to all Council members, and they may provide input on this issue. Office of Administration and Enterprise should be invited to participate in these meetings as well.
- Ms. Heitz inquired about review of the Order of Selection policy. Ms. Mitchell explained the policy will be presented to the State Board to open discussion. Mr. Paz De Melo explained that he is required to provide report to the State Board and that Council members are welcome to provide Public Comment, submit a letter, or provide input multiple ways to the State Board. Mr. Pennington explained this process is in its infancy and nothing has been determined. Mr. Paz De Melo and Mr. Pennington encouraged members to join the State Board meeting as an individual to understand the discussion as the Order of Selection process has not yet begun and discussion is needed so the process is not rushed as it may have

been during prior years. This is more notice than what was previously provided regarding the Order of Selection and shows the transparency of OVR and Mr. Hyde.

- Mr. Paz De Melo requested that PaRC begins inviting the CAC Chairs to attend Council meetings as guests and to have them participate in Council meetings. The next Full Council meeting is virtual only via Zoom, scheduled for Wednesday, November 13, 2024.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Ms. Sylenthia Dent inquired if a college student relocating to another State must provide a release of information and inquired which State should provide funding. Mr. Hyde explained that OVR would require a release of information as another State agency is a separate entity. Funding would depend upon which State the student is maintaining residence and the timing of that process.
- Mr. Jeff Iseman inquired if transportation resources such as vehicle modification limits or transportation training will be impacted by the Federal funding situation. Mr. Hyde explained that those services are generally dictated by the FNT.

ADJOURN

MOTION was made by Ms. Passle Helminski to adjourn. Ms. Sylenthia Dent seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.