

# State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

**March 8, 2024**

Seattle, Washington

Attendance – all members attended via videoconference

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

**Council Members Absent:** Liz Stewart, Jacob Kamaunu, Julie Harlow

**Staff and Visitors Present:** Meredith Stannard, Yvonne Verbraak, Damiana Harper, Kelli Anderson, Lisa Wheeler, Joe Kasperski, Linda Wilder, Colette Arvidson

Call to Order and Agenda Review: Andy Arvidson, 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. Meredith reviewed the agenda for today's meeting.

Review dates for the 2024 SRCB meetings

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June 14, 9am – 12pm via Zoom; September 13, in person 9am - 3pm; December 13, 9am -12pm via Zoom

Approval of December 2023 Minutes

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Yvonne stated the notes have not been provided.

SRCB Business

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September 13 meeting will be held in person at the DSB office in Seattle. Lunch will be provided. The annual SRC training will take place at this meeting. Several members of the committee volunteered to help Meredith Stannard and Yvonne Verbraak with the planning of the meeting: Sara Logston, Kristin Geary, Julie Brannon, Kris Colcock, and Andy Arvidson.

## Executive Director's Report: Michael MacKillop

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Michael began by recognizing International Women's Day, stating his appreciation and celebrating the contributions of women in the organization and beyond.

Danté Allen has been confirmed as the Commissioner for the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), which oversees vocational rehabilitation and independent living grants. He has expressed a commitment to shaking up vocational rehabilitation programs nationwide. His focus is on improving customer service, enhancing the quality and quantity of employment outcomes, highlighting opportunities for collaboration, and being open to innovative changes. Danté Allen will be speaking at the Consortium of State Agencies for Vocational Rehabilitation in April, Highlighting opportunities like recruitment, retention, training, and enhancing customer experience.

In Washington State, leadership within the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has been progressive, thoughtful, and supportive of the programs and the changes that need to be made. This support is crucial for aligning state-level efforts with federal initiatives and ensuring effective service delivery and improvement.

There's been discussions about the Department of Services for the Blind's (DSB) part of the Washington State Plan for the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act. DSB's plan is to focus on strategic elements such as recruitment, retention, training, and staff. Improving the customer experience and quality outcomes as well as improving services to the deaf-blind community. Some goals include shared intake process and data sharing among partners to improve service coordination, particularly for youth. Overall, the plan is awaiting approval from federal partners, with some performance measures still under negotiation. The delay in the state plan is due to the Workforce Board partners, not DSB. Public comment on the state plan closes March 15, with submission of the state's portion thereafter.

For 2024 and beyond, a portion of the state plan focuses on whether an agency needs to implement an Order of Selection, a system which prioritizes service delivery on a first-come-first-served basis, and adds a wait list, utilized when resources are not adequate to serve all eligible individuals. Confidence in resources suggests this will not need to be implemented at DSB for the next two to four years.

DSB is shifting the supported employment grant to the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). The funds are restricted to specific on-the-job services, which DSB can support through VR funds, and DVR will be able to make good use of them as they spend their supported employment grant quickly.

There's been a shift from individual agency accountability to state-level accountability for federal grants, impacting performance measures and funding requirements. Now, if one part of the state is not performing to measures, the entire state must work together to make it work. Washington state is the only state last year that did not pass the credential attainment performance measure. Documentation issues are likely the cause due to big changes in DVR's case management system and data collection.

Dana Phelps, new director of DVR, understands that close collaboration needs to happen for the agencies to be successful. The collaborative efforts in areas such as fiscal, pre-employment transition, and business relations are now being implemented effectively. Relationships are being built with DVR at different levels.

There has been notable progress in recruiting individuals with disabilities within the state enterprise. The percentage of state employees identified as having a disability has increased steadily, reaching 4.57% currently. This is a positive trend since efforts began under Governor Inslee's second executive order. Specific departments like Consolidated Tech Services and the Department of Commerce have shown higher rates (7-8%) of hiring people with disabilities in 2023, which is commendable progress. Individuals transferring between agencies that identify as having a disability are at approximately 10%, indicating both mobility with the workforce and retention of talent across different departments.

DSB alone hired 20 individuals last year and 55% percent of the new hires are those with visual disabilities, showing a commitment to hiring individuals who bring lived experience to their roles. The emphasis is finding candidates with the right skill, experience, and passion, ensuring a strong fit for each position. There's a focus on engaging customers early on, particularly those considering careers as vocational rehab counselors. This involves detailed planning and discussions about opportunities within the agency, emphasizing the importance of specialized training and long-term commitment. Vacancies are addressed promptly to minimize disruptions for customers, reflecting efficient staffing practices. The efforts in filling positions quickly contribute to maintaining continuity and support for customers. Paid work experience has been developed within DSB with a six-month duration. One example is for the front desk in Seattle to be an opportunity for someone that has an Office Manager/Customer Service/Reception-type goal to gain the experience needed and build a good resumé.

In the Independent Living (IL) program, the number of people reporting to have multiple disabilities is increasing significantly compared to 2023. There's also an increase in the number of people whose income is less than \$30,000. Michael is pleased with the intentional increase in support provided per person, particularly through the emphasis on providing devices and fostering partnerships in independent living and the resources available, noting there is currently a backlog in King County.

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) has undergone significant transformations over the past few years, supported by the state legislative funding. Originally earmarked at \$9 million, the budget was later adjusted by the state legislature to \$4.5 million. However, this year will have an expected \$1.5 million to continue those projects as planned. Michael gave kudos to Robert Ott for taking on two other sites to have ready for legislative session. The switch to micro-markets and modern menus have yielded positive outcomes. Upcoming projects include upgrading existing facilities and expanding micro market grab-and-go operations, aiming to reduce customer wait times while meeting their needs and increasing profitability. There are success stories like the popular Bibimbap Bowl at the courthouse in Seattle and the guide dogs assisting at point-of-sale operations.

Historically, the employment rate among individuals exiting from vocational rehabilitation services has been around 30% with 70% leaving without employment. Most recently, there has been a positive increase in numbers exiting with employment. This is too early to know if this will be a lasting trend or if it is a temporary positive blip. Keeping an eye on the data to understand the causes behind this change is crucial for identifying effective strategies to maintain or further improve employment outcomes.

The time from the first customer request for services to eligibility has been successfully reduced in an aim to streamline the process. Traditionally, there had been emphasis on extensive assessments and long-term planning (often planning for five years into the future) before finalizing a service plan. There is now discussion on how to break that up into shorter segments; getting people into services, having them learn a skill or two so that they can understand what it is they are capable of, and tailoring the services more to the individual which should shrink time for starting services. This system of setting more short term goals with frequent check in and revising recognizes that goals and needs can evolve over time, much like how students' career aspirations can change during their educational journeys.

In discussing the Pre-Employment Transition Service Program, Michael acknowledged the challenges of engaging working students year-round to bring them into the pre-employment career exploration and emphasized the importance of maintaining activities beyond major summer programs to foster independence and essential life skills. DSB's Bridge Program is now the 3T Academy (Transform, Transition, Thrive). It is a year-round program designed to prepare students for the transition from K-12 education, where much accommodation is provided for students, to the more self-reliant environment of college. Skills such as advocacy, time management, organization, and notetaking are crucial for this transition. There's the Stronger Together Family Conference in May and it is for the whole family to learn the tools to be successful and supportive together. There is also a Startup Wizard Exploration for self-employment to encourage students who possess the qualities to take risks, and have the initiative and excitement to pursue starting their own business.

The Washington State Legislature approved DSB expanding the agency by 15 positions. The sustainable funding for these positions is due to a negotiation with DVR to now receive a larger percentage of the annual VR grant, from 16% to 18%. When federal partners restricted the use of pre-employment transition dollars to support youth younger than 14, DSB persisted and managed to obtain one new specialist position, held by Sara Logston. She will be working out of the Vancouver office; supporting the entire state; and focusing on youth, children, and families aged 0-13. Sara's role is pivotal, in reestablishing services for youth, focusing on independence and career development.

Another new position is with Business Relations, hiring three specialists who will report to Carl Peterson, and will hear more about from Lisa later in the meeting. This role is critical for supporting vocational rehabilitation counselors and involves understanding changes in business recruitment practices, aligning them with industry needs, and identifying certification programs leading to high-demand/high-paying jobs. The other piece is helping businesses create a disability friendly workplace and the hiring of more workers with disabilities.

Other new positions are expanding training focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), building a quality assurance program to identify training needs and process improvement, self-employment training, and ensuring compliance with federal regulations.

The Vocational Rehab Revision project is underway. Michael talked about how they want to do planning differently. There will be a report out with the consultants on all ongoing projects every two months, with discussions focused on the progress made and areas where adjustments are needed. Those that wish to join will be invited to attend.

One of DSB's strategic goals involves improving services for the Deaf-Blind community. This goal was identified by the SRCB, as well as DSB, based on data and feedback from customers. There is a meeting planned with the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) to get more detailed information on training for staff and for those with deaf/blind issues. This includes individuals who rely on American Sign Language and those with varying levels of visual and hearing impairments. DSB acknowledges they could be serving this customer base better and realizes the solutions are going to vary based on primary language and specific needs. To address this, a committee has been formed, to include Jen Bean.

Michael mentioned a couple more overhaul projects. The first being the DSB website; changing the look, feel, and content as well as sustainably maintaining and updating the content. DSB is working with an amazing set of contractors along with IT and Communications on this, and it's scheduled to be completed in September. The second is the State's accounting system, Agency Financial Revenue System (AFRS), is moving from a system that dates to the 1970s to something called One WA. This will affect the financial systems first, then Human Resources and potentially other programs later within different phases.

Andy Arvidson stated he heard a presentation from the new lead of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. She is a female lawyer who is blind who successfully represents people with equal opportunity complaints. Andy said she was very informative and upbeat.

Julie Brannon asked to confirm if Kris Colcock and her committee are working on the website revision. Michael confirmed.

Andy Arvidson asked Michael how much he thinks the national attention on website accessibility will help improve job searches for folks with disabilities? Michael replied more accessibility is better in every way, not just jobseeking.

Damiana Harper stated in her experience both professionally and personally, inaccessible forms tend to be the bigger issue. If the forms were improved, that would definitely have a positive effect on increased employment.

Michael added that locally, there's discussion with State HR about reviewing job descriptions and requirements. One example is a driver's licenses being required for most every job when driving is not required for every job, especially when there may be ways to accommodate essential tasks through different means.

Christopher Zilar stated he has also been pushing for these types of changes with the Spokane Tribe HR with no response.

## Presentation: Workforce Initiatives Program - Lisa Wheeler and Carl Peterson

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Since Lisa's last report in June 2023, there have been many changes. It had been recognized by the Executive Team at DSB that the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs needed more dedicated leadership and deliberate focus to improve agency performance. To help move in that direction, Lisa's areas of responsibility were split in half. Damiana Harper was hired last fall to take over the field services portion of VR, including the Orientation and Training Center (OTC), and Lisa is now overseeing the Workforce Initiatives side of VR. The Workforce Initiatives Program includes Business Relations, Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), and the Business Enterprise Program (BEP).

Goals of the Workforce Initiative Program are to increase the employer's ability to employ, retain, and professionally develop people with disabilities in the workforce and match job-ready individuals at the agency with employers that are ready to hire people now. Preparing jobseekers and students to gain skills, understand their employment goals, get into the workforce with skills to meet employer expectations. Supporting individuals interested in self-employment to be successful in entrepreneurship endeavors.

Strategies to implement goals are to increase employer services; integrate business relations into the VR process – including them early and often. Building partnerships with other agencies, technical colleges, and community partners. Expanding the knowledge of labor markets and career pathways. Developing innovative opportunities for participants who are gaining income and self-sufficiency without barriers of the fluctuation of the economy and employment. Developing more skill development and credential programs. Partnering with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's Business Relations Workforce unit to have the most comprehensive representation in Washington State for Title IV.

Carl emphasized the distinction between being "job ready," which means being able to perform the essential functions of a job well, and being "job search ready," which involves needing assistance with the job search process despite being qualified for the job itself. With the upcoming hiring of three staff members, one of the early focuses will be on enhancing job search training opportunities to equip participants with the skills and resources needed to navigate the job search process effectively.

A job fair, WorkSource Pierce, is in the works for Pierce County on April 4<sup>th</sup>. It is an 'employ-ability' job fair. Carl intentionally reframed the term to 'employ-ability' to make it positive and focus on strengths and skills of the individuals DSB serves rather than letting it be a term that is used negatively. DSB is also working with DVR to put together a job fair in downtown Seattle sometime in September, possibly at a Hyatt location.

A recent positive trend shows employers are eager to work with DSB participants. Job fairs provide a platform for direct engagement between employers and job seekers, including individuals with disabilities. They serve as a catalyst for employers to start conversations about their policies and practices regarding hiring individuals from specific populations, such as those formerly

incarcerated or veterans. They foster dialogue around creating inclusive and accessible work environments that can accommodate diverse talents and abilities.

DSB is planning to hire three Business Relations Specialists (BRS), Program Specialist 5, a management leadership position. Areas each one will cover are Yakima for East, South to include Lacey, and Seattle. They will have a varied schedule including time in WorkSource offices, time in their own office, and engagement with employers or doing presentations. Emphasis will be placed on co-locating with WorkSource to ensure job seekers have access to necessary resources to become job search ready. These specialists will have significant face time with businesses to understand their needs and foster partnerships. They will represent the agency across various platforms within the workforce development system, engaging with different agencies and opportunities.

Carl emphasized that the addition of Business Relations Specialists is meant to expand services rather than replace existing ones. The role of the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) remains essential, and there will be increased focus on integrating their counseling with the services provided by the BRS team. This collaborative effort aims to enhance counseling effectiveness, aligning it more closely with labor market demands and career-oriented roles.

Julie Brannon expressed her excitement and support for the emphasis on career development for DSB participants. She asked if the job fairs are specifically for the blind and visually impaired, for all disabilities, or for anyone.

Carl responded by explaining that while every job fair entering the Workforce Development Center is for everyone, they are historically geared towards populations with disabilities, including disabled veterans. He emphasized their efforts to ensure full accessibility at the job fairs for blind participants is a huge priority.

Julie Brannon shared her personal experience of trying to navigate a job fair by herself. She suggests considering ways to assist blind attendees in navigating the job fair environment effectively.

Carl reassured Julie that individuals will be available to assist individuals in navigating from employer to employer.

Kris Colcock mentioned the National Federation for the Blind (NFB) holds career fairs at the national convention that holds preparatory webinars via Zoom to provide tips and tricks for attendees. She asked if similar preparations are planned for DSB participants.

Carl acknowledged that would be a great asset but unable to work it in currently due to staffing limitations. He expressed interest and is open to exploring this idea in the future.

Linda Wilder emphasized the importance of participants being well-prepared for job fairs in terms of attire, resume quality, and interview skills. She asked if the counselors could take the time to do this with the participants.

Carl agreed with Linda and assured that they will be working with participants to emphasize this aspect.

Kris Colcock raised the question about whether the job fair could be beneficial for self-employed individuals looking to network with potential employers or partners for their business. She also expressed concern that self-employed individuals might feel neglected and mentions difficulties they face in marketing themselves effectively to prospective clients.

Lisa responded, mentioning plans to recruit a self-employment-specific position at the agency. This role would focus on providing dedicated support and training to help self-employed individuals build a strong foundation for their businesses. She stated there are ongoing consultations with consultants, that it will be like a Workforce Initiative's trainer for self-employment opportunities.

Kristin Geary added that anyone going through the OTC or in transition already has a framework in place prior to attending job fairs.

Carl added that the OTC will also be attending the job fair.

Sara Logston stressed the need for comprehensive training for VR counselors, stating counselors need a thorough understanding of programs available, their objectives, and who they are best suited for. She acknowledged the VR counselors are busy and manage multiple programs effectively; however, she stated the more targeted education, the better. Having amazing programs in place is one thing, being able to direct people to the right place is another. She also suggested counselors should encourage clients to engage with networking entities and communities in Washington.

Carl mentioned a standing monthly meeting for the VR counselors and other VR staff called the Business Relations Meeting/Business Engagement Meeting. These meetings focus on various topics related to business relations, job search readiness, and more. Trainers have also been brought in to help train the VR counselors.

Lisa wanted to ensure everyone research had been done on how to integrate business relations into vocational rehabilitation. Benchmarking was done with seven other state agencies who have had very successful business relations programs. Key insights included the importance of training across all levels of the agency. That the training is not a one-time event, but an on-going need for staff.

Carl described his personal approach of meeting one-on-one with rehabilitation counselors to discuss upcoming changes and address any concerns they may have. If training had taken place recently, feedback was asked for, looking for constructive criticism for improvement.

Linda Wilder suggested counselors or those working with participants to prepare for employment should ask them about their perceived weaknesses. She noted that while general training programs cover many areas, an individual may only need targeted training in specific areas where they are less confident. She gave an example of performing well for a practice interview but struggling through real ones. Linda emphasized to just listen to what the participants needs are.

## Presentation: Client Assistance Program (CAP) Annual Report – Jen Bean

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Jen began by acknowledging Michael MacKillop and the DVR Director recruitment process. Michael's support and advocacy were key in selecting Dana Phelps as the new director. Dana's appointment marks the first time in a decade that the top candidate recommended by the panel was chosen. Dana hit the ground running. She has shown to be a strong and supportive leader and her level of understanding of vocational rehabilitation in three months exceeds that of previous directors.

Jen reported that her counterpart, Doug Burkhalter, has been promoted to CAP Assistant Director. He has been working hard to modernize their program; records have been digitized and adding robust tracking systems. Customer program policies have been updated for the first time in 40 years to reflect the current environment and challenges being faced. Rights and responsibilities have also been updated for the customers, and is now available in a Spanish version. There's a new CAP (Client Assistance Program) flyer that includes examples of CAP's services, available both electronically and in 17 different languages. DSB staff and SRC members assisted with the accessibility testing.

Washington CAP initiated quarterly meetings with partners in Oregon, Alaska, and Idaho, creating an opportunity to collaborate and share successes. CAP's national technical assistance consistently impressed with Washington's work.

Aside from client advocacy, CAP conducts training and education. Conducted 91 training sessions, training 1282 people, with the training focused on vocational rehabilitation laws, rights, responsibilities, and the vocational rehabilitation process. This was provided through new employee training, unit meetings, one-on-one staff interactions, and meetings with rehabilitation counselors for the deaf at DVR. Regional, Statewide, and executive team leadership meetings were attended. Met with Michael MacKillop, Lisa Wheeler, and Damiana Harper to review and discuss updates. As well as participating in community forums.

CAP is mandated to resolve issues at the lowest level possible through information, referral, and support for self-advocacy. Last year, CAP had over 1,100 instances of providing information and referrals, of that amount, only 55 cases were opened. Case distribution: DVR had 87%, DSB had 10%, and Tribal had the remaining 3%. Traditionally the split is closer to 75% DVR and 20% DSB. Often the Regional Area Managers (RAMs) recommend preemptive case staffing with CAP with no identifying information which can provide feedback that can be used to enhance services or confirm effective practices. This also improves customer satisfaction.

RSA (Rehabilitation Services Administration) now allows reporting for nonbinary gender identity.

The top disability served with DSB was Deaf-Blind customers, overall, it was individuals with autism and mental health issues. This data aligns with the needs assessment and customer satisfaction and is addressed as a priority in the state plan with steps taken already to address this.

CAP data reflects a diverse community, but around the country there's been a noted increase in customers reluctant to share their ethnicity.

CAP reports several key aspects to RSA, including problem areas, intervention strategies, closure reasons, and outcomes. DSB'S top problem areas are communication and IPE (Individualized Plan for Employment) development.

In terms of intervention strategies:

- 45% Investigation and Monitoring – problems were identified, engaged with DSB, and ensured actions are taken and issues resolved effectively
- 22% Negotiation – example: when a customer's self-employment request was initially denied, CAP provided additional guidance, and counseling with the customer, gathered more information, and facilitated a vocational assessment to explore the option further
- 20% Administrative or Informal Review – cases involving escalation beyond the supervisor level

Closure reasons, 33% of the time CAP supported the agency, 31% of the time all issues were resolved for the customer, and 29% some issues were resolved. For DSB, all or some of the issues were resolved.

Finally, outcomes:

- 30% had a plan developed
- 25% CAP explained the law
- 20% were assigned a new counselor – which is considered as a last resort

Jen highlighted some systemic advocacy efforts. A lot of CAP's successes come from partnering with SRC with the examples of the satisfaction survey, rapid and meaningful engagement with DVR, and state plan development with both DVR and DSB. In addition, Doug Burkhalter's dedication and efforts have resulted in several students being hired by DVR and DSB.

Christopher Zilar: Asked if tribal client cases are typically shared with DVR and DSB and does CAP see a difference in the kinds of concerns tribal clients are bringing versus state clients.

Jen stated they field more calls, do more self-advocacy and information support than those that become customers. The two current cases are not connected to DVR or DSB. The issues raised by tribal clients tend to very specific to tribal contexts, such as challenges related to promised services not being fulfilled due to administrative issues such as paperwork.

## Policy Committee Report: Kris Colcock

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After the meeting in January, Kristin Geary joined the policy committee. Areas of focus are:

- Self-employment support for those knowledgeable but needing assistance
- Guidance for individuals exploring self-employment options
- Standardizing policies to ensure consistent support across different stages of self-employment

There will be two interim meetings in between quarterly meetings. They will be on the third Tuesday of each month, 11:30 am – 1:00 pm. A more detailed report is anticipated at the next quarterly meeting in June.

### **Executive Committee Report: Andy Arvidson**

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The executive committee meeting takes place monthly with Andy Arvidson, Kris Colcock, Julie Brannon, Jen Bean, and Michael MacKillop with Meredith Stannard as liaison. The committee has been actively planning the September in-person quarterly meeting and the annual training, as well as building the agendas for the quarterly meetings. Andy emphasized the importance of having the entire SRC committee present for better training opportunities versus the few that show up on Zoom.

### **Membership Committee Report: Julie Brannon**

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Liz Stewart has been approved as the new SRCB education representative. The committee still needs to fill the Workforce position.

The committee plans to develop an onboarding document, electronic but possibly in print and braille, to provide it to new members. The membership committee and Meredith Stannard will be talking to Yvonne Verbraak about what to include and seek input from SRC-B members as well. The goal is to have the onboarding document ready by the September in-person quarterly meeting.

Mentoring programs are being developed and will be between current and new members. The membership committee is tasked with developing the guidelines for this program, with a target to implement it by September. Julie stated to email her if anyone is interested in being a mentor or a mentee. Jen Bean volunteered to be a mentor.

Kris Colcock asked if there is a way to have a type of shared drive across agencies to be able to access these documents.

Michael responded that Teams may be the only cross agency tool available. Further explorations will need to be done.

Larry Watkinson asked about having a staff liaison attend committee meetings.

Michael stated there is no liaison that attends committee meetings, he is the point of contact for any committee questions.

Yvonne went over community compensation guidelines and will send it to SRC-B members.

## Customer Satisfaction Committee Report: Jen Bean

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The survey update is complete, and the committee is awaiting the results. Kristin Geary joined the policy committee, as well as Kara Thompson.

The prioritization of efforts is to focus on improving Deaf-Blind services and exploring self-employment. The committee brainstormed ideas such as listening sessions with customers and getting feedback from consumer groups; talked about all DSB staff to better understand the needs of deaf/blind customers and to have ongoing, more extensive training in the new employee orientation.

Bek Moras asked if DSB was included on HB2221 Interpreter Work Group including Deaf-Blind focus? Michael replied that DSB was not named as a partner, that he has connected with the ODHH (Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing) and offered DSB's support.

## Wrap-up/Meeting Adjourned

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Meeting was adjourned at 11:57.