

Blind Services Planning Council

Date: Friday, June 28, 2024

Time: 9:30 AM – 11:30 AM

Format: Virtual

Chairperson: Sharon Howerton

Members Present: Sharon Howerton, Edward Birmingham, Daniel Hawkins, Dan Tevelde, John Holtgreve, Dustin Cather, and Whitney Hill

Guests: Erik Hanson, Kim Borowicz, Jasmine Gonzalez, Director Rahnee Patrick, Raven Pulliam, Andy Lossaso, Marilyn Green, Derrick Phillips, Karyn Campbell, Steven Dennis, Judith West, and Latisha Houston

Staff: Brittany Boston, Sarah Blalock

1. Call to order and Opening remarks: Sharon Howerton, Chairperson

Chairperson Sharon Howerton called the meeting to order, thanked everyone for their time, and reminded the Council of the need to complete the modules.

2. Review and acceptance of meeting minutes from April 12, 2024

Chairperson Sharon Howerton called for a motion to accept the minutes from the April 12, 2024, Blind Services Planning Council meeting as presented. Daniel Hawkins moved that the minutes be accepted as presented. Whitney Hill and Edward Birmingham seconded the motion. The minutes from the date of April 12, 2024, were accepted into the record as presented.

Dan Tevelde asked if the group could hear him, and Sharon noted that yes, the group could.

Sharon noted that the group met to discuss the BSPC's goals and vision. With Kim Borowicz leaving, these conversations have been postponed, with the hope the BSPC will return to it soon.

3. Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Bureau of Customer & Community Blind Services (BCCBS) Reports

- Rahnee Patrick, DRS Director

Director Patrick thanked Kim Borowicz for her service to the Division of Rehabilitation Services. The Director noted that with Ms. Borowicz leaving, there will be a vacancy at DRS and invited the BSPC to aid with their recommendations as well. Director Patrick noted there are a few resumes that are moving to interviews.

Sharon noted that the BSPC cannot receive the resumes because they are in an ongoing process. Director Patrick agreed. Edward Birmingham noted that they had a recent hiring process, and the rating form was not accessible. Director Patrick noted that she is unable to speak on the hiring process/forms, etc. but is noting that and thanked him for his input.

- Kim Borowicz, Bureau Chief

Kim Borowicz invited Andy Losasso to provide the most recent information on the job postings. Mr. Losasso noted that the Business Enterprise Administrator Position has closed, the Budget and Contract Specialist, which will be posted until Jul, and The Administrative Assistant Level I have also been posted for the Business Enterprise Administration. Mr. Losasso encouraged the BSPC to refer these positions to their network and noted quite a few Rehabilitation and Mobility Instructors have been posted: two in Waukegan and two in Rockford. Kim noted that the two posted in Waukegan are Specialist and Trainee positions with only one hire. Sharon asked if these positions required a master's degree; Andy responded yes. Andy Losasso reviewed the criteria for eligibility for the Rehabilitation and Mobility Instructors.

Marylin Green asked if the Rehabilitation and Mobility Instructors are only for mobility or braille, assistive technology, and Orientation and Mobility (O&M). Kim noted that these positions will not cover O&M. For O&M positions, they need a specific certification. Marylin asked if the positions for assistive technology, braille, etc., are still open at facilities such as ICRE-Wood. Sharon noted that those positions have not been posted. Derrick Phillips applauded the effort of

getting these positions posted and filled throughout the state, noting these positions will be helpful, especially to minorities. Derrick also congratulated Latisha.

Marylin asked if there are vacancies at ICRE-Wood. Kim noted that there are vacancies at ICRE-Wood. Latisha Houston noted that there are four Rehabilitation Instructors, two O&M Instructors, an Office Coordinator/Receptionist, and a Public Service Administrator positions that have not been posted. Latisha noted that ICRE-Wood is in desperate need of Rehabilitation and Mobility Instructors; two contractor workers currently fill those positions with their contracts expiring soon. Programming be disruptive beginning on July 1. Sharon asked when the posting would happen. Andy noted that these positions are in the queue with the Central Management System (CMS); DRS has been working for months on these vacancies and they are in process at CMS. Andy noted that the issue with the contract workers is statewide; non-RA positions are being paused with no reasoning to date. All personal service reasonable accommodations are being filled. Andy encouraged the group to email him when questions arise regarding these positions. Derrick Phillips asked if there is a plan to address the technology at ICRE-Wood due to the contractors. Andy said at this time, he is unsure but is proceeding how and when they are told. Andy Losasso posted his email in the chat if anyone would like to get in contact with him, andy.losasso2@illinois.gov.

Judith West asked if the Reasonable Accommodations Personal Services Contracts are in place for staff people. Kim Borowicz noted yes, those are in place.

- Ingrid Halvorsen, Assistant Bureau Chief: BCCBS field VR

Ingrid Halvorsen was unable to attend the meeting but provided her update by sending her report to the BSPC.

- Latisha Houston, ICRE-Wood Superintendent: ICRE-Wood

Latisha Houston provided an update for ICRE-Wood. Latisha noted there are currently thirty-four customers at ICRE-Wood: eleven residents, nineteen commuters, and four remote braille student classes. ICRE-Wood has one student who is deaf and blind and one who is Spanish-speaking. Latisha shared four success stories: a former student has graduated with a master's degree in counseling, another Spanish-speaking student earned his GED, one customer has become employed as a full-time facility trainer, and one student is now working part-time at Walgreens. Sharon asked where the students go to study for their GED. Latisha noted that one student attended Malcolm X University for their GED training. Derrick noted his congratulations to Latisha and the ICRE-Wood students.

- Raven Pulliam, Program Administrator: Business Enterprise Program for the Blind (BEPB)

Raven introduced themselves, noting there was a fair amount of work to be done in his short time with the BEFB. Raven added his excitement that new staff are being hired and job openings are being posted. Raven specifically thanked Derrick, Erik, Director Patrick, and Andy Losasso for welcoming him to the team. Raven noted that a few of their updates have been shared in previous updates regarding job postings. Technologies and equipment contracts have been updated, and so are all set for the Fiscal Year. Raven noted the new location of Waubensee Community College in Sugar Grove, which has its equipment in stock and will have a walk-through of the location soon. Other new locations are the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's building, the YMCA in Ottawa, the Kankakee Army and Aviation Support Facility, and the Illinois building. Derrick thanked a fellow staff person, Iyana, who has been helping arrange these contacts and locations.

Derrick asked Raven how many people are currently going through training in Chicago. Raven noted there are currently none, but there are two trainers on staff now: one in Chicago and one in Springfield. Sharon asked if there were any ideas on candidates in these new areas. Raven noted, yes, but many of these positions are satellite, with only one being a standalone at

Waubonsee Community College. Kim Borowicz highlighted the perks of Waubonsee Community College and noted that this contract was achieved through a Request for Proposal. Raven and Iyana are working hard to get these contracts in place, including Peoria and Decatur, which are also being planned.

Sharon noted it is great to hear things moving forward.

10:00 AM Committee Reports

- State Rehabilitation Committee (SRC) Sharon Howerton and Kim Borowicz

Sharon Howerton provided an update on the SRC. Sharon noted that the BSPC is not the only group that is worried about attendance and staffing; the SRC is also. Sharon then invited Kim Borowicz to share on the SRC meeting; the meeting was in Champaign at the U of I and hosted a professor who created a Service Matrix that would help Vocation and Rehabilitation Counselors understand the full picture of customers. The SRC discussed the upcoming visit by the Rehabilitation Service Administration in August to the Chicago office. Kim noted the SRC discussed their goals and priorities.

10:05 AM Consumer Group Reports

- Illinois Council of the Blind (ICB) Sharon Howerton
- National Federation of the Blind of Illinois (NFBI) Dan Tevelde

Sharon and Dan submitted their reports prior to the meeting but opened the floor to questions regarding the ICB and the NFBI. Sharon noted the ICB conference is currently virtual and will be hybrid attendance on July 5th.

10:15 AM Unfinished business

Sharon noted that she feels that much of this was covered during the various updates/questions but opened the group to discussion and questions.

10:30 AM New business

Erik Hanson introduced himself as the Bureau Customer and Community Field Services will be filling in for Kim Borowicz's replacement. Erik has met with Kim, Latisha, Ingrid, and Jasmine. He is meeting field services next week and is excited to meet with Raven soon. Erik invited this group to send him any new

pertinent information or questions; his email is in the chat erik.hanson@illinois.gov. Sharon and Marylyn asked if this email address could be sent via email; Kim noted she would send Erik's email.

10:45 AM Guest Comments

Karyn Campbell noted her hope to fill the vacancies quickly. Karyn asked about ICRE-Wood and the upcoming vacancies and if the program would have to close down. Latisha noted that the program will not shut down because there are other instructors in other areas. Latisha is also working on a solution to cover the Assistive Technology classes. However, the Health and Wellness classes will be put on hold. Sharon noted that these positions are moving but are with CMS.

Edward Birmingham noted his frustration and stated his intent to contact his local and state representatives with his concerns.

Daniel Hawkins noted he could understand Ed's frustration and asked if an outside/out-of-state contractor had the correct certification and if the state would be open to contracting with them. Sharon asked if a scenario is something that the state would be open to. Erik Hanson noted during his recent visits this idea was noted, and there are plans to explore this idea. Erik noted that this is a difficult situation to navigate, but it is still something they are open to exploring. Sharon asked if there were possible candidates whom the council should reach out to. Erik responded that for ICRE-Wood, Latisha should be the main point of contact. Sharon noted that there are vacancies throughout the state, particularly in the St. Louis/Southern Illinois area, and asked if there were any counselors in Daniel's area. Daniel said there is no one on full-time staff. Sharon stated her thoughts on if these counselors have 75-day appointments. Marilyn noted that other states allow for remote access, which would allow for assistive technology training for people throughout the field. Daniel Hawkins agreed that at the state level or contractual, virtual and remote training should be enhanced. Karyn asked how you cover customers who cannot learn remotely. Daniel responded that he has thought about this a lot and has an idea; each customer has an ideal learning environment, but in the beginning, the first few meetings are to be in-

person and then pivot to a virtual/remote learning environment if the customer is able. Sharon added in her experience that some customers and others need to be in person. Daniel also noted that adaptive technology training can also be accessed through remote access, which mimics an in-person trainer.

Dan Tevelde noted a theme when referring to CMS, that it seems there is no ability to change. Dan wondered if the lag time on postings an issue with just the jobs was pertaining to the jobs discussed. Also, Dan wondered if this group could invite CMS to come give an update on their process. Andy Losasso noted that based on the contracts with the union, there was a Task Force was formed to address the speed of hiring/job postings. Andy noted that this Task Force is still active, and a CMS director has been placed, adding he would reach out to CMS to see if there is an update or materials he could share. Dan noted that if they're not willing to be accountable, then it is an ethical issue. Karyn asked if Illinois is the only state having vacancy issues. Andy noted, based on his experiences in three different states, that this is a national issue, including mass retirements. These national issues are combined with the specific qualifications that are needed in some of these positions. Sharon noted specific issues with hiring interns into full positions, and Latisha noted that interns are coming to ICRE-Wood more heavily now, but to have interns, you must have a certified supervisor.

10:55 AM Next meeting:

Sharon noted that the next meeting will be on October 4, 2024, at 9:30 AM

11:00 AM Adjourn

Sharon Howerton called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Daniel Hawkins moved that the meeting be adjourned. Whitney Hill seconded the motion, and the meeting adjourned.