South Carolina Commission for the Blind

1430 Confederate Avenue  
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes   
July 26, 2022

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

# Call to Order

Chairperson Johnson called the meeting to order at 11:00 am. The meeting was conducted in person and via Zoom Meeting software.

# Present

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

# Adoption of Agenda

Susan John made a motion to accept the July 26, 2022, Agenda. It was seconded by Mary Sonksen. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Public Comment

Brooks Harken with the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ABVI) stated that they had received great feedback from some of their clients, who are also consumers at SCCB, about the services they had received over the past year.

# Approval of Minutes

Cathy Olker made a motion to approve the June 28, 2022, minutes. It was seconded by Mary Sonksen. The motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Olker asked if a notation such as “see attached report” could be incorporated into the minutes so that all of the information would not have to be written into the minutes. Chairperson Johnson added that it could be helpful moving forward.

# Commissioner’s Report

## Darline Graham reported:

Commissioner Graham began by thanking ABVI for positive feedback they provided.

Summer Teen – Debriefing for the Summer Teen program occurred over the past month. It was the first time since 2019 that the program was held on the Columbia Campus. Despite a few challenges, it was a success, and the Commissioner thanked the staff members and partners. STEM week, led by Dr. Thomas Madura, was an opportunity for the teens to learn about careers in science, technology, engineering and math. In addition, TVIs (teachers of visually impaired students) Lauren Beckman and Mary Robbins, along with Dr. Tina Herzberg of USC Upstate, who attended training led by Dr. Madura at Washington State School for the Blind, will be able better serve the students in their school districts who are visually impaired. In addition, the Training Center Residential Handbook will be amended to better fit the needs of the Summer Teen program.

NFB Annual Convention – The Commissioner and Karma Marshall attended the National Federation of the Blind Annual Convention. Meeting with representatives of Training Centers in Louisiana and Colorado, they learned how each focus strongly on home management. Consumers receive intensive, hands-on, individualized instruction on meal preparation, after which they are expected to prepare their own three meals per day for the nine months they are in the program. They participated in the convention Job Fair as an employer and met several potential candidates who may apply for SCCB vacancies. Assistive technology on display included an interactive audio-tactile map that could be incorporated into the agency’s renovation and landscape plan. This was also something recommended by the agency’s Staff Advisory Council.

Training Center – Regular meetings with consumers provided valuable feedback such as implementing peer support group meetings facilitated by a counselor and bringing in consumers who have achieved employment success to share their stories. One consumer commented that, when he came to the agency, he felt lost and was unable to navigate alone. But now, “thanks to the Commission, I don’t feel like there is anywhere I can’t go alone.”

End of Fiscal Year – The agency ended the State Fiscal Year very close to its target for spending, an improvement compared to last year. The new Business Enterprise Program AWARE module, which replaced outdated legacy software, has already proven beneficial. It has allowed the agency to accurately collect and track the Blind Licensed Vendor Stand Reports, and will eventually allow all reports to be available electronically. Quality Assurance (QA) Consumer Satisfaction Survey results show the agency is trending up since 2019 in multiple categories for Vocational Rehabilitation and Older Blind. Successful employment outcomes are up 19% compared to last year. A BEP Consultant will soon start in the Greenville office.

New Employees – New employee Benjamin Jackson, Licensed Practical Nurse, was welcomed to the agency.

Ms. Olker asked about the final speaker for the Summer Teen program. Commissioner Graham responded that Chad Foster inspired the teens and that many of them stayed afterward to meet him and get his audio book.

Ms. Olker also asked about the meals prepared by consumers (in Louisiana and Colorado), what type of kitchens they had available, and if this could be replicated in South Carolina. Commissioner Graham replied they had apartment style suites with a kitchen in each, but that SCCB only has a few kitchens. Susan John commented that it may be possible to have consumers alternate or rotate meal preparation to gain more experience. She added that she had seen a smart microwave at a recent event that may be beneficial for consumers. Commissioner Graham added that when this was discussed in the consumer meeting, the consumers were very excited about this opportunity.

# Finance Report

## Matt Daugherty reported:

This is an interim report on the previous State Fiscal Year (SFY 2022). The final report would be delivered next month along with the first report for SFY 2023.

State Budget – Agency spending is 90%. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has utilized 86% of the budget, the Training Center 97%, Transition Services 57%, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) is slightly over due to equipment purchases, but this will be adjusted and is not a problem, Prevention of Blindness 47%, Older Blind 99%, Children’s Services 98%, and Administration 76%. Susan John asked why Prevention of Blindness was less than 50% expended. Mr. Daugherty replied it was due to staffing; one person currently serves that program. Commissioner Graham added that the agency received funding for three new positions for Prevention and this would enable rebuilding the program. In response to a follow up question from Ms. John, Commissioner Graham said the current position is at the Columbia Campus, but as the program is rebuilt there will be one employee in each region.

Federal Grants – The 2021 VR grant is 71% expended. Many things remain to be attributed to this. Pre-Employment Transition Services portion of the grant is 78% expended, the Older Blind grant is 88% expended, and the Supported Employment grants are 2% expended. The Randolph-Sheppard Financial Restoration and Relief Plan was a one-time dollar amount that was fully expended for Blind Licensed Vendors (BLV). Attributions to the 2022 grant were beginning.

Capital Improvement Projects – Building A renovations and Landscaping project were in Phase 2 of design. Final designs for the HVAC project were expected in August. A new project was added, the Gressette Canteen Remodel at the Statehouse. The Statehouse would handle the remodel and the agency would provide BEP equipment. When the agency met with the statehouse, their representative commented that they had heard very good things about SCCB and that a lot of good things were occurring. Susan John asked if they would have to follow the same procurement process as the agency and Mr. Daugherty replied affirmatively.

Dr. Johnson inquired about the cafeteria at the agency and if it was on the project list. Mr. Daugherty replied that it was not. Adjustments and repairs had been made to some of the equipment in preparation for service. Mr. Skinner would speak to this issue later in the meeting.

# Human Resources Report

## Luis Mendoza reported:

Training Center – There was one separation, the Licensed Practical Nurse for third shift. When this report was created, the LPN position was pending advertisement, but was now advertised. Additionally, there was already a candidate for that position. Susan John asked if this was a position with a sign-on bonus. Mr. Mendoza replied that bonuses were considered only for critical and hard to fill positions such as counselors. He explained that there was a procedure to get bonuses approved through State Human Resources. He added that he was working with State HR to classify the Orientation and Mobility Instructor positions as critical to be able to offer a bonus and relocation expenses for them. He noted that many candidates, such as the BEP Consultant hired for Greenville, have been from out of state.

Administrative Assistant positions – There was one hire and two separations.

Dr. Johnson clarified with Mr. Mendoza that the number of vacancies for June was six and the number of hires was one. Mr. Mendoza added that there were more hires that would begin with the agency in July and August. In response to Dr. Johnson, Mr. Mendoza stated that the new hire for July was a LPN for second shift, and for August, the attorney. Mr. Mendoza added that the attorney, Thomas Smith, had twenty years of experience in assisting public health organizations and he would begin August 17.

Susan John asked if the HR report could list the oldest vacancies first, and if columns could be added for categories such as offers accepted and declined and readvertisements. Mr. Mendoza said this would be added.

# **Program Services Update**

## Karma Marshall reported:

Ms. Marshall began by asking if the board had any questions about the Program Services 4th Quarter report provided to them. Susan John first asked how the data in the report provided to the Board would be utilized. Ms. Marshall replied that it was used to identify trends in the programs, where referrals were occurring, where staff was needed, and it would inform the budget process. With regard to the public comment from Brooks Harken, she noted that the agency had created a fourth region by dividing an existing region, with the resulting Region 3 covering the Pee Dee and Region 4 covering the Lowcountry. Consequently, the agency can more effectively serve consumer needs. Ms. John asked if the indicated increase in Older Blind referrals resulted from more people exiting the workforce and Ms. Marshall said that was correct. She added that age-related vision issues were also factor with people living longer.

An attendee asked if the Program Services 4th Quarter was available, and Ms. Marshall responded that it was material provided to board members.

Ms. Marshall noted that Chad Foster’s presentation, which closed the Summer Teen program, was powerful. Mr. Foster lost his vision in college because of retinitis pigmentosa. One of the teens had the same condition and was inspired by Mr. Foster’s story and spoke at length with him after the event.

Regarding previous questions about kitchens for the consumers, Ms. Marshall said there were three kitchens in addition to the two currently used by consumers in Home Management that could be available. In addition to learning cooking skills, she added that consumers could be responsible for meal planning and shopping, which would further their orientation and mobility skills. Consumers having two or more conditions could potentially be addressed through nutrition and dietary education.

Regarding a question about the Prevention of Blindness program from Ms. John, Ms. Marshall noted that, as a result of the pandemic, it took time for medical providers to resume performing procedures and that some consumers were resistant to have a procedure, both of which impacted spending.

Residential Program – Ten adult day and ten adult residential consumers returned to the Training Center on July 11. Some of the consumers will complete their training soon and new consumers are ready to begin their training.

Summer Teen – As a result of debriefing after completion of Summer Teen, a project document and timeline will be created to document program needs and staff responsibilities throughout the year. The Consumer Handbook will also be updated to address the differences in emergency and safety protocols between teens and adults.

Prevention of Blindness – Rhonda Thompson and Taylor Cornelius drafted a new Prevention of Blindness policy in preparation for utilizing the increased funding received from the state. Once the draft is complete, it will be presented to the Board for review.

Digital Literacy – Ms. Marshall and Steve Cook, Assistive Technology Consultant, will join a statewide committee focusing on advancing digital literacy. It will be facilitated by Marty McKenzie from the School for the Deaf and Blind. Other stakeholders include Dr. Tina Herzberg with USC Upstate’s TVI program, representatives from the Department of Education, and the Vision Institute of SC.

Employment Outcomes – Successful employment outcomes increased by 19% over the past year, reflecting the hard work of staff, especially considering vacancies. One example of a success involved a consumer who is Deafblind. The consumer was hired as a junior software developer for Booz Allen Hamilton. Service provision was a collaboration between the Deafblind/Bilingual Coordinator, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, Employment Consultant, Administrative Assistant, and others. Services received by the consumer included tuition sponsorship, assistive technology devices, provision of a tactile interpreter, and an internship opportunity.

Ms. Olker asked about supported employment and how future assistive technology needs for this consumer would be handled. Ms. Marshall responded it was handled on a case-by-case basis. If, 90 days after placement, the consumer still needed services, the agency would continue to support them. In this case, the employer is taking on a lot of services that the agency could provide, such as providing JAWS software and a refreshable braille display.

# **Quality Assurance Update**

## Mike Daniels reported:

Data Validation Case File Reviews – Assesses performance accountability and timely service delivery per program, region, and counselor. In Quarter 4, 237 VR cases were reviewed. Dr. Johnson commented that when she compared the Quarter 4 results from 2022 to 2021, the results were slightly down. Mr. Daniels replied that the difference identified a performance gap and thus a training opportunity for staff. He noted that staff turnover also affected Quarter 4. Dr. Johnson added that it was good that the data indicated the region and individuals so that appropriate follow up could occur.

Sixty-eight Older Blind cases were reviewed. Three counselors retired or left the agency during this time. However, compared to Quarter 1, Application for Services improved from 48% to 94%. Older Blind counselors have received intensive training which accounts for this improvement. Dr. Johnson commented that Cases Reviewed had decreased from more than 100 to 68. Mr. Daniels replied that there were five counselors in earlier quarters and now there were two. Ms. John asked if other counselors had to cover the caseloads of the vacancies and Mr. Daniels replied yes.

Children’s Services had 100% in all areas. Although a smaller number of cases were reviewed, all were in compliance.

Prevention of Blindness also showed increases due to having a new staff member. For example, Application for Services increased from 29% in Quarter 2 to 91% in Quarter 4.

Consumer Satisfaction Surveys – VR Consumer Satisfaction Rate was 88.5%, up from the previous survey, and response rate 13%. Dr. Johnson inquired why the surveys cover October through March and not April through June. Mr. Daniels replied that the results for Quarters 2 and 3 were combined for this report. The Quarter 4 surveys were sent in July and the results would be available in August. Ms. John asked for clarification about the number of surveys sent (195) compared to the number of cases reviewed (237) and Mr. Daniels replied that surveys were sent to those whose cases were closed.

Older Blind Consumer Satisfaction Rate was 75% and response rate 31%. Mr. Daniels read the comment of a consumer who said, “I would like to thank SC Commission for the Blind and the counselors for giving me a second chance to see the world again, and the beautiful smiles of my grandkid’s face.”

Successful Outcomes – This report lists the average wage, average hours worked, and top ten hourly wages for the program year. Mr. Daniels also noted that the data of $72.00 for Food Service Manager had been validated.

Ms. John asked if, on the Consumer Satisfaction surveys, comments were collected to help clarify answers. Mr. Daniels responded that this information was collected, and the data shared internally.

# **Business Services Update**

## Ryan Skinner reported:

Quarterly Report – Information in the report reflects use of the new BEP AWARE module and cleanup of data in the system, plus greater accountability added to the stand reports. Mr. Skinner thanked Elaine Robertson and the team consolidating records from around the state for eventual scanning into AWARE.

SCDOT – The Department of Transportation will be updating rest areas across the state. BEP will assist with guidance and planning for updating the vending facilities at each location. The first rest area to be updated will be in the Charleston area. In the interim, the agency is looking to update equipment at existing sites.

Military Contracts – The transition to the two new BLVs operating the Fort Jackson contract proceeded smoothly and followed the established timeline with no disruption in food service provision. There was no new information regarding the Marine arbitration. Ms. John asked if feedback from the military regarding the transition and the quality of food provision was positive. Mr. Skinner said that things are improving, but that a major issue continues to be staffing. To address this, Palmetto Food Services recently hired three recruiters to be on site with the BLVs. Both BLVs have also been contributing ideas to address staffing. Mr. Skinner also connected the regional SCCB Employment Consultant and the SC Vocational Rehabilitation Department (general agency) Business Development Specialist with the Project Manager to potentially assist in filling staffing needs with individuals with disabilities. Commissioner Graham added her thanks to Mr. Skinner and his staff for the successful transition to the new BLVs and teaming partner (Palmetto Foods), adding that feedback from the military was positive about the transition.

Micro Market and Kitchen – Mr. Skinner began by explaining that a micro market has open door or open-air coolers allowing customers to take items themselves. Items may be frozen or warm. Most BEP micro markets have self-serve kiosks. It allows for expanded products to be available for customers. Mr. Skinner has worked to gather quotes for updating equipment in the kitchen at the SCCB Columbia Campus, which has been challenging. Recalling the comments from Ms. Marshall about consumers potentially using kitchens to learn food preparation skills, he noted that some BEP programs use a hybrid model where an individual can train to be independent while also training with BEP to learn about vending and canteen-type service. He added that many state facilities want to transition from cafeterias because micro markets are more cost effective, allow individuals to be served faster, and offer more food options. With this in mind, before continuing with updates to the cafeteria, the agency needs to evaluate if the kitchen should be used to train consumers and implement a micro market in the space. Dr. Johnson noted that this would require further discussion with the Board.

# Old Business

None

# New Business

None

# Public Comment

None

# Executive Session

Chairperson Johnson called for a motion to go into Executive Session to discuss a personnel matter (Hiring Plan and Commissioner Darline Graham’s Performance Evaluation). A motion was made by Mary Sonksen and seconded by Susan John. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Chairperson Johnson had to leave the meeting before the Executive Session concluded. Vice Chairperson John presided over the remainder of the meeting.

Vice Chairperson John stated that the members were out of Executive Session. No votes were taken during Executive Session.

Cathy Olker made motion to approve up $2,500 as a referral bonus and up to $10,000 as sign-on bonus for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors in the established increments. It was seconded by Peter Smith. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Mary Sonksen made motion to establish an ad hoc committee to review the Older Blind and VR series job areas. It was seconded by Peter Smith. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Peter Smith made motion to have a Special Called Meeting on August 8, 2022, at 1:30 pm. It was seconded by Cathy Olker. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Future Board Meeting Schedule

August 23, 2022

The meeting will be held in-person and via Zoom Meeting Software at 11:00 am in the Building D conference room.

# Adjournment

There being no further business, Vice Chairperson John called for a motion to adjourn at 1:27 pm. A motion was made by Peter Smith and seconded by Mary Sonksen. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Signatures

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Dr. Judy Johnson, Chairperson

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Cathy Olker, Secretary

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