

## **Blind Services Planning Council**

**Date:** Friday, October 4, 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, Director Rahnee Patrick, Barbara Hobrock, Heather Speth, Andy Losasso, Marilyn Green, Derrick Phillips, Karyn Campbell, Ray Campbell, Calvette Brown, 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 at 9:34 AM and thanked everyone for attending. Chairperson Howerton encouraged all who submit reports to do so in a timely fashion, as the information shared is of value to the planning council. Chairperson Howerton invited new staff to introduce themselves.

Calvette Brown introduced herself as the new Program Administrator for the Business Enterprise Program for the Blind. Ms. Brown was originally with the Bureau of Engagement Support Services. She was a prior vendor for approximately 18 years. Ms. Brown shared that she is visually impaired herself and expressed excitement for this opportunity.

Heather Speth introduced herself as the new Assistant Bureau Chief for Customer and Community Blind Services and echoed Ms. Brown's excitement about the opportunity. Ms. Speth has been working with blind services since 2015. Ms. Speth shared that she started out as a vocational rehabilitation counselor trainee and has experience throughout the system.

Latisha Houston introduced herself as the Superintendent of ICRE Wood. Ms. Houston has been with the agency for 29 years, initially starting as a rehabilitation instructor.

Brittany Boston, support staff from ISU, gave an overview of ISU's role as there are several new individuals participating on the council. Ms. Boston, along with Sarah Blalock, provides technical support for the meetings, including creating the Zoom links, sharing calendar invites, updating the webpage, preparing meeting agendas, and taking minutes. ISU staff compiles the reports to share with the council, and Ms. Boston asked those individuals to include her and Chairperson Howerton when emailing their reports so they can be shared with the full council.

2. Review and acceptance of meeting minutes from June 8, 2024

Chairperson Sharon Howerton called for a motion to accept the minutes from the June 28, 2024, Blind Services Planning Council meeting as presented. Edward Birmingham moved that the minutes be accepted as presented. Dan Tevelde seconded the motion. The minutes from the date of June 28, 2024, were accepted into the record as presented.

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

- Rahnee Patrick, DRS Director

Director Rahnee Patrick reported that DRS is in the process of onboarding new staff as well as continuing the hiring process for vacant positions. Director Patrick shared that \$13.9 million in funding is being utilized to work with 6 14c certificate holders or sheltered workshops to change their business model from subminimum wage payment for people with disabilities to competitive integrated employment.

Director Patrick shared that October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Director Patrick communicated that the Department of Human Services shares a committee for employees with disabilities with set goals. The committee is currently working on making the interagency committees' website more accessible and relevant. Director Patrick stated the goal is to have the website updated by October 8, 2024, for a celebration of

state employees with a disability and the state agencies that hire individuals with disabilities.

Director Patrick reported on events that occurred in July to celebrate Disability Pride. DRS had a contingent in the disability parade in Chicago to recruit individuals to come into the Division of Rehabilitation Services. On a national level, the Vocational Rehabilitation Directors have meetings around communication strategy. A group has been hired to assist with branding and outreach.

Director Patrick reported that regional meetings have been taking place as Rehab Services Administration Region 5 has been flat funded. Discussions are being centered around a strategy to move forward and working to find additional funding.

Director Patrick reported that the Employment First task force has been reinvigorated in response to legislation that could phase out piece rate work being legal. The task force's main objective is to recommend minimum wage protections for individuals with disabilities.

Director Patrick shared that on July 18, 2024, she was a part of signing a collective bargaining agreement between SCIU, which represents in-home care workers through the Home Services Program, for pay raises for the in-home workers.

Director Patrick shared that the agency had a site visit from the Rehabilitation Services Administration on August 6, 2024. On July 26th there was a meeting with all the workforce titles at ICRE Roosevelt to integrate the workforce system to assist the ICRE students in graduating with employment. Superintendent Robert Rainey announced this new initiative for ICRE-Roosevelt.

Director Patrick shared that she visited several offices in southern Illinois to help understand their pain points in the home services program

The agency held a Long Covid Summit in Chicago that discussed the impact of long Covid and how it needs to be considered regarding social

security administration. The Engagement and Support Services Bureau is taking the lead on this issue.

Director Patrick shared that a quarterly meeting was held with the Division of Developmental Disabilities on transitioning individuals with intellectual developmental disabilities from vocational rehabilitation.

Director Patrick attended a camp for young people with disabilities organized by the Schwab Rehab Center. Vocational Rehabilitation held a tabling event at the camp to recruit individuals into VR. Director Patrick attended the ICRE-Wood Street graduation on August 15, 2024. Director Patrick also attended a Breakfast in the Dark event and the state fair for recruitment.

Director Patrick reported the directors meeting took place the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> in Springfield to allow for respite and reunion with one another. It was called the Chicken Soup for the DRS Employee's Soul. The focus was on service, kindness, and human dignity. The keynote speaker was a former VR customer.

Director Patrick is on an apprenticeship subcommittee of the Workforce Innovation Board. The subcommittee is working to make more apprenticeships available to individuals with disabilities. The agency had a visit from the Department of Education Secretary, Secretary Cardona, to get an update on the project with the school districts and Center for Independent Learning.

Director Patrick attended the National Employment Network Association Conference to learn how vocational rehabilitation can work more closely with ticket-to-work agencies which are employment networks. These agencies want to provide more opportunities to assist people with disabilities to come off social security.

Chairperson Howerton asked if there was an update on the Bureau Chief position. Director Patrick stated that she had not been notified by the Governor's office regarding the position.

Dan Tevelde expressed frustration over Director Patrick's participation in the visual simulation. Director Patrick expressed appreciation for Mr. Tevelde's feedback.

Edward Birmingham asked if Director Patrick could reach out to the Governor's office for an update on the Bureau Chief position. Director Patrick stated that she would need to check with DHS.

Andy Losasso shared that the increased rate at which the agency is hiring is reassuring. Mr. Lasasso believes that the agency is becoming an employer of choice. There are currently 12 open positions. Mr. Lasasso shared that some of those positions must go through the bargaining unit process while others have gone outside of the bargaining unit for various reasons. Mr. Lasasso shared that OHR and CMS are providing updates. There are 12 additional positions that are being reworked and will be posted again in the coming weeks. The merit comp positions for the Enterprise Program for the Blind are filled along with the bargaining unit positions.

Mr. Lasasso shared that a tour was provided to decision-makers of both ISPI and ISD last week. Conversations were had about the difficulties in hiring and marketing. Mr. Lasasso shared that there was some positive movement with the Human Resource decision-makers on better-retaining student teachers and moving them to full-time employment once their credentialing is complete.

Mr. Lasasso reported that Ingrid Halvorsen is continuing for a short time to assist with the transition of the role to Heather Speth.

Edward Birmingham asked if Raven would be able to stay on to assist Ms. Brown in her transition as well. Mr. Lasasso stated that it could be discussed but could not give a clear answer at this time but is hopeful that the increased training opportunities will assist in elevating new staff.

Derrick Phillips asked if deaf-blind individuals would continue working with blind services under Heather Speth. Erik Hanson shared that there are 26 rehab counselors for the blind throughout the state. They are companioned on customer cases to work collaboratively together and, as Mr. Lasasso stated, Ms. Halvorsen is assisting in the transitions of roles. Daniel Hawkins offered to assist with questions about deaf-blindness as he is deaf-blind himself. Mr. Hanson thanked Mr. Hawkins for the offer. Mr. Hanson shared that Heather Speth and Kristy Peen sit on a newly constituted deaf-blind committee centered

on ensuring the deaf-blind population is being appropriately served and reached.

- Erik Hanson, Bureau Chief (Acting)

Erik Hanson shared his report as the Acting Bureau Chief. Mr. Hanson shared that he has been with Customer and Community Field Services for the last two and a half years and with the division since 2010. Mr. Hanson also shared that he has worked in social services for the last 30 years. Mr. Hanson commended the exceptional work of the staff under the Bureau of Customer and Community Services. Mr. Hanson shared that he has used the last three months to familiarize himself with BBS and was able to attend a graduation ceremony at ICRE Wood. Mr. Hanson shared that he's been working with Raven as he transitions out of his role to assist Mr. Hanson in supporting Ms. Brown. Mr. Hanson apologized for his late report and will send it to Chairperson Howerton. Chairperson Howerton thanked Mr. Hanson for sending his report and remarked that she would forward it to the group.

- Heather Speth, Assistant Bureau Chief: BCCBS

Heather Speth shared that she has been in her role for a month and with this being her first meeting, she is learning the structure of the meetings. Ms. Speth shared that she is excited about the number of instructor positions being added. An Orientation and Mobility instructor started in Region 2. There are currently three rehabilitation instructor trainees who should start within the next month. Ms. Speth shared there are several BEPB customers that have gotten sites.

Chairperson Howerton asked if Ms. Speth could explain about how the coordinator, instructor, and counselor work together. Ms. Speth stated that the Bureau of Customer and community blind Services is split into five regions that cover the state. Each region has a supervisor and several counselors. Ms. Speth shared that the counselors have control of the caseload and work directly with the individual needing vocational rehabilitation while the coordinator oversees the administrative support. Ms. Speth shared that they work as a team

with the rehabilitation instructors who provide basic adaptive skills training within the home and community. An Orientation and Mobility instructor teaches white cane training outside the home.

Derrick Phillips asked if there are still vacancies in Region 5. Andy Losasso offered to answer the question and stated that there are positions that have not been filled because a candidate was waived or there were no additional candidates. Those positions are being requisitioned and reposted. Mr. Lasasso shared that this does not appear to be localized to one region.

- Calvette Brown, Assistant Bureau Chief: Business Enterprise Program for the Blind (BEPB)

Calvette Brown provided an update for BEPB but did preface that this is her fourth day in her position. BEPB is currently fully staffed. Aaron Carter was hired as the administrative assistant and Corey Christian is the budgeting contract specialist. BEPB is currently in the process of updating the correctional centers with a credit card system, as they have been functioning with cash only. Tim Bronco is the equipment specialist and has been assisting in this process. Kiwani, East Moline, Statesville, and Danville have been completed. Ms. Brown reported on facility development for new locations, sharing that equipment has been installed at Waubensee Community College, including 21 pour-over coffee bots.

#### 4. Committee Reports

- State Rehabilitation Committee (SRC) Sharon Howerton

Chairperson Howerton did attend the SRC meeting and apologized to the council as she had forgotten to take notes. Chairperson Howerton did share that much of the meeting was related to business specific to SRC and a plan to update their bylaws.

#### 5. Consumer Group Reports

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

Chairperson Howerton and Dan Tevelde submitted their reports prior to

the meeting but opened the floor to questions regarding the ICB and the NFBI to which there were none.

#### 6. Guest Comments

Chairperson Howerton opened the floor to guest comments and questions. Karyn Campbell asked for an update on the bureau chief appointment. Director Patrick shared that she has reached out for an update but does not have any additional information to share at this time.

Ray Campbell, President of the Illinois Council of the Blind, congratulated Ms. Speth on her new role and thanked Mr. Hanson for stepping in as the acting Bureau Chief until the position is filled. Mr. Campbell acknowledged that these appointments do take time but is hopeful a permanent leader will step in soon and continue moving the work forward. Mr. Campbell inquired about Statesville Prison closing and Logan Correctional Center's anticipated closure if that would allow for equipment to be repurposed and available to other facilities. Ms. Brown shared that she is not currently involved in the details, but based on previous closures, the equipment is typically reassigned after being assessed. Reassignment is dependent upon the contract, space allotment, and additional factors. Ms. Brown will plan to follow up and include any new information in her report for the next meeting.

#### 7. Next meeting:

Chairperson Howerton noted that the next meeting will be on December 6, 2024, at 9:30 AM. Elections will be held at the next meeting. Chairperson Howerton encouraged the members to consider whether they would be willing to fill a position.

#### 8. Adjourn

Sharon Howerton called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Whitney Hill moved that the meeting be adjourned. Daniel Hawkins seconded the motion, and the meeting adjourned at 10:47 AM.