

Blind Services Planning Council

Minutes of Meeting for Friday, October 6, 2023, 9:30 AM

- a. Council Members Present:
 - i. Edward Birmingham (ICBV; vice chairperson, BSPC)
 - ii. Dustin Cather (NFBI)
 - iii. Mindy Ely (ISU)
 - iv. Horacio Esparza (Progress Center, Forest Park, IL)
 - v. Whitney Hill (SPORK!)
 - vi. Daniel Hawkins (American Foundation for the Blind—AFB)
 - vii. Sharon Howerton (ICB; BSPC chairperson)
 - viii. Dan Tevelde (NFBI)
 - ix. John Holtgreve (BEPB)
 - x. Andy Lossasso (DHS)
 - xi. Jeremy Holderfield (BEPB guest)
 - xii. Jasmine Gonzalez (Admin assistant to Kim Borowicz)
 - xiii. Ray Campbell (President, Illinois Council of the Blind-ICB; Second vice president, American Council of the Blind-ACB)
 - xiv. Marilyn Green (President, NFBI)
- b. Department Representatives Present:
 - i. Rahnee Patrick (Director, DRS)
 - ii. Kim Borowicz (Bureau Chief, BBS)
 - iii. Ingrid Halvorsen (Asst Bureau Chief, BBS)
 - iv. Derrick Phillips (Superintendent, ICRE-Wood)
 - v. Jasmine Gonzalez (Administrative Assistant, BBS)
- c. Other Guests Present
 - i. Aimee Julian, ISU
 - ii. Brittany Boston, ISU

Aimee Julian – ISU will work with the committee exec board to develop the meeting agenda, take minutes, provide minutes afterward, and ensure the website is up to date. The goal is to meet the Open Meetings Act. They will also provide the meeting link.

Whitney motions to accept minutes from June. Horacio seconds. Motion passes.

Rahnee Patrick defers report to Andy Losasso. Report submitted.

- Demographics in report
- Able to expend all federal dollars.
- Strong performance results for 2023. All above target.
- SWTCIE Sub minimum wage to competitive integrated employment
 - Competitive win of federal dollars 13.9 million or 5-6 years
 - Working toward competitive employment
 - Aligns with state-level work to get Dignity Act approved

Kim Borowicz

- Digital accessibility will be a priority in councils work with ISU contractors
- Vendor Conference (BEPB) in Springfield in Dec
- 3 trainees in the BEPB program (2 Chicago; 1 Springfield)
- New trainer began in Chicago this week.
- Working with contractors to purchase accessible kiosks.
- Welcome to Jasmine Gonzalez, new administrative assistant to Kim Borowicz. Working out of the ICRE-Wood office
- Grant management position is posted
- Kim has begun to meet quarterly with the grants team
- Kim is attending some upcoming conferences to increase visibility
- Will attend National Association of State Agencies
- Information technology issues
 - Hot spots are not available at ICRE-Wood. Hopeful to clients
 - Working to improve accessibility in DHS agency.
 - Ex. Items put into DocuSign need to be made accessible first
- Working on open vacancies
- Working on transition services in collaboration with UIUC

Ingrid Halvorsen – Asst Bureau Chief

- A comprehensive tool has been developed to assess blind clients
- Continue to struggle with staffing vacancies
 - 700 customers and 1 counselor

Derrick – ICRE-Wood

- 23 returning students for next term plus 5 new customers in the program
- 11 residents in current term
- 31 on waiting list
- Anticipate a large graduating class in December; Anticipate about 20 people will be able to begin in January
- There has been recent increased interest in the program. Currently there is approximately a one year wait to get into the program. Working to improve this.
- Looking for Office Coordinator. That position has been vacant 2 years
- Looking for Residential Care Worker, Rehab Instructors and O&M instructors.

Derrick was Asked about why so many customers are returning

- Many were unable to get tech bundles because funds ran out on contract and so had to wait to next fiscal year. This meant that clients could not take their tech classes. IATP provides the tech bundle (laptop, USB drive, keyboard, headphones, Olympus [a recording mechanism]) Laptop preloaded with a variety of accessible software such as JAWS or Fusion.

- Instructor out sick
- But, also, it is common for students to take 2 terms. 85% of individuals do 2 terms.

Consumer Group Reports

State Rehab Council meeting – Sharon attended. Want consumer issues to take back to SRC. Next meeting in Bloomington Nov 15th to learn more about the ISU grant. Agency has to do a needs assessment as required by the federal gov. Next meetings March 15 and June 12. Sharon has stated that she is not able to take on the amount of work that applying as a member of SRC would require but would be good to have a BSPC representative which she likely would be able to perform. Kim attends these meetings. Ray asked if there might be an increase in those who are blind given increase in migrant population. Discussion was that those who are eligible to work in the US can receive services. Individuals including migrants who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise disabled who do not have work permits, therefore, would not be able to apply for services.

Vacancies in Blind Services – Andy Losasso: A letter was sent to Director Patrick, DHS Secretary, Illinois Governor and Bureau Chief Kim Borowicz. This was initiated by BEPB's attorney and endorsed by ICB, NFBI and SRC as an official inquiry into blind services, specifically the reason for prolonged vacancies within BBS including ICRE-Wood. Andy was able to respond without legal input. The letter was taken very seriously. He brought data and promised a vacancy update for future meetings. Some of the information Andy shared included the following:

- All of DHS 4000 hires. 900 no-shows on first day of work.
- Currently have 44 vacant blind services positions
 - 9 in requisition approval phase
 - 21 in requisition submitted phase – just waiting to be posted
 - 17 Rehab Mobility Instructor trainees
 - 5 going through closing process
 - 9 other means status (looking at people outside state employment)
- Much movement happening (people promoting into positions) who leave a different position. If an individual seeks a promotion, his/her former position must be held open for four months in case he/she wishes to return to the former position so the replacement process cannot even begin until this period of time has expired.
- Questions
 - When response from lawyers is received, Losasso to meet with Blind vendors.
 - Only one O&M in the state. How are these prioritized?
 - Losasso prioritizes schools because when specific staff is missing, the school must close.
 - However, effort is put into the other open positions as well. The O&M shortage is significant. One possible solution is an intern role...they are working to build such an option. Currently hire fee-for-service until staff is hired.

- Discussion about process in which someone can be hired without interview. Losasso explained that this happens through a bargaining unit process. In those situations, the highest scorer (through review of application materials) is hired without interview. Neither Rehab Instructors nor O&M instructors are hired in this way but do go through the interview process.
- Question about understanding that some positions have been open for years. Losasso suggested this might be a misinterpretation of the data. Total numbers may not look like they've changed, but some leave while others are hired and so change in total vacancy numbers may not reflect change.
- Could we be provided annual attrition rates in the future? Concern is that the DRS is used as a stepping stone for new hires. This is costly to the department in funds and time. Losasso is interested in this data as well and has begun work to get this data built into a dashboard so that we can monitor such things.
- Is there a schedule for how vacancies will be filled? Is there a number of days that positions must be vacant before it can be filled? Losasso explained that this problem is pervasive across state agencies and is not unique to blind services. He is willing and wants to share this data and plans to do so in the future.
- In the last year, there have been no O&M positions posted. There have been counselor positions posted. Kim Borowicz believes we are up to date on posting of counselors. Ray asked how many O&M positions we are budgeted for? Is there any priority for where O&M positions are posted? Currently there are 2 O&M instructors at ICRE-Wood and 1 O&M instructor in Springfield. 13 positions (I think for instructors-comment from Sharon) are in the budget, 4 for ICRE-Wood and 9 for the field. What is the process to make it happen?
- Sharon advised that the next scheduled meeting of the BSPPC is December 1, 2023. This is the weekend for the BEPB meeting. As a result, the next meeting is scheduled for Friday, December 8, 2023 at 9:30 AM at which time new officers for 2024 will be elected. Immediately following the meeting, Sharon received an email from Mindy indicating that her term is expiring at end of this year, and she does not feel she can fulfill her responsibilities to BSPPC while performing her new job at ISU. We sincerely thank Mindy for her work over the years and hope she will attend her last meeting. In the meantime, Sharon will get more information about how the ISU grant will affect BSPPC and will have more information following the SRC meeting on November 15. Sharon also reminded members who have not completed their required OneNet training modules to do so ASAP as these are due before calendar year end as has been required for some years.

Motion to adjourn at 11:53.

Respectfully submitted by Mindy Ely, Secretary; reviewed and updated by Sharon Howerton