

# State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

March 10, 2023

Seattle, Washington

Attendance – all members attended via videoconference

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***Council Members Present:***

Cathy Wilson, Christopher Zilar, Jacob Kamaunu, Jen Bean, Jill McCormick, Julie Brannon, Julie Harlow, Kristin Geary, Linda Wilder, Michael MacKillop, Bek Moras, Sara Logston, Sean McCormick

***Council Members Absent:***

Andy Arvidson, Chris Alejano, Kris Colcock, Larry Watkinson

***Staff and Visitors Present:***

Meredith Stannard, Yvonne Verbraak, Tricia Eyerly, Joe Kasperski, Kim Canaan, Cheryl Cummings, Marci Carpenter, David Edick, Hayley Edick, Keri Brant, Nathan Brannon, Matthew Hines

Call to Order and Agenda Review: Julie Brannon, Chair

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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 2023 SRCB meetings

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June 9, September 15, and December 8. All scheduled for 9am-12pm via Zoom.

Approval of December 2022 Minutes

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Linda moved and Kristen seconded to accept the December 2022 SRC Meeting Minutes. Motion passed.

Executive Director's Report: Michael MacKillop

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March is Women's History Awareness Month and Michael said he's been thinking about his own matrilineal line, which included an escape from an abusive relationship for his grandmother. How that informed his mother's choices, and now he sees the culmination and benefit of that history in his sister who has a strong voice and knows who she is.

At the last SRC meeting there were many new members, and Michael did a review. Wonders if there are any follow-up questions from that. He talked about the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) which reauthorized the Rehab (VR) Act of 1973 and gives us the purpose of Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living for Older Blind. In WIOA was the program addition of the Pre-Employment Transition Services for students with a disability to start career exploration, and which we had understood to start at age 9. We were informed last year by Federal partners that it starts at age 14 and no younger. A lot of DSB's current focus is on the Pre-ETS program, and the Council will hear more later from Matt Hines, the Pre-ETS Manager.

WIOA also had the effect of taking away 15% of the funds for adult VR services after 2016. By 2018 this resulted in enough loss of funding that DSB went into Order of Selection (OOS) and had a wait list for services for a period of time. The other change with WIOA was the focus on business as a customer of VR. Need to be supporting and working with community businesses to help them understand how to create accessible and disability-friendly workplaces so our participants get connected to those jobs and can be in those jobs with full equity.

Michael talked last time about the pandemic and the large number of staff changes; and how since the pandemic DSB has seen a decrease in VR applications. He explained how the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) is DSB's Federal partner, and they hold and govern the VR and IL-Older Blind grant. They give VR agencies guidance and direction on how the WIOA legislation is supposed to be interpreted. RSA completed a month long monitoring of DSB's VR processes last March, and are still waiting to receive the monitoring report with any findings.

Legislature is back in session, haven't heard on DSB's budget asks yet. About half of what was asked for serving Birth to 13 was included in the governor's budget, as was an increase for Independent Living to increase vendor fees. Also asked for more funds for the BEP Rebuild project.

The BEP Rebuild project is continuing, with work on the Dome Deli in the Leg building and OB2. Have the architectural drawings done, a contractor hired for the Leg, and finalizing bids for OB2 contractor. Both sites have had lower bids than were projected and that was a pleasant surprise. It's a challenge to manage these types of multi-year projects within the state budget cycle. DSB has to spend the allotted money between July 1 and June 30, and anything unspent during that cycle has to be returned. The BEP project team has created many contingency plans to allow for some flexibility based on funding. Michael appreciates the focus on micro markets in this project, and the possibility for profitability that micro markets bring to locations with fewer people on site.

Julie B – What is a micro market? Michael explained it has more of the refrigerated grab and go types of items that are already prepared, and increased self check-out options.

Christopher – How often does DSB see participants asking for a self-employment plan? Michael said it's not unusual, pre-pandemic about 10% of cases were helping people keep their business or starting a new business. It can be complex and challenging to manage, and the approach to self-employment likely needs to be re-visited as DSB explores the revision of the VR process.

Jacob – As a BEP operator, he has questions about the remodel project, and it seems that there are some unknowns about certain sites' ability to be remodeled. Michael is not able to answer this question, but it will be noted and passed on to the BEP manager.

Cheryl – New to WA state, are the BEP sites identified in Seattle or elsewhere? Are there plans to offer the program across the state? Michael said the sites mentioned are in Olympia, and the potential exists with the micro market model to expand into areas, such as Eastern WA, where BEP has not been located previously.

Michael talked more in depth about the Independent Living Program. The Quarterly report showed an increase in numbers served, an increase in percent of participants who have multiple disabilities, and in the percent of participants who report less than \$30k in annual income. Partnered with the Lighthouse for the Blind and the Talking Book and Braille Library to get a research study to understand the demographics of people 65 and older with visual disabilities living in WA state. Michael shared some of the report statistics of visual disability prevalence by age and race in WA state compared to national trends. Looking at the data from WA state broken down by county, it shows the areas in the state where there may be a need for more IL providers, where there are clusters of people 65 and older. Kim Canaan confirmed they are looking to fill gaps in those areas identified in the state that are underserved.

Julie H – Asked to clarify what Michael meant when he said the percentage of black/non-Hispanic participants are being served well. He explained that he was referring to DSB participant data that shows the prevalence of visual disability in that population is about double the state's demographic of that population, and the report validates that data, suggesting we are not underserving that community based on demographics and expected rate of disability.

The report also looked at other health conditions (among all demographic groups age 65+) in addition to visual disability and see there is a higher incident of stroke for those with a visual disability than without; about the same rate of heart attacks; about twice the rate of diabetes; three times the rate of depression; and three times the rate for hearing loss. An additional set of questions looked at general state of physical health over past 30 days, and about 50% of those with visual disability reported fair or poor health compared to 20% for those without. Frequent physical distress was 36% compared to 16%, frequent mental distress was 17% compared to 8%, and frequent limitations in activity was 30% compared to 21%. Additional statistics looked at daily living skills, which are the areas where the IL Program can help participants.

Jacob – Why is there a distinction of black/non-Hispanic? Michael said it is a federal distinction of race vs ethnicity that we have to follow.

Michael is grateful to have received these study results. He thought he knew the community that was being served by IL, and said it really expanded his understanding.

Vocational Rehabilitation numbers are increasing slowly, as seen in the Quarterly report. The number of Students with a Disability dropped, after removing everyone 9 to 14 from Pre-ETS.

Michael pointed out the variety of jobs that were obtained by participants last quarter, he feels this shows how DSB supports people to find fulfilling work and not just a job.

Sarah – Curious how much time and effort is put into financial literacy for participants? Michael said this is a need and not one we do regularly enough. The OTC is looking at adding it to their curriculum, and we have a couple of vendors who can provide benefits training. She works with students every day and sees how it ties into many other aspects of what they're learning.

Nationally there is a lot of conversation around the public Vocational Rehabilitation program. Congress is frustrated by the amount of money that is being returned each year by the state VR programs, and also at the lack of employment outcomes for participants. DSB has taken this to heart, has assembled a cross-agency workgroup and is actively looking at how we can increase the number of participants exiting with employment. As a first step, breaking down and rethinking the referral/application/intake process in order to speed it up and get participants receiving services as soon as possible. Allowed to take 150 days for this process, but no reason to take that long.

One point that's been brought up is how does DSB message about its services? It's not just about going to work because we also offer IL services, and this is not necessarily clear on the website. Where can processes be streamlined so the participant talks to one person and does not have to tell their story multiple times? Are there instances when a VRC can determine eligibility without waiting for a Dr's medical documentation or test results? In this case there will need to be intensive counselor training, so all are asking the same questions, and arriving at their determination the same way.

DSB knows that there is also a gap in business engagement, and education of participants about the labor market and trends. Have received feedback that DSB could do a better job at supporting participants in certain job fields, such as tech and self-employment. Would it make sense to dedicate VRCs to specific industries instead of territories? Can specific jobs be mapped out ahead of time so a participant can be given a list of what skills are needed to do that job, and what opportunities are available in that field right now. In some states a Business Relations Specialist meets with a participant before Intake to discuss the local job market opportunities and trends.

Jen – Exciting to hear what's happening with rapid engagement. CAP was able to talk with CA about their approach which is not reliant on medical records to determine eligibility. With this new model 85% of applicants are determined eligible within five days. Christopher asked if CA has been audited on this new process yet? Jen said no, but they did meet with RSA to advise new approach and did not get push back about it.

David Edick – Likes the idea of the VRC being able to determine eligibility. Does DSB have statistics on employment outcomes between those with low vision vs. blind? Sometimes there are jobs that require some amount of vision. Michael said this is not something we track.

Linda – Re five days to determine eligibility. When she was a VRC she would ask a participant if they have a copy of their most recent eye report, then don't need to get it from a doctor.

Marci – Re classifying low vision vs. blind job opportunities, many times an employer believes that someone needs vision to do a job, but they actually don't. Likes the idea of shifting some of the fiscal tasks from the Rehab Techs back to the fiscal department and freeing the RTs to spend more time on VR tasks. Also, she mentioned that they are supporting the agency's budget asks with the Legislature.

DSB has an All Staff training scheduled for April 24-26, will be the first all staff gathering in four years. Held a New Employee Orientation for all new hires over the past year, about 23 people. Spring Community Forum scheduled for May 17<sup>th</sup>, 7:00-8:30pm. Lastly, the State Plan is due in 2024; this means DSB needs the SRCB contribution by the December SRCB meeting on Dec 8<sup>th</sup>.

## Public Comment

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Hailey Edick – Wanted to reiterate that it would be useful if DSB were to track employment outcomes between those with low vision vs. blind.

## Presentation: Matt Hines, DSB Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) Manager

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Matt's background: has lived in WA most of his life, graduated from WA State School for the Blind (WSSB) in 2003. Prior to attending WSSB, Matt struggled with his disability and was not sure about his future place in the world. Coming to the school as a youth helped him understand his potential and what opportunities are available to someone who is blind. In addition to the support from the school, Matt also credits getting started with DSB with changing his perspective about his future and learning about all of the resources available to him and others in the blind community. After graduation, Matt got involved with the Northwest Association of Blind Athletes (NWABA) and was able to really understand self-advocacy, health and wellness, and the importance of living a holistic life. These experiences informed what he wanted to do with his life, and he realized that he wanted to do something to help support others out there like himself to reach their highest level of independence and achievement.

Matt then worked in customer service at several retail positions while continuing with his education. He came back to work at WSSB in 2016, and continued to learn and grow through his own lived experiences as well as serving the students. He was ready for the next step in his career when the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) team had an opening in the Vancouver DSB office. He was excited to join that team and be able to contribute, and then had the opportunity to apply and interview for the Manager position. Matt feels that all of his experiences and observations over the years are what enabled and inspired him to have a vision for the future of Pre-ETS at DSB.

Many changes to the Pre-ETS program have been made and continue to be made. Matt has done a needs and status assessment for DSB's 'legacy' programs, including YES 1, YES 2, and Bridge, as

well as other smaller programs that occur throughout the year. Also assessing needs in different regions across the state, recognizing there is an imbalance where programs are available. Understand that there is room for growth and expansion of the program, and there are still regions of the state that are considered service 'deserts'.

The Pre-ETS team has been reviewing their processes to streamline, and shift many of the administrative tasks from the Specialists to their Rehab Tech who can provide that support. This will allow more time for program development and opportunity building, improve communication timing, and maximize the resources of the team. Matt wanted to share that the Pre-ETS team is also working with the agency internally to ensure the VR onboarding process for Pre-ETS participants is a smooth and time-effective process.

Matt is happy to share that the program is expanding. For example, YES 2 is a legacy program that happens in the Summer, but they can take that program and offer it at other times of the year. He sees it being a 4-6 month program leading up to the actual 6-week work experience. Same with the Bridge program, looking at expanding that to last over 10 months with it culminating with the education experience at Eastern WA University.

Lastly Matt shared that the team is strengthening partnerships, with contractors, with schools across the state, and with the blind consumer groups.

Julie B – Excited to hear about expansion of the existing programs. Will there be any additional staff added to the team? Matt said the goal to expand the program influenced the decision to add the Rehab Tech role to the team. His promotion left one position open, so they will recruit to fill the empty position which will be located in the Tacoma office. Julie would like to have Matt come back at some point and give updates on the program changes.

Matt is happy to answer questions anytime, he can be reached at [matthew.hines@dsb.wa.gov](mailto:matthew.hines@dsb.wa.gov) or 360-409-3003.

## Executive Committee Report: Julie Brannon

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This committee meets monthly, and is made up of the Chairs of each SRCB committee. Even when she thinks they won't have anything to talk about they manage to fill their meeting time every month. Julie reviewed each committee and noted that they are listed at the end of the agenda for each meeting as well.

Customer Satisfaction Committee is chaired by Jen Bean and members are Kristin Geary, Julie Harlow, Jacob Kamaunu, and Jill McCormick.

Membership Committee is chaired by Linda Wilder and members are Andy Arvidson, Sarah Logston, Bek Moras, and Christopher Zilar.

Policy Committee is chaired by Chris Alejano and members are Kris Colcock, Sean McCormick, Larry Watkinson, and Cathy Wilson.

## Membership Committee Report: Linda Wilder

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In September this year there will be several members who need to reapply and a couple members who will term out and have their positions filled. Linda will be leaving the council this year. The positions for CAP and Tribal VR do not have term limits, but the member does need to reapply every three years.

Christopher – There is a TVR counselor who would like to apply for Linda’s vacant position, however the TVR requirements for a VRC are not the same as the state. Would that prevent them from being able to apply? Michael said if they are a qualified counselor then they are able to apply.

Linda reminded the council members that they need to let Julie B know if they’re going to miss a quarterly meeting. It is in the by-laws that meeting attendance is required.

Yvonne clarified that sometimes a new member is taking over a term, so they will finish that term and then can still apply for two full terms. This means someone could end up serving for seven or eight years before they term out.

Michael wanted to remind Membership Committee that is in the by-laws that 50% or more of the council members need to be blind or have low vision.

Christopher – Some of the Tribal areas cover multiple states. Would a TVR staff person who lives in another state but supports clients in WA be eligible to apply? Michael said he doesn’t see that would be an issue. Yvonne mentioned that it was an issue for a WSSB instructor who wanted to apply but they live in OR, and we were told they couldn’t apply. Meredith will ask for clarification from the council’s Boards and Commissions contact.

## Customer Satisfaction Committee Report: Jen Bean

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Jen and Lisa Wheeler met with WA State University (WSU) last month to talk about them helping out with the customer satisfaction survey, facilitating it, and providing analysis of the results. The thought is to contract for two surveys a year, one for the Council and one for DSB. WSU proposed doing the survey quarterly to get current results and provide an annual report to DSB. Lisa received their proposal, the DSB Executive team was enthusiastic about it, and the DSB IT department approved it. Still need to work out a few more details, including understanding the parameters of the survey, and then propose the draft survey questions. Also looping in Nohemy at DSB in regard to including several Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) questions for data we need to collect from participants.

Jen shared survey results for past two quarters. The participant can choose 3-Very Satisfied, 2-Satisfied, or 1-Dissatisfied. Scores for each question on the survey averaged between Satisfied and Very Satisfied. She noticed a couple of trends based on the comments. One is around feeling that staff do not really understand blindness or blindness issues. Jen knows that DSB is aware of this issue and taking steps to address it. Another theme is about improving communication and the

impact of staff turnover. CAP has seen this feedback for the general VR agency as well. There were a couple of comments that indicate participants are not entirely understanding who DSB is and what they do. Opportunity to be clearer with expectations up front and what services can be provided by DSB. Jen feels the overall feedback is positive and many things are done right, and she shared a couple of positive feedback comments. Also seeing a slight increase in the number of responses to the survey. The committee and the council appreciate the changes made to the survey results format that have made them easier to read.

## Ad-Hoc Training Committee Progress Report: Julie Brannon

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Have learned that training is invaluable for new council members to understand the by-laws, history of the council, expectations of council members, committee details, etc. The training is valuable for existing members as well and everyone is encouraged to attend. The training will be on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 10am-noon, virtually on Zoom. The ad-hoc committee consists of Julie B., Linda, Andy, Kristin, and Meredith. Jerry Johnsen is available to attend to provide some VR and SRC history as well. There will be some materials sent out ahead of time and people are encouraged to read through them prior to the training. There will be a survey sent after the training to get feedback on what went well and any suggestions for improvement.

## SRCB Member Report – Sean McCormick, representing State Educational Agency

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Sean works at the WA State School for the Blind (WSSB) and is the Director of On-Campus Programming. The mission of WSSB is to empower blind and low vision (B/LV) students to reach their full potential. Their vision is for every B/LV student in WA to have the supports and services they need to succeed. On-campus programs serve around 70 students through their intensive and transition programs, and other programs include a short course (one week intensive), summer programs, summer camp, as well as YES 1 and the Learning Independence for Today and Tomorrow (LIFTT) programs which are offered in partnership with DSB. This year they have a couple of new programs they're offering which include a Goal Ball Leadership Program (offered through DSB Pre-ETS) and the NFB BELL Academy program which is a Braille intensive program.

They offer on-campus training for professionals who have not previously been trained to work with B/LV youth but are working with them in their own schools. Offered in late July or early August prior to start of the school year. Can include paraprofessionals, school counselors, Braillists, classroom teachers, etc. It's a sort of 101 class that teaches how to be effective at the application of Universal Design in the classroom, and hopefully gain a perspective shift in how they approach education and services. The intention is to not just address the strategies but reduce the occurrences of ableism that may happen based on any preconceptions, fears, or misunderstandings of how B/LV students learn.

WSSB offers a middle and high school program for grades six through 12. Plus, students may stay for a “Super Senior” year and/or choose to go to the LIFTT program after graduation. LIFTT is for students who are still working on transition skills, and are transitioning into life, work, college and beyond; and it’s focused on those skills rather than classroom instruction.

The reason why students come to WSSB is quite broad. Sean said he is often asked this question by teachers who are instructing B/LV students out in the school districts as well as by families; they want to know what the criteria is or if someone is a good fit and there is not just one answer to that question. It is an individualized program for each student and so is the enrollment process. There are core educational components that every student in the state must have, and the rest of the program is tailored to each student’s needs. A couple of examples, a student may come to WSSB to learn in a Braille-rich environment with accessible materials readily available with no headaches, it’s simply built into the environment. Another student may have LV, but they are “passing” in terms of whether they identify as B/LV and often this is the student who slowly disengages over time.

Can be the result of a variety of reasons, but in Sean’s experience social and emotional identity can play a huge part in why students with LV will come to the school. Because living in both worlds, B/LV vs non-disabled, can be very tricky for a teenager who is in an identify phase of trying to figure out who they are, what their interests are, and making friends. He thinks it’s one of the things WSSB does really well with students. When they walk through the front door and into the Commons area each day they are not defined by their disability, but rather by who they are and what they want to be. This means they get to focus on learning, making friends, and having fun; and being B/LV is simply another part of their identity. From there it opens up the freedom for students to make new friends, have new experiences, and to know they are expected to do things that may be difficult or challenging. It closes the opportunity gap, so students are allowed the opportunity to experience the dignity of risk, and failure, and getting back up, in order to strengthen their perseverance.

Many students when they come to WSSB have had adults hovering around their lives quite tightly because it’s a necessary part of their environment; to make sure they have accessible materials available, that they are safe, and there are strategies and supports available. When they come to WSSB they try to peel away the paraeducator as much as they can while still providing one on one paraprofessional support to students in making sure they have what they need in the media format desired.

They also support students with their mobility skills. They have a number of mobility instructors on site, and every staff person supports mobility and understands that the power of a question is preferable to a directive. Especially as they are trying to empower students to get around and how they can find their way, even when they get a little lost. It’s part of the culture at the school, working with the students to advocate for themselves and ask for help; but only when they need it and that’s part of the process too.

Some of the high school students like to take classes nearby at Hudson Bay High School for the experience of being in a generalized education setting, where they are in a 30 student classroom and have to navigate crowded hallways. In addition they can take classes that are not offered at WSSB. There are students taking classes at Clark College through the Running Start program. While there are students taking college classes they also may have some high school students who are still working on their literacy skills, so there can be a big range in skill level, and they want to support them all.

Each student has to have an Individualized Education Program, it's a requirement to attend the school. There is a lot more to each student's individualized education than what's listed as an IEP goal; such as peer mentoring at summer programs or attending the DSB YES 2 program. Providing a place for students to connect with someone who gets them, to swap notes on experiences, bounce ideas off of, celebrate with, cry, and laugh with. Some of the challenges they're seeing right now at the school are regarding mental health, social, and emotional learning for the students. Other schools are facing similar challenges currently. They have two school counselors on staff, but are challenged in finding counselor support for students outside of school. In the recent past when there have been students who needed and were referred for in-patient services, but they have not been accepted for treatment because they are B/LV. Sean is working to do what he can to help change that attitude.

In addition to the intensive program at WSSB, there is the Ogden Resource Center which provides accessible materials for students across the state. There is a Low Vision clinic run in partnership with Pacific University's Optometry program and they provide free LV exams for anyone in the community. The Birth through Five program to support families and youth transitioning into Preschool. They have an Outreach Department that helps to serve and support gaps of services in local school districts. They have an exciting new program, CATT, which stands for Center for Assistive Technology Training. It's a partnership program with the American Printing House for the Blind, and mainly intended for training professionals who work with B/LV students to have access to technology and training so they can give the tools and training to the youth they support. They've hired a Program Coordinator, and they will be responsible for this training in a number of Western states in addition to WA. In addition to learning how to use a specific piece of equipment, the attendee is also given the equipment to take with them.

Events that have been held at WSSB and some events coming up include White Cane Day celebration, Abacus Bee, Winter concert, Goal Ball team, overnight Environmental Sciences program on Bainbridge Island for middle schoolers, a swim meet, cross country skiing, a Career Fair that goes beyond tables and brochures, a track meet day, another concert, awards, and graduation in June.

Christopher – Is there tuition, and can anyone visit/tour the school? No tuition fees, considered a public school, includes transportation. Yes, anyone can visit the school at any time.

Linda – Really appreciated hearing about the school, it's the most information she's heard about all of the programs that happen there. Also, she got to tour the new LIFTT and DSB space recently and it is going to be a wonderful space.

Sean confirmed they are very excited about the new facility. Currently LIFTT is located in the old main building, and the new location will give them more separation from the school and the administrative offices.

Julie B – Curious how many students can be in residence at the school. And express her sadness at the lack of in-patient mental health resources, which means they still have work to do. Sean said they have 52 spaces for residential students, and currently 48 students are enrolled.

Jill – Asked about the transition program. Sean said the school-based transition services go through age 21. Those are students who are on an IEP and still part of the comprehensive program. The LIFTT program is for students who have graduated high school, are moving to the next step of greater independence, and are age 18 to 23. They also have to be a DSB participant with an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).

## Wrap-up/Meeting Adjourned

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Meeting was adjourned at 12:10pm.