



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

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Full Council Quarterly Meeting November 13, 2024 APPROVED MINUTES

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

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

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Present: Ryan Hyde, Chris Harbert, Denise Verchimak, James Whitonis, Cheryl Novak, Audrey O'Connor, Gail Steck, Denise Verchimak, Stacey Collins, Melissa Wert-Thrush, Marie Martini, Chelsea Brooks, Bridget Frascella, Bret Glavey, Chris Palmer, Hillary Hubbell, Ralph Roach, Tammy Burke, Jim France, Douglas Rand, Jessica Crum-Lasko, Dana McKinney, Kathleen Brown, Susan Storm

Stakeholders Present: Melissa Hawkins, Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH), Steve Pennington Esq., Client Assistance Program (CAP), Sherri Rodgers, Pittsburgh Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), Cathy Long, Harrisburg Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), Angel Torres, Reading Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), Jeff Iseman, Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), Tom Burgunder, Pittsburgh Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), Hayley Penn, Pennsylvania Training Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), Dale Verchick, Disability Rights of Pennsylvania, Robert Schramm Esq., Office of Chief Counsel, PA Department of Labor & Industry, Deborah Schwartz Esq., Office of Chief Counsel, PA Department of Labor & Industry, Mary Dougherty, Workforce Development Board, Matthew Seeley, Esq., Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)

PaRC Support Personnel Present: Michelle Gerrick, Christopher Todd

Moderator of Zoom: Nichole Wade

CART:

Interpreters: Ashley Shenk, Laura Schupp

Guests: Meg Van Fossan

WELCOME & OPENING REMARKS: William De Paz Melo, Chair

- Mr. William Paz De Melo asked that attendees hold a moment of silence to honor the memory of Mr. Paul Fogle, former PaRC member and Chair. OVR staff, PaRC members, stakeholders, and attendees shared their experiences and memories of Mr. Fogle honoring his tremendous advocacy work for disability rights.
- Mr. Paz De Melo announced that Ms. Julia Barol has been reinstated to the PaRC and expressed gratitude for everyone's efforts in resolving this difficulty.

MOTION was made by Mr. Andrew Pennington to remove the agenda item regarding Ms. Barol's application for membership. Ms. Michelle Mitchell seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Members held discussion on whether to remove the agenda item to hold an election for Member-at-Large due to Ms. Barol's reinstatement. Members explained that Ms. Barol was elected by the Council to the position of Member-at-Large in May 2024 and would currently be serving that position were it not for being incorrectly removed from the Council due to circumstances beyond her control. It was suggested to hold an election with those previously nominated with the addition of Ms. Barol as a nominee. Ms. Julianna Rodrigues removed her nomination for the position.

MOTION was made by Ms. Sylenthia Dent-Siebenlist to remove the election for Member-at-Large from the agenda. Ms. Julianna Rodrigues seconded the motion. 6 members voted to remove the election from the agenda. 5 members voted to keep the election on the agenda. There was 1 abstention. The motion passed and the election was removed from the agenda.

- Members confirmed that Ms. Barol is fully reinstated to all her roles on the PaRC that were previously held. Mr. Paz De Melo requested that members share any questions they may have regarding Ms. Barol's roles with PaRC Governance Committee Chair and within Committee discussion.
- Ms. Passle Helminski explained that OVR recently inquired about tabling the action item for approval of a letter regarding VR Funding / OVR flat funding as there is interest in a collaborative advocacy effort with other states and their SRCs on this topic.

MOTION was made by Ms. Joan Goodman to remove the approval of letter to Governor regarding importance of VR funding / OVR flat funding from the agenda. Ms. Lynn Heitz seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Julia Barol to add to the agenda approval of the Order of Selection amendments to the State Plan. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Lynn Heitz for approval of the meeting agenda as amended. Ms. Twana Jones seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Mr. Andrew Pennington requested that the past meeting minutes be corrected, and a vote of nay be removed regarding the tabling of a motion. Mr. William Paz De Melo explained that this item may have been recorded in error and requested PaRC personnel make this change to the past meeting minutes.

MOTION was made by Ms. Julia Barol for approval of the August 13, 2024, meeting minutes with changes. Ms. Susan Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.

PaRC FISCAL REPORT (1st QUARTER): Michelle Mitchell, Vice Chair

MOTION was made by Ms. Julianna Rodrigues for approval of 1st quarter Fiscal Report. Ms. Christie Cyktor seconded the motion. All were in favor.

CHAIR REPORT – William Paz De Melo

Update on Council membership

2023-2024 Annual Report Update – Michelle Mitchell, Vice Chair / Julia Barol, Ex Officio

- Members explained that with the many upcoming changes to both State and Federal administrations it will be important to educate Legislators about Vocational Rehabilitation and the employment of people with disabilities. Mr. Ryan Hyde explained that PaRC members have continued to be strong advocates with Legislators, that education process will be important with significant changes in leadership, and that there will need to be a focus on core priorities such as ensuring the VR program is funded appropriately. OVR recently met with leadership for the 5 biggest VR programs in the nation, and those states are also interested in collaborating with their State Rehabilitation Councils (SRCs) on a

letter regarding VR funding. A draft letter will be shared with the Council in the coming weeks upon its completion.

- A draft of the 2023-2024 PaRC Annual Report was briefly reviewed by attendees. This document will be shared with Full Council via email to provide members an opportunity to share feedback and/or corrections and review its content more closely.

NEW BUSINESS

ACTION / SOCIAL MEDIA COMMITTEE: Joan Myers Goodman, Chair

- The next Action / Social Media Committee meeting is scheduled for December 4, 2024.

MOTION was made by Ms. Michelle Mitchell for the approval of Committee Goals for FY 2024-2025. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

CAREERLINK COMMITTEE: Andrew Pennington, Chair

- The next CareerLink / WIOA Committee meeting is scheduled for November 20, 2024.

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE: Susan Tomasic, Chair

- Mr. Paz De Melo thanked staff from the Commonwealth Technical Institute at Hiram G Andrews Center (CTI at HGAC) for their continued collaboration with the Council. Ms. Tomasic explained the PaRC Transition/Education Committee already provides oversight of programs similar to CTI at HGAC and merging the 2 Committees oversight will help simplify Council work by requiring 1 less Committee.
- The next Committee meeting is scheduled for November 21, 2024.

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

MOTION was made by Mr. Andrew Pennington for approval of forwarding Ms. Kadie Trauger's application, resume, and letters of reference to the Governor for consideration of appointment to the PaRC representing the category of

Sensory Disabilities. Ms. Joan Myers Goodman seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Barol for approval of merging CTI at HGAC Committee with the Transition/Education Committee. Ms. Michelle Mitchell seconded the motion. All were in favor.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE: Passle Helminski, Chair

- Ms. Passle Helminski reported the next Committee meeting is scheduled for December 5, 2024. PaRC members held 14 meetings with Legislators and/or their staff in early October. Talking points included supported Legislation and language from State and Federal Position Papers, OVR flat funding and the importance of VR funding, Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) and Inclusion, the Direct Care Worker Crisis, increased access to transportation, recommendations from the Employment First Oversight Commission Annual Report, Service Dog laws, and Schedule A. During the meetings members received feedback and suggestions including advocacy efforts for VR funding and holding both in person and virtual follow up meetings with Legislative staff and the Chairs of State Senate and House Human Services Committees regarding the Direct Care Workers Crisis. Ms. Helminski stressed the importance of meeting in person and suggested including the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and the State Board on meetings with Legislators. Mr. Paz De Melo encouraged members to attend meetings with Legislators, meeting with local Legislators, and providing education about OVR.

POLICY COMMITTEE: Lynn Heitz, Chair

MOTION was made by Ms. Joan Myers Goodman for approval of goal and objectives to increase Customer engagement and ensure Customer Satisfaction Surveys are fully accessible. Ms. Michelle Mitchell seconded the motion. All were in favor.

- Members, OVR, and OCC expressed concerns with the action item for approval of Bender Consulting research project, with a budget not to exceed \$5,000, to identify 3 entities capable of conducting quality OVR Customer Satisfaction Surveys, focusing on enhancing customer engagement and ensuring full accessibility of the surveys. After further discussion members agreed to amend the action item and remove any mention of identifying vendors because of the Commonwealth procurement process. Members stressed the importance of the

surveys being fully accessible and improving customer engagement. Members agreed to amend the action item.

MOTION was made by Ms. Michelle Mitchell for approval of Bender Consulting project with a budget not to exceed \$4,000 to develop a Statement of Work for OVR Customer Satisfaction Surveys focusing on improving customer engagement and survey accessibility. Ms. Joan Myers Goodman seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Julia Barol to accept the amendments to the VR Portion of the Combined State Plan reinstating the Order of Selection (OOS). Ms. Sylenthia Dent-Siebenlist seconded the motion. All were in favor.

TRANSITION COMMITTEE:

- Ms. Julia Barol was reinstated as Chair of the PaRC Transition/Education Committee. Committee members plan to represent PaRC at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) Conference scheduled for February 2025 in Hershey. The Council has applied for an exhibitor table for the event. The next Committee meeting is scheduled for December 3, 2024.
- Mr. Paz De Melo requested that members share any questions they may have regarding Ms. Barol's role as Committee Chair with the PaRC Governance Committee Chair and within Committee discussion.

AD HOC COMMITTEE - OVR HEARING OFFICERS / MEDIATORS: Andrew Pennington, Chair

- Mr. Andrew Pennington explained the Committee in collaboration with the Office of Chief Counsel (OCC) and OVR is working to implement a 90-day timeline to assess guidance to ensure it accurately reflects roles and responsibilities as established during previous Committee meetings with OVR and OCC to present final written guidance to PaRC Executive Committee and Full Council for review and approval. Members agreed that a vote for the Ad hoc Committee goal and timeline are not required.

AD HOC COMMITTEE TO STUDY ROLES OF PaRC & STATE BOARD - Michelle Mitchell & Lynn Heitz, Co-Chairs

- Ms. Mitchell reported that the Ad Hoc Committee has met once to divide work that needs to be completed in preparation for the December 10th Committee meeting to compare notes.

OVR DIRECTOR'S REPORT - Ryan Hyde, Executive Director, OVR

- Mr. Ryan Hyde reported on what many other states are doing in regard to monitoring their budgets due to flat funding and exploring similar measures Pennsylvania is taking regarding reinstatement of the Order of Selection (OOS). Mr. Hyde provided report on reallocation, funding status, Pre Employment Transition Services (Pre ETS), cost containment strategies, close out of the 2019 Monitoring Report, outreach efforts and events, Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Conference, My Work Summer Programs, Career and Transition Fair, Commonwealth Technical Institute at Hiram G Andrews Center (CTI at HGAC), staffing, College Policy, Financial Needs Test (FNT) Policy, advocacy efforts, Summer Academies, Pathways to Partnership Grant and Project InVEST, staff trainings, VR dashboard quarterly data, and concerns regarding funding and the Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA).
- Mr. Andrew Pennington inquired about the My Work Program. Mr. Hyde explained that the program will continue, and the length of the experience may be limited to curb costs. Pre ETS is one of OVR's most expensive services. To address the funding issue, OVR may shorten the length of experience while serving the same number of students as last year.
- Ms. Heitz shared that she was inspired by the stories from young adults that presented during the Pennsylvania National Federation of Blind Conference about their work program experiences and determination to be independent and succeed. Mr. Hyde shared that OVR works to educate employers that are unfamiliar with working with people with disabilities and assures them that they are provided an opportunity to learn, ensures their safety, and once trained will be able to work independently.
- Mr. Paz De Melo inquired if On-the-Job Training (OJT) will be affected by funding cuts. Mr. Hyde explained that the OJT program has been reduced from 180 days to 90 days and will most likely remain at that level.
- Mr. Paz De Melo requested an update on collaboration with the Bureau of Special Education (BSE) and continued conversation regarding their contributing funds to Pre ETS. Mr. Hyde reported that OVR continues to work with BSE and PaTTAN regularly. Concerning Transition funding, BSE is responsible for what is included within the Individual Education Plan (IEP), but additional funds will not be passed on to OVR. Collaborative efforts include the Pathways to Partnership grant,

Centers for Independent Living, Transition Services, and Employment First recommendations.

- Members inquired about funding and services for other states with large VR programs. Mr. Hyde reported that Florida is also pursuing the OOS. Pennsylvania is serving 13,000 students receiving Pre ETS and has approximately 35,000 total VR participants. California is just under 70,000 participants, Texas is at 54,000, Ohio is at 22,000, and Florida is at 33,000. Members explained that it was important to note that Pennsylvania OVR serves a lot of people in comparison to the top 6 states with larger budgets.

OVR REPORTS

Update on Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) 2024-2028 State Plan amendments – Order of Selection addendum: Jim Whitonis, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist

- Mr. James Whitonis reported that following today's PaRC approval of the State Plan amendments the State Board will be asked to review and approve in December followed by submission for review and approval to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA).

Financial Needs Test Policy update: Audrey O'Connor, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist

- Ms. Audrey O'Connor reported that following the September Public Comment period OVR decided to push back the timeline for the Financial Needs Test (FNT) policy draft. They have incorporated feedback based on comments received and a second Public Comment period has been scheduled. Comments may be submitted until November 22, 2024, and public meetings are scheduled for November 18, 2024. Mr. Steve Pennington, Esq. shared concerns that language regarding the availability of waivers for college students needs to be included within the FNT policy language. Members agreed and shared concerns regarding accessibility, accessible language, and informing customers about the availability of multiple waivers.

Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRs) New Castle District Office: Gail Steck, District Administrator

- Ms. Gail Steck provided updates regarding Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRs) New Castle District Office staffing, caseloads, Citizens Advisory

Committee (CAC), Project SEARCH services, and shared an employment success story.

OVer and Above – An Employee Recognition Program – Chris Harbert, Administrative Officer

- Mr. Chris Harbert provided background about the employee recognition program and explained the only cost in addition to the award itself is a catered lunch for the award recipients during the ceremony. Ms. Lynn Heitz shared that she feels this is a phenomenal idea to recognize the important work staff are doing.

STAKEHOLDER UPDATES

Client Assistance Program - Steve Pennington, Esq., CEO / Andrew Pennington, Deputy Director

- Mr. Steve Pennington, Esq. explained that the Client Assistance Program (CAP) is federally designated for people with disabilities that are receiving services from OVR, receiving OVR related services from community providers, and consumers of services from Centers for Independent Living (CILs). Mr. Pennington offered to schedule a time for new PaRC members to be presented with information about CAP. Mr. Pennington inquired about OVR policies being published on their website. Mr. Hyde explained that the website was recently updated, and policies are being formatted to be published on the new website in early 2025. Mr. Pennington suggested clarification on CFR 361.17 regarding PaRC member applicant recommendations not being made to the Board which are submitted to the Governor. Mr. Paz De Melo suggested Mr. Pennington also provide PaRC members with historical information regarding the State Board and Council.

Office for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing - Melissa Hawkins, Director

- Ms. Melissa Hawkins reported that they provided interpreting and accessibility for everyone in the Commonwealth for deaf and hard of hearing during the recent election. Ms. Hawkins provided updates regarding the Support Service Provider (SSP) program, outreach efforts, legislative amendments, and Advisory Council for Deaf and Hard of Hearing which meets on December 6, 2024. The SSP program is funded by the General Government Operation (GGO) funds.

Statewide Independent Living Council – Susan Tomasic, Chair

- Ms. Susan Tomasic invited members to attend the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) quarterly meeting scheduled for November 14, 2024. SILC State Plan was approved and went into effect on October 1, 2024. Projects associated with the new plan include in-person Independent Living Conference and revitalizing the Statewide Advocacy Group project.

COUNCIL DISCUSSION

- Information will be forthcoming regarding Mr. Paul Fogle's funeral visitation service. Condolences were shared from the Council and a tree is being planted in Mr. Fogle's honor.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Mr. Tom Burgundy provided his introduction as Co-Chair of the Pittsburgh CAC along with Ms. Sherri Rodgers.
- Ms. Passle Helminski provided her introduction as Chair of the Erie CAC.
- Mr. William Paz De Melo provided public comment and shared concerns regarding accessibility within VR systems for surveys and other documents that should be translated. He hopes to work with OVR and the State Board to develop a plan of action to be implemented to ensure the Customer Satisfaction Surveys are accessible to receive feedback from the community members serve.
- Ms. Michelle Mitchell provided public comment sharing the great importance of receiving customer feedback.

ADJOURN

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