

Maryland State Rehabilitation Council Meeting Minutes

February 5,2025

Members Present:

Katherine Jones – Chair
Erikk Bonner
Kristen Patterson
Marla Friedman
Todd Tolson
Cory Richo
Penny Reeder
Sherria Young- Smith
Michele Hamlin
Hunter Whitt
Miah Smith
Kristina Richards
LA Benn
Chandra Smith
Neil Christopher
LaBria Shannon
Penny Reed

Members Unable to Attend:

Ronza M. Othman
Rosa Raez
Marlo Lemon

DORS liaisons to Council:

Jody Boone, Senior Executive Director Planning, Operations, and Field Services
Toni March, Director, Office for Blindness and Vision Services
Wanda Peele, Program Manager II Business Relations Branch
Patrick Peto, Program Manager Policy, and planning DORS
Tom Liniak, Director of Community Based and Workforce Services
Beth Lash, Director, Office of Field Services
Samantha McGinley, Program Manager, Individual & Community Liaison

Support Staff for the Council:

Sherri Alban, Executive Associate DORS HQ

Guest

Kathy Robins
Nina Saini
Paula Meads

Marcia Colburn
Mira Appleby
Cheryl Solomon
Kia Green
Lisa Mules
Melanie Harrington
Nina Saini
Kathy Robens

Welcome: Katherine Jones

Katherine Jones welcomed everyone and opened the meeting.

November 6, 2024, minutes have been approved.

Public Comment:

A Suggestion was made that DORS create a Job bank of employers interested in hiring neurodivergent individuals and provide more transparency about employers interested in hiring individuals with disabilities:

- Beth Lash offers tailored feedback to parents and mentions Marla Friedman and Jhoselin Contreras from the Client Assistance Program as consumer advocates for individuals with unmet needs.
- Also, acknowledges the challenges of the digital job-seeking process for people with disabilities and has stated that Internal efforts have been made to improve communication and external resources on the website for job searches.
- Recommends using multiple job search strategies, including connecting with the American Job Center, community rehabilitation programs, business services representatives, and nonprofit programs.
- Beth and Marla will share their contact information in the chat and are willing to meet with parent(s) individually or as a group.
- Kristina Richards, notes that employers cannot legally seek individuals with specific diagnoses. She highlights the ALE (Adult Learning Experience) Program's positive impact on clients, especially neurodivergent individuals, and suggests it for those with limited work experience.

Client Assistance Program (CAP)

- Marla Friedman introduces the Client Assistance Program (CAP) and announces a community chat to explain CAP's purpose and how to reach them for support with the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS).
- CAP offers advice and help with any process needed with DORS.

Concerns about DORS Process:

A guest expressed concerns about her son being put on hold twice and missing the deadline for application resubmission. She requests clarity on the DORS process and available services to avoid settling for less than intended:

Beth offers to help resolve the issue with her son's case, suggesting a miscommunication regarding quarterly data reporting.

Beth acknowledges the importance of sequential work experience for people with disabilities and encourages individuals to return for additional services to advance their careers.

Kristina Richards emphasizes the importance of building a resume to demonstrate employability and the ability to retain employment and carry out duties.

Nina Saini offers to have a guest speaker at the Employment Related Support Group meetings, and Marla from CAP is willing to present to the group.

Todd Tolson compliments the DORS team on their marketing efforts and increased attendance at the meeting.

Dr. Erik Bonner, Assistant State Superintendent

Thank you to the leadership team, DORS staff, parents, and stakeholders for participating in today's meeting. Participants and consumers are our main focus, and the goal is to address their needs with quick turnaround times.

- Continuing visits to all our Field Offices, will be visiting our Eastern shore offices next week. It is important to hear directly from the field, collaborate, and work as a team.
- "We can't do anything without you all, nor can I do anything without the team, because there's no I in team."

Budget and Funding Concerns:

DORS is continuing business as usual and remains optimistic, focusing on providing for consumers and supporting staff.

"We're continuing to stay positive. And I'll tell you the same thing that I told our internal group members today on the Coffee hour, that I pride myself in having possibilities and opportunities and hope."

Partnerships and Initiatives:

- DORS is exploring partnerships with LEAs (Local Education Agencies) to provide jobs in local communities
- A call is scheduled with LEAs on the 18th to discuss partnerships in food and nutrition services.

- The goal is to replicate successful partnerships to ensure individuals have job opportunities closer to home.

Jody Boone, Senior Executive Director Planning, Operations, and Field Services

Update on the Disability Innovation Fund grant, Maryland Pathways to Partnership Initiative (MPPI)

- 9.9-million-dollar grant
- The project focuses on working with 10– 21-year-olds in partnership with local education agencies (LEAs) and Centers for Independent Living in rural areas.
- The first year was dedicated to planning, and the second year involves a pilot program with outreach efforts underway.
- The program includes career navigators in LEAs working with transition specialists, guidance counselors and teachers to support students and their families.

Patrick Peto, Program Manager for Quality Assurance, Policy & Planning

Policy Updates

Policy review committees meet three times a year to update policies in line with federal regulation.

- The committee is working to simplify letters and correspondence to consumers, using plain language and minimizing technical jargon.

QA Update

- The agency is in its fifth or sixth year of quality assurance case reviews, where teams review cases per district to ensure policy expectations are met and consumer needs are addressed.
- We are in the process of reviewing OBVS and should finish by the end of June, then we will meet and recognize the good work and determine and plan what needs improvement.

Toni March, Director of the Office for Blindness & Vision Services

Update on the Office for Blindness & Vision Services in combination with the SRC subgroup update:

SRC Sub-Committee:

- The SRC for the Blind Services subcommittee meets quarterly, with Penny Reeder as the chair.
- The committee discussed case reviews from the previous year and how OBVS has used those reviews to instruct staff.

OBVS Training Programs:

- Report from an outside source led to the creation of two staff trainings:
 - VR training for quality case reviews.
 - Training for the Independent Living Older Blind program.
- One program focused on employment, resources, job seeking, and goal setting.
- Another upcoming program will focus on independent living, older blind resource sharing, coding, and technical reporting.

Business Enterprise Program (BEP):

- Provides opportunities for legally blind individuals to operate vending facilities in federal buildings.
- Rehabilitation Services Administration encouraged direct operation of vending machines by the blind vendors.
- October 2024: First vending route training initiated; 23 managers received training.
- One OBVS consumer was accepted into full vendor training: 14 modules with Chicago Lighthouse and 3-month on-the-job training.
- Many blind vendors are out of work due to the reduced in-person workforce in the federal government because of COVID.
- BEP staff are busy with calls to reopen facilities with the expectation of the federal workforce returning in person.
- Concession facilities are being reinvented into micro markets that are more automated and cost-effective.

Tom Liniak, Director WTC

- We design and implement employment training programs with on-site internships and classroom components.
- Programs run at the Workforces and Technology Center in Baltimore and in the community.
- Childcare program partnered with the Y of Central Maryland, leading to hires.
- Food service program extended to healthcare companies with sites across the state.
- First employment training program in Salisbury, MD., on March 17th.
- Training programs provide experience and on-site training, increasing the success rate for being hired by two and half times.

Questions and Discussions:

- Montgomery County: Interest in biotechnology opportunities for neurodiverse individuals with specific skills.
 - Tom Liniak is already in talks with three different companies.

- Training programs for entry-level biotech jobs previously existed.
- Trainings are not only in retail.
- Wide array of programs are offered, including pharmacy tech.
- Apprenticeship opportunities are available, including IT apprenticeships leading to cyber security.

Committees:

- **Reviewing traditional committees:**
 - Policy and Quality Assurance
 - Blindness and Vision Services
 - Membership
 - Employment/Career Development
 - Strategic Planning & Public Relations
- Considering condensing committees to build up three subcommittees.
- Questioning the need for a separate Policy and Quality Assurance committee.

Policy and Quality Assurance committee

- There was a discussion on whether to have a subcommittee or review policies as a whole group.
- Agreed with keeping policy committee because of its importance to the State Rehabilitation Council.
- Dr. Jones thanked Patrick for providing necessary information from the quality assurance side.
- It was suggested that the committee present upcoming policies and gather feedback from the SRC.

Blindness and Vision Services

- Anyone is welcome to join the Blindness and Vision Service Sub-committee, including community members who are not SRC members.
- The Blindness and Vision Services Sub- committee meets quarterly to share resources and updates.

Membership Committee

- It is suggested that membership recruitment becomes a group effort and a regular agenda item.
- Recommendation was made that members invite individuals to the SRC meetings and to join the SRC.

- Katherine checked the bylaws and confirmed that membership is a standing committee.

Employment and Career Development

- Neil Christopher suggests reaching out to regional DORS offices for employer recommendations if non-council members can be on the committee.
- He added that more employer involvement can help answer questions, build an employer network, and make DORS job easier.
- Beth shares that Ad Hoc members are permissible on subcommittees.
- Wanda Peele would be a resource for identifying businesses in each region to join the subcommittee.

Strategic Planning and Public Relations

- The Strategic Planning and Public Relations committee has potential value, especially for advocacy and coordinating public meetings.
- Jody Boone volunteers Samantha McGinley to be on the committee, as well as Kim Schultz.
- Michelle Hamlin suggests increasing the digital presence, social media platforms, and website awareness.
- Dr. Bonner thanked Todd for providing a list of contacts and resources for marketing and outreach.

Legislative Committee and Membership

- A legislative committee could advocate for DORS.
- It is suggested that everyone take a role in membership, present the names of potential members, and invite them to meetings.
- A motion is made to remove the membership committee as a subcommittee.
- The motion was seconded.

Combining Legislative Committee with Strategic Planning

- It is suggested to tie the legislative committee in with strategic planning and public relations.
- Some believe legislation and advocacy are public facing, making it a logical fit.
- Members are asked to express interest in joining subcommittees.

Subcommittee Leadership

- Parick Peto is willing to lead the Policy and Quality Assurance committee.

- Penny Reeder is willing to lead the Blindness and Vision Services committee.
- Wanda Peel is willing to lead the Employment and Career Development committee.
- Jody will confirm if Kim wants to continue leading the Strategic Planning and Public Relations committee.

Committee Sign-Ups

Policy & Planning:

Dr. Erik Bonner
 Dr. Katherine Jones
 Marla Friedman
 Kristina Richards
 Chandra Smith

Public Relations & Quality Assurance:

Hunter Whitt
 Marla Friedman
 Michele Hamlin
 Todd Tolson
 Jamie Stoner
 Corey Richo

Employment and Career Development:

Labria Shannon
 Penny Reeder
 Michele Hamlin
 Sherria Young - Smith
 Chandra Smith
 Jeffrey Neill Christopher

Blindness and Vision Services:

Ronza Othman
 Penny Reeder
 Sherria Young- Smith

Meeting Schedules

- There was some discussion about changing the meeting time from 4 to 6 to 3 to 5.
- Also, a discussion about alternating meeting times; having one meeting at 12:00, the next meeting keeping it at 4 to 6.
- The Chair will put together a survey and see what everyone's likes are and present that at the next SRC meeting.

Pending Appointments

- Brendan Steiner from Disability Rights Maryland applied again.

Attendance Policy

- For new members, there is an attendance policy.
- Council members should attend council meetings on a regular basis.
- Any member missing two consecutive meetings without due cause shall be contacted by the Executive Committee to determine his or her interest in serving on the Council.
- The missing of three consecutive meetings without due cause will result in the Executive Committee forwarding a recommendation for removal to the Governor.

Vice Chair Nomination

- The Committee needs to nominate and vote on a vice Chair.
- The Chair will send out an email asking for nominations followed by an urgent request to vote.

NFB Conference

The NFB conference was held in Ocean City, MD. From February 13 to the 16th, Valentines Day Weekend. It was a huge success.

National Coalition for Rehabilitation State councils conference (NCRSC)

- The National Coalition for Rehabilitation State Councils Spring 2025 conference will be held in Bethesda, MD. on Saturday, April 5th and Sunday, April 6th.
- It will be followed by the CSAVR conference.
- If you have an interest in possibly joining that conference, reach out to Dr. Katherine Jones or Sherri Alban.

Public comments

- It was noted that there was a high number of consumers present, especially parents from Montgomery County.
 - The parents were encouraged to attend meetings to understand the agency and their rights
 - There were wishes for more parents of blind individuals to attend.

- Senate Bill 433, the Office of Disability Employment Advancement and Policy (ODEAP) in Maryland as a model employer initiative was mentioned.
 - It will be under the Department of Disabilities.
 - An urge for support through letters to the assembly was made to the committee, as it will open doors.
 - Request for the information to be shared in the chat.
- An express for concern about the Department of Education and hopes for updates was made.
- It was suggested that the council consider writing a letter of support for the vocational Rehabilitation program.
 - Mention was made of the importance of vocal support for government programs.
 - Staff offered support in drafting a template if needed.

Adjournment

Respectfully Submitted,

Sherri Alban

MSRC Staff Support