**Department of Rehabilitation Services**

**Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)**

# Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired

## Minutes

### March 21, 2019

**Members Present**

**Alan Sylvestre, Chairman, Eileen Akers, Andrea Giudice, David Gregoire, Katherine Guzman, Beth Rival, , Stephen Thal, Samuel Pride, and Randa Utter.**

**Members Absent**

**Darcy Jones, Astread Ferron-Poole (representing the DSS Commissioner), and Mary Silverberg.**

**Others Present**

**Amy Porter, DORS Commissioner, Brian Sigman, BESB Director, Chris Lassen, Adult Services Supervisor, Catherine Summ, Education Supervisor, Edward Owens, Business Enterprise Program Supervisor, Mary Burgard, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, Lisa Tanguay, Office Supervisor, Lori St. Amand, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Kathleen Sullivan, DORS Director of Planning, Communications and Operational Readiness, and Andrew Norton, DORS Legislative and Administrative Advisor.**

**Welcome and Introductions**

**Chairperson Sylvestre called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.**

**Public Comment**

**None**

**Old Business**

**MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Akers, seconded by Ms. Giudice to adopt the minutes from December 18, 2018 with one correction changing Mr. Thal’s first name to “Stephen” rather than “Steve.” Motion carried unanimously.**

**Daily Living Aids Workgroup Update**

**Mr. Thal reported that he was not able to convene the workgroup since the last meeting, but recommended that an on-line resource guide be compiled which should include a list of local community providers where members of the public would be able to purchase devices or receive services for those who are not eligible for BESB services. Ms. Akers gave an update on behalf of the Lions Clubs regarding the BESB large print calendar. Since a significant cost would be incurred by the Lions Low Vision Centers to print these calendars, they are not financially able to take on that expense. Ms. Giudice recommended that BESB inquire if the agency would be able to sell the large print calendars to individuals who are not registered with BESB.**

**Blindness-Community Outreach Workgroup Proposals**

**Mr. Thal recommended that activities should be planned to promote more public awareness of Blind Americans Equality Day. Ms. Guzman recommended the use of social media (Facebook) to help promote awareness. A workgroup consisting of Ms. Guzman, Mr. Thal, Mr. Gregoire, and Mr. Sigman was formed to explore options for this year’s activities.**

**New Business**

**Bureau Update**

**Mr. Sigman expressed concern that BESB is losing two low vision doctors due to retirements and that additional low vision doctor retirements are anticipated in the coming months. Both of the doctors who are retiring reported to Mr. Sigman that they were unsuccessful in finding another eye doctor to take over their practice. Mr. Sigman indicated that he has been researching options to address the diminishing availability of low vision doctors to serve clients of the agency.**

**Mr. Sigman also reported that DORS has a new website that will be launched in early April. The BESB portion of the website will look different in the new layout, which is more service-specific rather that program-specific in the format.**

**Mr. Lassen reported on the Adult Services Program. Mobility instructor David Ferland transferred from Children’s Services to Adult Services on January 22, 2019. A new Special Assistant to the Blind will be starting on March 29, 2019 and she will be assigned to the rehabilitation teacher who covers the Bridgeport area. The four rehabilitation teachers are developing a protocol for training in the use of smartphone apps that can assist persons with blindness. Human Service Advocate Donna Gore has reassumed the role of receiving referrals from eye doctors. Mobility staff recently conducted a Blindness Awareness Training for fixed-route bus drivers in the Hartford office of Connecticut Transit and will also be conducting driver trainings in New Haven and Stamford.**

**Lori St. Amand reported that the volunteer program continues in its efforts to recruit new volunteers. The Department of Public Safety has implemented a fee for all criminal history reports causing DORS to now incur an expense for obtaining background checks for prospective volunteers. April is Volunteer Appreciation Month and Ms. St. Amand will be sending out letters of appreciation to the cadre of volunteers.**

**Catherine Summ reported on the Children’s Services Program. A new field day program was launched for students with deafblindness, focusing on music discovery and exploration activities. Additional activities have included a movie day with an introduction to audio-described movies, adaptive ski day at Ski Sundown, a penguin discovery program at Mystic Aquarium and a field trip to the New Britain Museum of American Art. Future events include a preschool field trip to Dinosaur State Park in Rocky Hill and a Family Fire Safety day.**

**Commissioner Porter reported on the Governor’s proposed budget that includes favorable funding levels for the programs administered by DORS. She also reported on House Bill 7163 that proposes to change the name of the agency to the Department of Aging and Disability Services, recognizing the new structure of the agency that includes the State Unit on Aging. The mission of the agency has also expanded accordingly to “maximizing opportunities for the independence and wellbeing of people with disabilities and older adults in Connecticut.”**

**Vocational Rehabilitation Client Handbook Update**

**Mr. Sigman expressed appreciation for the feedback that he has received so far from Advisory Board members and reminded the members that there is still an opportunity to offer recommendations. He is hoping to have the draft handbook finalized and in use in April, replacing the current version that is outdated.**

**Budget Update**

**Mr. Sigman reported that the proposed budget the Governor put forward for fiscal years 2020 and 2021 includes increases for Children’s Services, Vocational Rehabilitation and community inclusion services for individuals who are deafblind. Based on current funding projections, in federal fiscal year (FFY) 2021 it may be possible to serve all eligible individuals in the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program without the need for an Order of Selection. Mr. Sigman noted that the level of projected funding versus the level of anticipated expenses for FFY 2021 is very tight and he will continue to provide updates to the members on whether or not an Order of Selection would be needed in FFY 2021. The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) will begin to access the New Haven Cotton Fund to help the program to meet expenses that are associated with the BEP food service locations in New Haven County.**

**Legislative Update**

**Mr. Norton reported that a bill was passed out of the Insurance Committee mandating health insurance coverage for the purchase of service dogs. Another bill that passed out of the Human Services Committee would require the state to make their websites and public safety notices auditory accessible for people who are blind. Another bill would restrict the types of service dogs that could enter public places.**

**Points to the Good and Welfare**

**Ms. Rival reported on the death of Ms. Anne Walsh, one of the members of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Connecticut. Due to her death, the East of the River Chapter of the NFB is now closed after 47 years. The new mailing address for the NFB of Connecticut is 111 Sheldon Road, Unit 420, Manchester, CT 06045.**

**Mr. Thal and other Scouters who are Masons took the opportunity to present a certificate and letter from the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of CT A.F. & A.M. to the new Eagle Scouts at their Eagle Courts of Honor statewide. Mr. Thal was able to speak about facing his challenges of blindness and hearing impairment and how the principles of Masonry and Scouting have helped him continue on his life’s path. Mr. Thal expressed his gratitude towards mobility instructor Matt Cornelius for his prompt action when Mr. Thal recently experienced a medical emergency.**

**Ms. Akers reported that Ms. Gerry Cohen, who was a longtime and dedicated reader for the Library for the Blind passed away recently. Ms. Akers also reported that CRIS Radio is struggling financially.**

**MOTION: On a motion by Ms. Giudice, seconded by Ms. Utter, the meeting adjourned at 12:00 noon.**

**Next meeting – 20 June 2019, 10:00 a.m. to noon at 184 Windsor Avenue, Windsor, CT**