

State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

December 8, 2023

Seattle, Washington

Attendance – all members attended via videoconference

Council Members Present: Andy Arvidson, Cathy Wilson, Christopher Zilar, Jacob Kamaunu, Jen Bean, Julie Brannon, Julie Harlow, Kara Thompson, Kris Colcock, Kristin Geary, Larry Watkinson, Michael MacKillop, Sara Logston, Shawnda Hicks

Council Members Absent: Bek Moras

Staff and Visitors Present: Meredith Stannard, Yvonne Verbraak, Tricia Eyerly, Damiana Harper, Kelli Anderson, Lisa Wheeler, Joe Kasperski, LaDell Lockwood, Kim Canaan, Sophie Watson, Doug Burkhalter, Liz Stewart (OSPI-pending appt), Jill Reasoner (SILC), Bill Scholl, Marci Carpenter, Alco Canfield

Call to Order and Agenda Review: Julie Brannon, Chair

Meeting was called to order at 9:00 AM. All parties on the call introduced themselves for the record. Meredith and Yvonne reviewed Zoom protocols for asking questions and accessible commands. Julie reviewed the agenda for today's meeting.

Review dates for the 2024 SRC-B meetings

2024 dates: March 8, June 14, September 13, and December 13. One meeting will be in person, to be announced later. Yvonne will submit the meeting dates to the State Register.

Approval of June and December 2023 Minutes

Minutes were approved for June and December.

Annual SRC-B Elections

Each position had one candidate who had expressed interest in the position, Andy Arvidson for Chair, and Kris Colcock for Vice-Chair. Julie called three times for each position, and no additional candidates were nominated from the floor. Andy Arvidson was elected as Chair, and Kris Colcock was elected as Vice-Chair. Both were elected by acclamation.

Executive Director's Report: Michael MacKillop

Michael thanked the two new members of the Council joining today for their first meeting. Kara Thompson, who is a VRC for DSB in the Tacoma office; and Shawnda Hicks, who is representing PAVE. He's excited to have Andy and Kris taking a leadership role on the SRC-B. He offered thanks to Linda W. again for all of her work with membership while she was on the council and led that committee, it means a lot to show our state and federal partners that we have a full SRC-B. Michael said he first worked with Julie B. in the 1990's, and she's the one who brought him to DSB and also taught him Braille. He appreciates her guidance of the SRC-B for the past three years as Chair and is glad she will continue to be on the Council.

Jen Bean also offered thanks to Julie and Linda for their leadership. Christopher added in his gratitude for Linda's persistence in filling all Council seats.

Michael welcomed the new council members, and explained the general VR agency has a State Rehabilitation Council also, which is called the WSRC; and DSB designates their SRC as SRC-B for Blind. The Rehab Act of 1973 is the federal law that authorizes all of the services that we provide at DSB. That legislation was a precursor to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. It is a really critical key piece of legislation and foundation of the disability rights movement. The Rehab Act includes those comprehensive and individualized services which are so critical to the success in vocational rehabilitation, and enables people to find their own path and achieve what fits for them.

Michael went over some of the many acronyms that will be heard during the meetings, including: WIOA – Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 which reauthorized the Rehab Act of 1973. Important to link it back to that key legislation that is the core and heart of the program.

VR – Vocational Rehabilitation, not to be confused with “rehab” or some other medical thing. In VR, services are provided as necessary to someone who is eligible and focuses on a vocational goal with an employment outcome at the end. DSB wants those employment outcomes to be a really good fit for each individual, ideally in their desired career field where they can grow and develop and not just a job. However, if someone really wants “just a job”, they'll be supported in that goal as well.

BEP – Business Enterprise Program, aligned with vocational rehabilitation but authorized by the Randolph-Sheppard Act of 1936, gives priority to people who are blind or low vision to offer vending in government buildings. In Washington state it is understood to include all government buildings and not just Federal, and the vending has been primarily food operations. There are a number of cafes and coffee bars in Olympia buildings and others along the I-5 corridor.

IL – Independent Living, also authorized by the Rehab Act. IL offers many of the same opportunities for receiving services as VR, but is different from VR in that there is no expectation of a career path or employment. IL is intended for people who do not need help with their career or are retired, can't work, or don't have a goal of working. This program can help someone who has had a change in their vision to learn the adaptive skills of blindness. This may include how to cook safely, how to manage things in their home, and access to aids and tools that help with daily

tasks. These skills allow people to engage in their communities and families, and to be able to manage and live independently.

OTC – The Orientation and Training Center is a subprogram within the VR program at DSB. This is the residential training program located at the Seattle DSB office in Columbia City. People get intensive skills of blindness training and vocational readiness training. In addition, they learn computer skills, orientation ability and travel, how to utilize adaptive devices, how to read and write Braille, how to manage their homes, and to plan, shop for, and cook nutritious meals. All of these are critical skills if someone is going to get a job. People have to be able to manage their life and get out into the world if they're going to get a job. They're learning independent living skills for the purpose of supporting their career path. OTC attendees have the option of being a residential student in the CityLine apartments next to the Seattle office or commuting daily.

DSB provides similar skill training in a less intense manner in the field with staff who provide all of the same training as the OTC but spread out over time. The people who attend the OTC are getting 6 to 8 hours of training daily each week.

Pre-ETS – Pre-employment Transition Services, or Pre-ETS, is another subprogram within VR, and is a set of distinct services identified by the Federal partners that are necessary for students to explore their career options and possibilities. It includes self-advocacy, work experiences such as job shadowing, and counseling about vocational services and post-secondary education. The Federal law that reauthorized the VR Act requires agencies to set aside 15% of their grant to provide these services to students with a disability; and the age range for those services starts at age 14 and ends when the student turns 22. Lastly, only students enrolled in an education program are eligible for the services.

There are a lot of rules around how the money can be spent, and it can be limiting to have such a large chunk of money for a very prescribed set of experiences. Not saying it is a problem by any means, the Pre-ETS program has had amazing programs and experiences and connections. But it can be a challenge to do what seems good and also fit within the prescribed services.

Moving on, and no promises there won't be more acronyms. There is a State Plan and process, and it happens once every four years with a refresh in the second year; currently at the start of that four year cycle. DSB is part of the greater workforce development system as a result of the WIOA legislation. DSB does not work in isolation on its mission of getting people skills that lead to their career path; it partners with a number of other workforce development agencies and organizations to provide a more unified and collaborative workforce development system. Because of this the State Plan is for the entire state and DSB has a piece they're responsible for, plus pieces of the combined plan, and it is quite a process to complete it.

SRC-B members put in their recommendations for goals and objectives for the agency, and Michael is grateful for that. The three main goals identified and incorporated into the state plan are:

- Improve number of employment outcomes for DSB participants
- Improve staff skills and experience, and increase understanding of the community that DSB supports

- Increase resources for, and understanding of, the underserved Deaf-Blind community

Michael said these objectives align with DSB's goals and objectives, and he's grateful for that clarity. Those are the three areas DSB will keep focusing on for the next four years.

There is a frustrating pattern of participants who apply, are determined eligible, and receive services but then exit before gaining employment. The percentage of people who do this is very out of balance, and has been for a number of years. The pandemic had some impact on that, but Michael thinks it's more than just that. The Comprehensive State Needs Assessment (CSNA) that will be reported on later in the meeting identifies some additional issues and challenges.

Currently the rate for exits with employment is at 30% and without employment is 70%. Not to belittle the 30% who did get a job, kept their job, or got promoted; and some of those outcomes are amazing. But Michael is surprised that the ratio has not changed at all, and wants to see those percentages turned around and have 70% of participants exit with employment and 30% without. In looking at why this is happening, DSB has identified some processes that may be part of the problem. He will be talking about some of the work being done to revise how services are provided, how quickly people get started with services, and how to keep people engaged.

Christopher commented that they (Spokane Tribal VR) had similar issues during Covid and were able to identify the issue which he would be happy to share with Michael.

Michael talked about the variety of jobs listed in the quarterly report, and he's proud that DSB doesn't direct people into any specific job path but helps participants find employment based on their personal aptitude and interests. He feels that DSB's cultural value of individualized services is very strong. Also noted the average hourly wage for the quarter was pretty phenomenal at \$37.66.

Michael then pointed out that he can talk about DSB being the most fantastic agency there is, and also that there are challenges. Both of these things can be true. He wants to be as transparent as possible, and feels his role is to inform the SRC-B where DSB has challenges. Because there is tremendous experience and insight that can be offered by the council members. He does not want DSB to be insular and think it has all the answers, always looking for council input on how to fix things and be part of the solution. Michael wanted to acknowledge that members take time away from their schedules for the quarterly meetings and for committee work, and he's grateful for that.

An issue that aligns with the SRC-B desire for skilled staff is the churn in employment. DSB has been very proud of being able to promptly fill vacancies. The Governor's office was floored when Michael reported in October that the average time from putting out the recruitment to filling the position has been less than 60 days. This has not been the experience of other state agencies. It is exciting to have new opportunities for new people with new perspectives, and it's also exhausting to have vacancies.

Currently there are three Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor positions open, two in Seattle and one in Tacoma. This is putting a heavy burden on the other VRCs to pick up the slack where they can. DSB has been recruiting as broadly as possible, and appreciates the SRC-B members sharing job announcements with their networks also.

Still looking for a new Braille instructor for the OTC. Have someone interested who would have to relocate, so they are planning a visit before deciding. Longtime OTC computer instructor Jim Portillo has accepted a position with the Oregon Commission for the Blind to head their training center, so that has created another open position.

DSB has posted the recruitment for the Birth through 13 Specialist position. This was created in response to the Federal partners telling DSB that no Pre-ETS money can be spent on anyone under age 14. Asked for and received some money from the State Legislature to create a program and hire one person to run it. Goal is to be able to partner with schools and with families to support youth from birth through age 13, with a vocational lens and age-appropriate ways to explore and build that vocational pathway. There has been success in the past with trainings that show how youth are able to be folded into the family labor to do chores, be able to clean a bathroom, do the dishes or cook a meal. Michael hopes this position will create more of these kinds of workshops, and in partnership with the WCB, and the School for the Blind. He's excited to be able to fill this gap and provide these services again.

With all of these recruitments happening, Tricia and the HR team are exhausted. A new position for an HR Liaison is being added, with the plan that they will assist with future recruitments. Michael explained that as part of the re-organization and re-visioning that he'll be talking about there are going to be a number of new positions that will need recruitment and on-boarding. A lot of change is happening, and he has calculated that 75% of DSB staff are either new to the agency since 2020 or are in a new position than what they had in 2020. DSB leadership is aware that onboarding of new staff needs to be beefed up, in addition to receiving this feedback from the SRC-B and other community members.

Three of the new positions being considered will be for agency trainers. Need for internal training exists on a number of levels. One of the trainer positions will be focused on self-employment and business enterprise operations. BEP vendors need to have a foundation of how to run their own business, such as managing finances and people, getting customer feedback and how to incorporate it, understanding regulations around their business operation, etc. Anyone who is going through self-employment has that need for foundational knowledge of how to run a business. DSB wants to have this training available to support not just BEP vendors but any participants who are interested in having their own business.

Another training position is going to be focused on state needs to make sure all new staff understand all of the state policies and needs, and complete all statewide agency trainings. There are a lot of things that everyone in the agency needs, and the vision is for this new training position to be able work on addressing those needs.

The last training position being created will address quality assurance in DSB's vocational rehabilitation processes. DSB needs a trainer who will make sure that processes are standard even though all of the services are individualized, and all of the counseling and guidance is around the individual. They'll help to ensure that everyone and anyone who comes into the Vancouver office, or comes to Spokane, or comes to Seattle, is given the same opportunities and have the same conversations in a standard way. Having the same high expectations and the same belief that

anyone who comes through DSB for services can do what is in their heart and find that right fit for their career path. Michael is excited about these trainer positions coming in the near future.

In 2022, DSB's federal partners spent a month on an intensive monitoring of all their processes. One of the observations they made was that DSB is really good at the blindness rehabilitation side of things, but not as good on the vocational side of things. The old way of just helping someone with their resume and sending them out to look for a job doesn't work anymore. Different industries have radically different recruitment processes from each other, for example in the software and IT industry. Is DSB preparing people that have interest and capability in being able to market themselves, or to be able to get into training programs that lead to a number of jobs? A lot of places for DSB to grow in terms of connecting participants with pathways that already exist but that may not be totally accessible. That is part of DSB's job too once a path is found and there are people interested in it. For example, there are training programs in cybersecurity where you don't need an IT background just some of the soft skills, decision-making, communication, collaboration, etc., and they will train the person from 0 to 100, and DSB is not currently making use of those.

Michael is excited that the assistant director of VR role was split into two positions, Participant Services and Workforce Initiatives. Lisa is now AD for Workforce which includes partnering with business, business as a customer of the agency, and understanding business needs for recruitment and the talent needs they have. She and her team will bring that information back to the VR team and educate staff on how to prepare participants for the pathways they've chosen, to understand what jobs are out there, and what is required to do those jobs.

The role changes have been made, and now growing the program by adding three Business Relations Specialists. The Business Relations Manager, Carl Peterson, has already been amazing at connecting staff to businesses and participants to job opportunities, and is ready to expand on that. This is a critical way for DSB's services to happen going forward.

Julie H commented – She attended a workshop at the Hearing, Speech, and Deaf Center about help for business entrepreneurs, and wished she had been given the information back in 2020 when she started her business. She was not provided with much training or any resources from her counselor at the time. It would be great for DSB to provide one central resource for information and help with running your own business. She would love to see some thought given to that idea.

Michael was glad to hear Julie had attended, and DSB is looking to add more resources. One thing underway is a complete revamp of DSB's website, so that it will be a useful tool, with accessible and easy to find resources, and a section dedicated to self-employment. The new self-employment trainer will also be building new curriculum and collecting resources to share. Julie said even what seems like a small thing, like a template for LinkedIn, would be very useful and save so much time.

Alco asked – What is the current status of the Business Enterprise Program? Michael replied that there are a number of locations open for business again, however other sites have no employees in the building to support food services. DSB did get a chunk of money from the Legislature to revamp some of the BEP sites. Robert Ott has successfully reopened his remodeled café starting with a Micro Market, and then working with a chef to update and modernize menu offerings.

People have been responding well to the quality of the food and the changes made to the café. The Dome Deli in the Legislature building has had a bit of a challenge with the operator resigning prior to re-opening. Working with Robert to take over this facility to be open for the Leg session starting in January. The BEP team has been amazing in getting Robert the training and supports he needs to ensure a successful startup.

Alco asked – Anything east of the mountains yet? And what is a micro market? Michael confirmed nothing in Eastern WA yet, but the Micro Markets offer an opportunity for places with a smaller footprint and fewer employees to have fresh food options. The markets are self-serve coolers, with fresh items that are purchased pre-made or made on site, and they have self-checkout. They are not quite as accessible as DSB had originally thought, but the equipment manufacturers are committed to work on making improvements.

Michael said the Governor's budget should be out next week, and DSB has two asks in that it hopes will be included when the budget is sent to the Legislature. If it's not on the Governor's budget then it's not happening. One ask is money to remodel the café in the Natural Resources building, with the intent to use it as a BEP training site in addition to café operations. The second ask is to authorize additional head count. DSB has secured funding for additional permanent positions since increasing DSB's split of the general VR grant with DVR by 2%, but need to have authorization to increase head count.

Alco asked – What is DSB doing about Braille instruction for folks who are attending the OTC? Michael said the long-distance Braille training that Julie B piloted at the OTC is very successful and has continued to be offered.

Kris asked – In reading the job results in the quarterly report it seemed they were primarily on the West side of the state. Is it demographics or something else having an impact? Michael replied that it seemed to him the East side was fairly well-represented in the last report. It could be some of the jobs are with companies west of the mountains but done remotely. He asked if Lisa or Damiana had anything to add. Damiana agreed with Michael that there have actually been some great career type positions filled by the East Region recently. And she's very excited about the new Regional Area Manager for the East Region who will start in January.

Lastly, Michael read a bit of verbiage around the purpose and objectives for the projects that DSB is undertaking which are really kind of strategic goals and objectives. "The purpose is to prioritize and execute on the renewed operational visions for the Department of Services for the Blind vocational rehabilitation services to better equip and support people with visual disabilities to gain and retain employment." That's the purpose of a lot of the revision and reorganization drives. And they will be part of the strategic goals in the state plan. Program objectives: "DSB is revisioning our programs to lessen the bureaucracy that customers and staff face. Will build relationships with businesses and external partners, and improve employee morale and environment. Through the re-visioning, leaders and staff will be more skilled at adaptability and customer service, which in turn will help participants become more skilled."

Michael said he feels like these goals really align with the goals that the SRC-B identified for the state plan. Also looking at employment, looking at the customer experience, and the skills of staff

to ensure that the customer experience is the highest experience. It doesn't mention Deaf-Blind but that is a stated goal for DSB as well.

Presentation: Combined Statewide Needs Assessment results with Kathe Matrone and Kelly Franklin from the Center for Continuing Education in Rehabilitation (CCER)

Kelly and Kathe introduced themselves, and shared who else was on the team that worked to create the assessment, gather and analyze the data, and create the report. They worked with DSB staff to determine requirements for the report to ensure the data collected was helpful in terms of agency strategic planning.

The Comprehensive State Needs Assessment (CSNA), required by the Rehab Act to be completed every three years and results reported to the RSA Commissioner, and addressed in the State plan. The State plan must:

- include the results of the CSNA, describing the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing within the State, particularly the vocational rehabilitation services needs of:
 - individuals with the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment services;
 - individuals with disabilities who are minorities;
 - individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the state VR program; and
 - individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce investment system;
- include an assessment of the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the State.

The WIOA amendments to the Rehab Act of 1973 added two new requirements; the CSNA must identify, report, and address the VR service needs of youth with disabilities and students with disabilities with respect to:

- their need for pre-employment transition services or other transition services; and
- an assessment of the needs for transition services and pre-employment transition services and the extent to which such services are coordinated with transition services provided under the (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) IDEA.

CCER follows the RSA guidelines for conducting the CSNA, and they also follow the direction of the Agency director to focus on a particular area. They collect both quantitative and qualitative data by reviewing existing demographic and case service data; as well as using electronic surveys and telephone interviews with the actual customers.

They look at the data from different sources to identify trends and common factors that keep popping up, and this helps to increase the validity of the analysis, and allows for a perspective they might not have otherwise. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative data allows for a deeper understanding of the findings. There are also limitations that come with the process, such

as the sample size, or differences in the definition of disability across data sources. They are always concerned about potential for participant selection bias, so they have to keep that in the back of their minds.

Kelly said the data analysis resulted in these seven common themes for organization:

- Barriers to employment
- Services and service provision to address the needs of individuals who are blind, deaf-blind, or low vision
- Underserved or unserved populations in Washington communities
- Transition services, and pre-employment transition services
- Partnerships which include community rehab providers (CRPs), employers, and other agencies
- WorkSource questions
- Employer and business partnerships

Kelly and Kathe went through each section of their final report to DSB. The good news is there were no big surprises in the data. The areas identified in the Needs Assessment as requiring more attention line up with the items that were identified by the SRC-B for the state plan.

The entire 130 page report is available upon request to Meredith Stannard or Yvonne Verbraak.

Executive Committee Report: Julie Brannon

Julie noted this will be her last Executive Committee report since the committee is made up of the council Chair, Vice Chair, and the other committee chairs. They meet monthly with the DSB Executive Director and there is always plenty to talk about.

The committee recently completed the SRC-B's recommendations for the State Plan, and Julie was pleased that they had time to meet with all council members to give their input for each of the three areas that were identified. Next up is the Annual Report, and their committee is collecting accomplishments from each of the committees to sum up for the report.

Julie mentioned that Andy will be confirming committee memberships with council members and assigning new members to their committees. Look for more info to come out in January.

Membership Committee Report: Linda Wilder

This is Linda's last meeting on the Council, and she's really enjoyed the past six years especially her partnership with Julie in the leadership roles. All positions are currently filled except for the Workforce Board representative. She feels like she's retiring all over again, but look for her to be part of the public at future meetings.

Customer Satisfaction Committee Report: Jen Bean

Jen didn't have a lot to report from the committee. The satisfaction survey is now being administered through a contract with WA State University, and it will be a few months or more before they share initial results.

She shared that the Client Assistance Program has been using pretty much the same brochure for about 40 years, and they have taken time to update it and make it current. A copy of the new brochure was included in the SRC-B Quarterly Meeting packet that went to all members. Everyone should feel free to share it as needed. Jen also thanked members of the council who reviewed the new brochure and gave feedback on accessibility.

Wrap-up/Meeting Adjourned

Meeting was adjourned at 12:00pm.