South Carolina Commission for the Blind
1430 Confederate Avenue
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes
March 16, 2021

Notifications of all regular, called, or special meetings are compliant with the FOIA requirements, Section 90-4-80.

Call to Order

Chairperson Johnson called the meeting to order at 1:31 pm. The meeting was conducted via Zoom Meeting software.

Present

Dr. Judy Johnson, Chairperson
Peter Smith, Vice Chairperson
Mary Sonksen, Secretary
Catherine Olker
Susan John
Darline Graham, Commissioner

**Adoption of Agenda**

Vice Chairman Smith made a motion to accept the March 16, 2021 Agenda. It was seconded by Susan John. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Public Comment

None.

Approval of Minutes

Secretary Sonksen made a motion to accept February 16, 2021 minutes. It was seconded by Cathy Olker. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Finance Report

Matt Daugherty reported:

* The agency had utilized 67% of the state fiscal year budget.
* Administration had utilized 65% of its budget.
* Rehabilitation Services had utilized 79% of its budget. The amount was high due to the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) contract, which required the full year of spending to be committed on the front end.
* Region I had utilized 60% of its budget.
* Region II had utilized 72% of its budget.
* Region III had utilized 62% of its budget.
* Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center for Employment and Independence (EBMRCEI) had utilized 37% of its budget. The amount was low due to the closure of the Center during the pandemic.
* Prevention of Blindness had utilized 11% of its budget. The amount was low due to a vacant counselor position for most of the year.
* Older Blind had utilized 51% of its budget. The amount was slightly low due to the lack of Low Vision Clinics during the first part of the year.
* Children’s Services had utilized 62% of its budget.
* Business Enterprise Program (BEP) had utilized 64% of its budget.
* Training and Employment had utilized 56% of its budget.
* Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) had utilized 76% of the required 15% for the 2020 grant.
* 82% of the Independent Living for Older Blind grant had been utilized.
* Spending against the Supported Employment grant was showing progress.
* The agency had utilized 30% of the 2020 Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) grant, which included receipt of a $1 million re-allotment.

Facilities & Operations Report

Matt Daugherty reported:

* The Florence District Office would move to a downtown area location at the end of the month.
* The Conway District Office would move to a new location by the end of May.
* A search was underway for a new location for the Charleston District Office. Census data was being used to determine a convenient and central location so that services could be easily and effectively offered to more consumers.
* The state would require all new locations to be in compliance regarding elevators, bathrooms, lobby area, hallways, parking for staff, and accessibility for individuals with all types of disabilities.

**Human Resources Report**

Wanda Miller reported:

* Changes to the Human Resources (HR) report would provide information on specific employee titles, such as Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC), Caseload Technician, and titles of staff at the EBMRCEI, plus location information on filled and vacant positions. The report would also show how HR was working with supervisors to take action on vacant positions and provide information on new hires and separations for the month.
* HR had initiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with The University of South Carolina for VR Interns that would assist with filling positions. In the past, these had been paid internships.
* Duties for the vacant position in HR would be changed to include more assistance with recruiting, such as helping with job fairs, engaging candidates, and encouraging qualified candidates, including veterans, to apply for vacancies.

Commissioner’s Report

Darline Graham reported:

* Commissioner Graham had attended a Senate Human Services Subcommittee meeting on February 17. Bill S430, which would change the frequency of the Board meetings, had been considered and approved by the Senate. This bill was introduced last year but died in the approval process due to the pandemic. It will also have to be approved by the House.
* A follow-up meeting with Kimberly Tissot, Executive Director at Able SC, and her staff was held on February 19 to discuss how to improve the partnership and ensure individuals get the best services possible.
* On February 24, a meeting had been held with Sandy Jordan, Director of Employment programs for Able SC; Chip Kennedy, Project Director, Interwork Institute at San Diego University; and Carol Anderson, Consumer Services Director at the Vocational Rehabilitation General Agency, to discuss the agency’s role in the Customized Employment Initiative. The initiative personalizes the employment relationship between the job seeker and employer in a way that meets the needs of both.
* BEP held the first virtual Blind Licensed Vendor (BLV) Annual Meeting on February 26 - 27. During the meeting, Marcellous Primus, Matt Daugherty, Carrie Morris, and Commissioner Graham discussed the state and federal laws and regulations that applied to the BEP, and the research into those laws to ensure the agency had a clear understanding and was compliant with the laws and regulations. Guest speakers spoke on topics focusing on the challenges COVID-19 had presented to the vending operators.
* A follow-up meeting was held on March 2 with Jennifer Bazer, Executive Director for the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). Jennifer would be working with agency staff to plan this year’s Summer Teen Program, which would be a hybrid of virtual and in-person activities. The program would include work-based learning experiences and guest speakers.
* On March 3, the agency had its Senate Budget Hearing. Funding for Salary Adjustments, Prevention of Blindness Services, the Older Blind Program, and a Capital Budget request for a new HVAC system had been presented.
* Commissioner Graham and several staff members attended the virtual 2021 Vision Submit on March 5. The theme was “Leveling the Educational Playing Field Through Accessible Technology and Materials for Students with Visual Impairments.” Information shared was related to assistive technology and educational support, virtual platforms that could bring e-learning into homes, and assistive technology devices designed to help teachers.
* The Confirmation Hearing for Mary Sonksen had been held on March 10.
* On March 11, Commissioner Graham attended the quarterly Midlands Workforce Development Board meeting. Apprenticeship opportunities that could help youth train for careers with better wages and benefits had been discussed.
* Commissioner Graham and Zunaira Wasif attended the SC Disability Employment Coalition Infrastructure Committee meeting. The committee consisted of state agencies, community organizations, and other stakeholders that help reduce employment barriers for individuals with disabilities in South Carolina.
* A meeting with the Senior Managers had been held to discuss the agency’s Strategic Plan, and the progress made over the past several months despite the pandemic. The RSA report, once received, would also help the agency with strategic planning.
* As part of basic restructuring, Melissa Young would serve as Case Manager for the EBMRC. Kisa Grate, the Director of Training and Employment, would supervise all training, including the EBMRC. This would put all training under one umbrella, including adjustment to blindness, braille, assistive technology, home management, orientation and mobility, and customized employment.
* The Governor had issued Executive Order 2021-12 directing state agencies to immediately expedite the transition back to normal operations. The Executive Order, and guidance from the Department of Administration, meant that, effective March 15, 2021, all employees would be expected to return to the workplace full-time. As a result, in-person services would increase. The agency would continue implementing measures to ensure the safety of staff and consumers, including providing PPE and developing protocols for safe service provision. With safety protocols in place, the residential facility would gradually reopen.
* The agency’s Intranet would be operational within the next week. This tool would help improve internal communication for staff and serve as a centralized location for announcements, memos, and shared department documents.

BEP Report/Annual Meeting

Marcellous Primus and Matt Daugherty reported:

* BEP was providing services to 99 stands operated by 69 BLVs. All facilities were using caution when bringing back the BLVs and other vendors.
* The Federal Restoration and Relief Funds Appropriation had awarded over $839,000 for relief payments to the BLVs in South Carolina.
* RSA had provided assistance to the agency in developing a fair and accurate process to distribute Financial Relief and Restoration Payments (FRRP) to BLVs to offset losses suffered in 2020. A plan would be developed and submitted to RSA for final approval prior to issuing relief checks.
* Two consumers had been assessed for the next training class and three were waiting to be assessed.
* BEP had one vacancy for a repair technician and one vacancy for a Business Consultant.
* The 2021 Blind Licensed Vendor’s Annual Meeting had been held virtually on February 26 – 27. The theme was “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now.” Fifty BLVs attended the meeting.
* Finance staff had worked with BEP staff to review State and Federal regulations to establish an effective way of providing benefit payments to the BLVs.
* A meeting with the BEP Committee and the BLVs had been held to clarify the federal and state laws and regulations regarding the distribution of vending machine income. The system was currently distributing 30% for benefits, 20% for a reserve fund, and 50% for program funds. A 50/50 split had been proposed for distribution of funds collected and would be voted on by the BLVs. A discussion was held about vending options on public property (state, county, municipal and local government) and how recently proposed legislation would affect the program.
* A discussion was held to change the annual distribution of funds to a quarterly distribution.

Old Business

None.

New Business

A vote was taken and passed unanimously to resume in-person Board meetings beginning May 17, 2021. The meetings would be held in-person but continue to have a virtual component.

Public Comment

Rhonda Thompson commented:

* As a result of COVID-19, closures of doctor offices, and a vacancy in the Prevention of Blindness program (POB), the number of referrals had been substantially low. Counselors and doctors had begun to meet with consumers and referrals were gradually increasing.
* Work had begun with the Director of Communications to revise program information on the agency website to ensure accessibility.
* The Conway office would serve consumers with a low vision clinic once its move was completed. Several specialists in the area would provide assistance.
* The agency continued to work with Jennifer Bazer, President of the South Carolina National Federation of the Blind, and her team to offer regular workshops for young consumers and parents. A children’s camp would be offered June 26 – July 2, 2021.

Executive Session

Chairperson Johnson called for a motion to go into Executive Session to discuss a personnel matter. The motion was made by Susan John and seconded by Vice Chairperson Smith. Motion passed unanimously. No discussion.

Chairperson Johnson reported that no vote was taken during Executive Session. A motion was made by Susan John to send a letter to Senator Leatherman requesting a salary adjustment for Commissioner Graham. The motion was seconded by Vice Chairperson Smith. No discussion. Motion passed unanimously.

Adjournment

There being no further business, a motion was made by Chairperson Johnson to adjourn at 3:23 pm, seconded by Ms. John. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Future Board Meeting Schedule

April 20, 2021
May 18, 2021

Signatures

Dr. Judy Johnson, Chairperson

Mary Sonksen, Secretary

Date