



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

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Full Council Quarterly Meeting August 13, 2025, from 10:00 AM to 3:30 PM

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

Julia Barol (P)	Christie Cyktor (P)	Sylenthia Dent-Siebenlist (P)
Cindy Duch (P)	Kait Gillis (P)	Joan Myers Goodman (P)
Lynn Heitz (P)	Passle Helminski (P)	Mallory Irwin (NP)
Twana Jones (P)	Michelle Mitchell (P)	Andrew Pennington (P)
Dorian Rhodes (P)	Julianna Rodrigues (P)	Susan Tomasic (P)
Rob Wallington (P)		

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Present: Ryan Hyde, Chris Harbert, Douglas Rand, Krista Sloan, Chris Palmer, Marci Katona, Cheryl Novak, Craig Schield, Dawn Sokol, Tammy Burke, Audrey O'Connor, Melissa Wert-Thrush, Susan Storm, Kim Robinson, Denise Verchimak, Ralph Roach, Dana McKinney, Chris Cowan, Kathleen Brown, James Whitonis

Stakeholders Present: Rob Schramm, Esq., Office of Chief Counsel, PA Department of Labor & Industry, Angel Torres, Reading Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), Sherri Rodgers, Pittsburg Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS) Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), Eric Orr, Center for Independent Living Opportunities, Linda Carmona-Bell, Norristown Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), James Martini, Pennsylvania Workforce Development Board, Jaritza Nguyen, Center for Independent Living Opportunities, Matt Seeley, Esq., Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), Brian D'Amico, Reading Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), Dr. Carole Clancy, Bureau of Special Education (BSE), Mary Dougherty, PA Department of Labor & Industry

PaRC Support Personnel Present: Michelle Gerrick, Christopher Todd

Moderator of Zoom: Nichole Wade

CART (CAPTIONER): Abby Estes

Interpreters: Jessica Sassaman, Ashley Shenk, Laura Schupp, Josh Baugher

Guests Present: Everett Deibler, Edna Niceforo, Linda Rodrigues

WELCOME & OPENING REMARKS: Michelle Mitchell, Chair

- Ms. Lynn Heitz read the PaRC Mission statement and Ms. Nichole Wade conducted roll call. A quorum was confirmed for the meeting.
- Ms. Michelle Mitchell explained that she would like to amend the agenda so that the Policy Committee update is given during the OVR updates being provided by Mr. James Whitonis so that he will be available to answer questions during the approval of the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) Targeted Goals.

MOTION was made by Ms. Michelle Mitchell to move the Policy Committee update to the time scheduled for OVR updates on the agenda and for approval of the meeting agenda. Ms. Lynn Heitz seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Julia Barol for approval of the May 7, 2025, Full Council meeting minutes. Ms. Twana Jones seconded the motion. All were in favor.

FISCAL REPORT (4th QUARTER): Julianna Rodrigues, Member at Large

- Ms. Julianna Rodrigues reported that the Council's budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-2025 was \$80,000. 4th quarter expenses totaled \$20,964.17 including April expenses of \$3,594.66, May expenses of \$9,754.81, and June expenses of \$7,614.70. Adding the expenses from quarters one through three, the PaRC spent a total of \$68,622.40 in FY 2024-2025. The budget for FY 2025-2026 is \$80,000.

MOTION was made by Mr. Rob Wallington for approval of the Fiscal Report. Ms. Joan Myers Goodman seconded the motion. All were in favor.

CHAIR REPORT: Michelle Mitchell

- Members discussed and confirmed Calendar Year (CY) 2026 Full Council meeting dates.

MOTION was made by Ms. Lynn Heitz for approval of holding Full Council meetings on Wednesday, February 11, 2026 – Virtual, Wednesday, May 06, 2026 - Hybrid (Zoom & in person), Wednesday, August 12, 2026 - Hybrid

(Zoom & in person), and Wednesday, November 18, 2026 – Virtual. Ms. Julianna Rodrigues seconded the motion. All were in favor.

PaRC 2024-2025 Annual Report - Julianna Rodrigues, Member at Large

- Members held discussions regarding the theme for the Annual Report. Suggestions included the National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) poster, why funding matters, building your community, including an image of a road going throughout the report, return on investment, OVR success stories, and how the PA Client Assistance Program (CAP) has been so successful.

Business Enterprise Program (BEP) Ad Hoc Committee

- Ms. Joan Myers Goodman and Ms. Lynn Heitz will be Co-Chairing the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) Ad Hoc Committee. 3 additional members have volunteered to join the committee.

OVR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT: Ryan Hyde, Executive Director

- Mr. Ryan Hyde, OVR provided updates regarding the uncertainty of federal funding, federal budget process, Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), OVR's preparation of different funding scenarios, impacts of a potential continuing resolution, hiring freeze, cost saving measures for Pre Employment Transition Services (Pre ETS), and carryover of funding for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2026.
- Members inquired about the focus on retention and/or hiring by OVR District Offices (DO) and uptick in vacancies at the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) level. Mr. Hyde explained that OVR monitors the percentage of vacancies for each DO and there are about 25 to 30 active postings and/or postings in process currently. Retention efforts include employee training, continuing education opportunities, conferences, and continuing to work on approvals for the bachelor's level position. OVR explores hiring once vacancy levels reach approximately 20% at the district level. Currently OVR caseloads are at about 100 to 110 per VRC.
- Mr. Hyde provided updates regarding PA Client Assistance Program (CAP) funding, reallocation, Supported Employment grant, the Order of Selection (OOS), Commonwealth budget, hiring restrictions, travel limitations, the importance of advocacy at both the state and federal level, the OVR Annual Report and success stories, outreach efforts, videos highlighting OVR programs, and the support and partnership OVR has continued to receive from State Board members, Secretary Nancy Walker, the Governor and the First Lady. Mr. Hyde also shared information about community events, OVR summer programs, the Commonwealth Technical

Institute at Hiram G. Andrews Center (CTI at HGAC) activities and programs, and the My Work program.

- A member of the public inquired if OVR is unionized. Mr. Hyde explained that OVR field offices have 2 main unions, CTI at HGAC has approximately 7 to 9 unions. The current contracts for unions end in June of 2027.
- Mr. Hyde provided follow-up from previous discussions regarding the Customer Satisfaction Surveys. OVR has been working with the Office of Information Technology (OIT) and Deloitte who is contracted with the Commonwealth Workforce Development System (CWDS). They have continued to work on implementing a text-based survey system. They will be making changes to their system in November which will provide the ability to test their systems before those changes are implemented. Updates may be available in the spring of 2026.
- Mr. Hyde provided an update regarding the Business Enterprise Program training at HGAC. OVR staff updated all field managers about the training program in August 2025, HGAC has worked with OVR's procurement office to put up for bid the instructor position, but no responses have been received to date. OVR anticipates remaining on track by the end of 2025 to implement the training program.
- Mr. Hyde responded to previous inquiries regarding the State Board of VR meeting minutes. A few have been posted and 5 to 10 are in the final stages of accessibility review. They anticipate being posted by the end of the month. Document accessibility is a priority for OVR, and they have several staff trained at different levels but because PDFs are particularly complex to make accessible the process can be very complicated and time-consuming.
- In response to previous member inquiries, data was shared regarding the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRs) and the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS) closures, 911 reports, average weekly hours, average weekly wages, hourly wages, and total cases.
- Members inquired if data is used to help determine what should be prioritized for funding student services and summer programs. Students that are provided with work-based learning experiences (WBLEs) are 4 times more likely to be employed when they graduate. OVR has focused as much funding and services on WBLEs as possible. A national study on Pre ETS is necessary and would be very helpful to support the need for additional funding.
- Members inquired about OVR success stories and videos. OVR tries to complete several videos each year, and they are typically first published on social media depending upon the source. OVR will have over 60 individual success and partnership success stories available soon which will be county-based. Once they are finalized the press-office will create and distribute booklets. Members inquired about strategies regarding customers who are on the waitlist because of the OOS

who may see those stories and be frustrated that they are not receiving those services. Customers may reach out to their DO or counselor for an update on their status for the OOS or speak with a manager. The OOS is very prescribed and once placed in a particular category they can be reevaluated if there has been a change with their disability. OVR is also required to refer people to other agencies such as the Centers for Independent Living (CILs), CareerLinks, or other agencies that may be able to provide support regarding employment. Customers may also go through CAP as there is an appeal process if they do not agree with the category they were placed into for re-evaluation.

- An attendee from the public inquired how Citizen Advisory Committees (CACs) can receive information about OVR customers to connect with them and send customers surveys regarding services at the local District Office level. Mr. Hyde explained that CACs cannot receive client information because of their data sharing agreement and confidentiality rules. OVR does provide the PaRC with customer satisfaction aggregate data and that information could be provided to the public. Surveys are sent from the OVR Central Office computer system, but the CACs may inquire with their local District Office about general feedback and encourage local offices to make sure the surveys are going out to customers.

OVR REPORT

Update on the 2024-2028 Combined State Plan 2-year Modification – Jim Whitonis, VR Specialist

Overview of Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment – Jim Whitonis, VR Specialist

- Mr. Jim Whitonis provided an update on the 2024-2028 Combined State Plan 2-year Modification and an overview of the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA). The Targeted Goals for the next cycle of the CSNA were listed during the presentation.

POLICY COMMITTEE: Lynn Heitz, Chair

- Ms. Lynn Heitz reported that the next Policy Committee meeting is scheduled for August 19, 2025, from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM.

MOTION was made by Ms. Joan Myers Goodman for approval of Description (a) for the 2-year Modification of the 2024-2028 Combined State Plan. Mr. Rob Wallington seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Passle Helminski for approval of Description (c) for the 2-year Modification of the 2024-2028 Combined State Plan. Ms. Susan Tomasic seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Passle Helminski for approval of Targeted Goals for the next cycle of the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) beginning January 1, 2026. Mr. Andrew Pennington seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Mr. Rob Wallington for approval of expanding the search of state certified Small Diverse Businesses to provide the Statement of Work for the Customer Satisfaction Survey Project. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

STAKEHOLDER UPDATES

Client Assistance Program: Andrew Pennington, Co-Director

- Mr. Andrew Pennington, Client Assistance Program (CAP) provided an update regarding presumed competency in relation to OVR's eligibility process. CAP has provided advocacy and discussion to have cases reviewed to ensure individuals are provided with services that align with their informed choice. CAP continues to work to ensure customers are provided what is required by law in the case a determination is made that they may not be able to benefit from services during trial work experience.

Department of Education

- Dr. Carol Clancy, Bureau of Special Education (BSE) provided updates regarding the curriculum toolkit, grant awards, Federal monitoring, Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) Local Task Force Capacity-Building Institute, and the Bridging Knowledge to Know-How Conference.
- Members inquired about lip reading, American Sign Language (ASL), and Braille being taught to students with sensory disabilities. Dr. Clancy explained that providing instruction in those areas is contingent upon the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team to determine what services the student needs and assured members all those services are being used for students across the Commonwealth. Braille is being taught to students experiencing blindness and visual impairment but has been informed by constituents that it needs to be strengthened. BSE is working hard to expand that opportunity by increasing more professionals with that skill set. Ms. Joan Myers Goodman shared a statistic which recently became

available that the unemployment rate is about 70% for the blind and of the 30% who are gainfully employed, more than 90% of them are proficient Braille readers. Ms. Goodman explained that it is critical that we focus on proficiency of Braille for low vision and blind students if we expect them to be meaningfully employed after graduating.

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

- Ms. Melissa Hawkins provided information and updates about the Support Service Provider (SSP) program services, providers, and funding. Members inquired if people seeking SSP services are put on a waitlist because there is no current state budget. Ms. Hawkins explained they are still providing services, reimbursement for the program is probably going to be delayed, there is no reason to cut off services, interpreters are still working, and they maintain these services because they had funding left over from the previous fiscal year.

Statewide Independent Living Council: Susan Tomasic, SILC Board Chair

- Ms. Susan Tomasic reported that the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) will have its quarterly meeting on August 14, 2025, at 9:30 AM. SILC is awaiting information about the future of their funding. This is a difficult time due to the uncertainty of federal funding for the Centers for Independent Living (CILs). SILC has continued to do everything they can to cut costs and save money to be able to employ staff for as long as possible. SILC remains funded until the end of the current fiscal year which ends on October 1, 2025. SILC continues advocacy efforts and is planning for a newly reconstituted statewide advocacy group and is still planning to hold an Independent Living Conference in 2026.

State Workforce Development Board: James Martini, Executive Director

- Mr. James Martini provided an update on two recommendations that were passed by the State Workforce Development Board during their August 2025 quarterly meeting including partnering with the Helmets to Hardhats (H2H) program and continuing to invest and find new opportunities within the manufacturing sector for good, high quality jobs, providing outreach to educate young people about those opportunities within the manufacturing sector which has changed a lot over the last 40 or 50 years.

NEW BUSINESS

ACTION / SOCIAL MEDIA COMMITTEE: Joan Myers Goodman, Chair

PaRC Video Project/Documentary

- Ms. Joan Myers Goodman provided an update regarding the Social Media Committee's work to begin planning a documentary in collaboration with the Council's web maintenance / digital media team. The project would include a one-hour documentary about the partnership between the PaRC and OVR, OVR's services and programs, and interviews with customers that have had success with OVR. The video would be fully accessible and ensure the use of captions, audio descriptions, and ASL. The cost of the project would be covered by an increase in the expenses of the web maintenance / digital media services expenses. Ms. Julianna Rodrigues explained that the committee discussed topics that could be covered in the video including an overview of PaRC and OVR, PaRC meetings, a client that has become a counselor, Pre Employment Transition Services, the Client Assistance Program, Business Enterprise Program, small businesses, entrepreneurs, other OVR services, and legislation. Mr. Ryan Hyde explained that they understand that this is a PaRC project, but OVR involvement would require Commonwealth Media Services press office to assist, and they would be happy to invite that group to work with and educate members about those processes with VR.

MOTION was made by Ms. Passle Helminski for approval of the PaRC Video Project / Documentary. Ms. Lynn Heitz seconded the motion. All were in favor.

CAREERLINK COMMITTEE: Twana Jones, Chair

- Ms. Twana Jones reported that the committee had no action items. The next committee meeting is scheduled for August 18, 2025, at 1:00 PM.

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE: Susan Tomasic, Chair

- Ms. Tomasic encouraged members to consider joining the committee and reported that the next Governance Committee meeting is scheduled for September 18, 2025, at 11:00 AM. Members will be reviewing their assigned sections of the PaRC Bylaws and the Member Handbook, Policies, and Procedures.

MOTION was made by Ms. Joan Myers Goodman for approval to submit Ms. Ashley Norkus' application to the Governor for consideration of appointment to the PaRC, representing the category of Sensory disabilities. Ms. Twana Jones seconded the motion. All were in favor.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE: Christie Cyktor, Chair

- Ms. Christie Cyktor reported that the next Legislative Committee meeting is scheduled for September 4th at 10:00 AM and the next round of meetings with Legislators will be held in October 2025.

MOTION was made by Ms. Passle Helminski for approval of sending a letter regarding VR funding to the Chairs of the Appropriations Committees. Ms. Julia Barol seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Mr. Rob Wallington for approval of sending a letter regarding accessible transportation and SEPTA audits to the Governor. Ms. Lynn Heitz seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Joan Myers Goodman for approval of sending a letter to U.S. Congress and the U.S. Department of Labor regarding the withdrawal of proposed rulemaking for phase out of 14(c) subminimum wages. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Ms. Julianna Rodrigues for approval of supporting State House Bill HB485: An Act amending Title 71 (State Government) of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes, in boards and offices, providing for Office of Information Technology. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MOTION was made by Mr. Rob Wallington for approval of renewing the annual subscription to PA Legislative Services (PLS) Communication Connection. Ms. Passle Helminski seconded the motion. All were in favor.

TRANSITION COMMITTEE: Julia Barol, Chair

- Ms. Julia Barol reported that 2 members attended the Bridging Knowledge to Know-How Conference held at State College. The next Transition Committee meeting is scheduled for September 2, 2025.

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

- Mr. Andrew Pennington reported that he was informed that the Office of Chief Counsel (OCC) and OVR are reviewing and developing the processes for hiring and

looking at how to fit the PaRC's role into that. There is currently not a definitive time frame for the next meeting as it is dependent upon the fulfilling of what the committee has tasked them with.

AD HOC COMMITTEE: PaRC / State Board: Lynn Heitz & Michelle Mitchell, Co-Chairs

- Ms. Lynn Heitz and Ms. Michelle Mitchell reported that the State Board of VR members are provided with monthly invitations and information regarding PaRC Full Council and Committee meetings. Members held discussions regarding the importance of collaboration and partnership with the State Board.

COUNCIL DISCUSSION

Bridging Knowledge to Know-How Conference – Julia Barol & Michelle Mitchell

- Ms. Michelle Mitchell reported on the conference sessions that were attended and that they interacted with over 50 individuals about the PaRC and OVR. Ms. Julianna Rodrigues and Ms. Christie Cyktor also provided information about the conference sessions they attended representing other stakeholder groups. Mr. Ryan Hyde informed attendees that OVR, the Office of Developmental Programs, and the Office of Long-Term Living provided joint presentations at the conference. The presentations were also translated and broadcasted in Spanish. Presentations about the Pathways to Partnership and Charting the Life Course grant were also provided during the conference.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- Ms. Joan Myers Goodman provided a comment as a member of the public reminding attendees about the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) employment symposium that will be held in four Pennsylvania cities and explained that she thinks it is important to reach out to contacts providing an opportunity to highlight Business Service Representative information for employers. Ms. Myers Goodman intends to contact Human Resources organizations to inform them about employment opportunities.
- An attendee from the public inquired about the PaRC Social Media Committee's role and duties. Ms. Joan Myers Goodman explained that the committee does make decisions on what is posted to the PaRC website, social media pages, and newsletter. Members also request the sharing of information about webinars.
- Ms. Christie Cyktor provided public comment that several members stated this was their first Full Council meeting leading their respective positions and that she

thought everyone did a great job. She explained this was an engaging and informative meeting.

- Ms. Sherri Rodgers, Pittsburgh BBVS Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), provided public comment explaining that a family member is Deafblind and that she is hard of hearing and blind. She explained that they both have cochlear implants, have been participating with the SSP program since it first began and if it was not for the program they would never have been able to accomplish all that they have accomplished. Services that have been provided include shopping, assistance with computers and phones, and doctor visits. Ms. Rodgers emphasized the great importance of the SSP program. Mr. Ryan Hyde thanked Ms. Rodgers for her comments and reminded members that there is currently no legislation that supports the program, there is no specific line item that supports it, it is under the General Government Operations funds that come to the department and is managed by ODHH.
- Mr. Brian D'Amico provided public comment and inquired about page 7 of the Citizens Advisory Committee Training Manual which he explained states that the CAC may meet with or survey current or past OVR customers to discuss their experiences with OVR programs and procedures and gather their suggestions for solutions to problems they may have encountered. Mr. D'Amico stated that he understands OVR cannot share customer data which would violate their confidentiality requirements and inquired if there were suggestions on how CACs may accomplish the goal of receiving feedback through surveys from customers which is extremely vital and mandated by law. Mr. Hyde explained that he is not sure that CACs are mandated by law and thought this was previously recommended. Mr. Hyde explained that regarding the CACs' solicitation of surveys, social media or Listservs may be used to gather feedback from former or current customers. OVR does not have a way to provide that information outside of their organization. Mr. Hyde agreed to review the handbook that is currently on the PaRC website and emphasized that OVR cannot give out customer information. Members agreed that CAC meetings are a public forum, customers may join the CACs and share feedback if they choose to disclose that information.

ADJOURN

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