South Carolina Commission for the Blind

1430 Confederate Avenue
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes
January 24, 2023

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
Darline Graham, Commissioner

# Adoption of Agenda

Accepted as written. No vote. No quorum.

# Public Comment

None.

# Approval of Minutes

Accepted as written. No vote. No quorum.

# Commissioner’s Report

## Darline Graham reported:

The agency’s turnover rate has greatly improved: in FY20 it was 17.76%, in FY21 it was 25%, in FY22 it reached 40.47%. However, during the first six months of FY23, it decreased to 11.95%. Thirty-six employees were hired or promoted in the past year, 28 were new to the agency. No counselors have left in FY23 compared to last year when nine left the agency. The agency’s Equal Employment Opportunity Attainment rate is at 89.6%, the highest it has been in eight years. Both the Training Center Manager and Residential Facility Supervisor vacancies were filled. Karma Marshall and Donna Earley were thanked for taking on additional duties regarding the Training Center for the past year. Human Resources and other staff who worked diligently to fill vacancies with qualified candidates were thanked.

Nikki Green was recognized for her work with Chaz Compton and Chip Kenny at San Diego State University on the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA). VR agencies are required to complete a CSNA every few years to assist in making improvements in their programs.

In November, the agency worked with the School for the Deaf and Blind (SCSDB) to arrange for their choir (which includes several SCCB consumers) to perform at the annual National Women Legislators Conference held in Charleston.

SCCB, in partnership with SCSDB, will host the annual Braille Challenge at its Columbia Campus on February 9.

SCCB’s House Ways and Means Budget Hearing is scheduled for February 1.

Governor McMaster has nominated four individuals for appointment to the SCCB Board of Commissioners. The next step will be confirmation by the Senate.

# Finance Report

## Matt Daugherty reported:

State Budget – Agency spending is 49.51%. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has utilized 42% of the budget, the Training Center 45%, Transition Services 38%, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) 71% (the number is high due to commitments for equipment purchases that could not be delivered last year and had to be moved to this year), Prevention of Blindness 20%, Older Blind 51%, Children’s Services 44%, and Administration 56%.

Dr. Johnson asked why the amount for “other personnel” positions was high. Mr. Daugherty replied this was due to annual leave payouts, one-time bonuses, and state pay increases. Dr. Johnson asked if overall percentages would increase above 100%. Mr. Daugherty said that funds would be moved to accommodate for that. In response for clarification from Ms. Olker, Mr. Daugherty said that the agency anticipates this type of issue and funds in the “unassigned” line item are utilized to address such issues.

Federal Grants – The 2020 and 2021 VR grants were both closed out. In 2020, the agency returned $2.9 million due to COVID-related issues. However, in 2021 the amount returned was down to $1.1 million. Spending on the 2022 grant was proceeding well.

Ms. John noted that spending of the Older Blind grant had improved significantly and asked why. Karma Marshall replied that it was due to consumer demand.

Capital Improvement Projects – All projects were progressing. The generator had arrived and will soon be placed. The HVAC and Building A Renovation projects will be coordinated to save money and time. Both are in final bidding phases. The Dennis Canteen and Wade Hampton Canteen are in phase one of design.

Ms. John asked if the completion date of May 1, 2023 was on target for the generator project. Mr. Daugherty replied that it could be June 12, but would have to be completed before the Summer Teen program. Commissioner Graham added that the Generator Project may be pushed back by three weeks if needed to avoid conflict with Summer Teen.

# Human Resources Report

## Luis Mendoza reported:

Management positions – As of December, there were three vacancies and two offers had been made. The VR Training Center Manager will start February 2. The IT Manager started in January. A new vacancy in December was the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) Program Lead position. The position will be posted soon.

Counselor positions – A candidate was hired internally for the Charleston VR counselor position. This resulted in a Children’s Services counselor vacancy. Interviews are continuing for the Charleston Older Blind position. An Older Blind counselor was hired for Rock Hill. A candidate was hired internally for the Orangeburg VR position. This resulted in an Older Blind counselor vacancy in Columbia. Interviews are continuing for the Aiken VR counselor position.

Administrative Assistant positions – Candidates were hired for the Conway and Florence positions (both have started). Interviews were completed for a Columbia position and a selection will soon be made. A candidate was hired for the (pilot) Intake Specialist position in Conway (and has started).

Ms. Olker asked how the Intake Specialist will affect services. Ms. Marshall replied that the Intake Specialist will ensure the consumer is in the appropriate program and gather all information needed for the counselor to determine eligibility for that program. The position will be piloted for 6 months.

Training Center positions – Interviews will soon be scheduled for the home management instructor position.

Dr. Johnson asked, referring to a previous meeting, about being able to pay more to contract with existing O&M specialists. Mr. Daugherty said that rates were in the process of being raised. Ms. Marshall added that once the O&M contractors bid and are vetted by State Procurement, they will be awarded the contract. Dr. Johnson asked if this meant there would no longer be a need for O&M hires. Ms. Marshall replied that contractors are limited regarding their time and where they choose to travel; therefore, the agency would continue to seek full-time O&M specialists. Commissioner Graham added there is a need to have O&M specialists at the Training Center and within communities to meet consumer needs. Dr. Johnson asked about getting more O&M instructors trained, possibly in North Carolina. Mr. Mendoza replied that the agency recruits for O&M specialists out-of-state, but the challenge is that potential candidates usually accept positions within the state they live. He added that the agency is excited to work with the University of South Carolina Upstate to develop an in-state program to train O&M specialists. Ms. Marshall added that USC Upstate is working with the Department of Education and hopes to offer a two-year O&M program beginning in Fall 2023. Ms. John asked if the agency could assist students with tuition if they agreed to work for the agency for a specified time. Commissioner Graham said the agency is exploring that option and currently has two staff in the process of obtaining their O&M certification.

# **Consumer Services Update**

## Karma Marshall reported:

Residential Program – Fifteen consumers received training at the Training Center in December. Training paused from December 19 through January 9 due to state holidays.

Dr. Johnson asked why the number of consumers dropped from 19 in previous months to 15. Ms. Marshall replied that it was because some completed their training and because it was more efficient to start new consumers after the holidays. Dr. Johnson asked how many were staying at the residential facility and Ms. Marshall replied six.

Based on consumer feedback, the agency met with STRIVE4You, a non-profit organization that provides self-defense instruction for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. The agency is planning to have STRIVE4You provide a workshop every other month for adult consumers. Additionally, the agency hopes to incorporate self-defense and adaptive sports into the Summer Teen program.

Dr. Johnson asked if a concern that STRIVE4You may not be able to address obesity issues had been addressed. Ms. Marshall said that STRIVE4You programs included a health and wellness component, and that programs would be adapted based on need.

Summer Teen program – Scheduled for three weeks beginning June 12. Dr. Thomas Madura with the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) program will return for the last week. Planning meetings are occurring regularly and will include Employment Consultants to assist with developing placements for students working in the community. A Summer Teen Consumer Handbook will be created and should be finalized by March.

Residential Facility – A Residential Facility Supervisor was hired who has extensive supervisory skills and is a veteran. An extremely qualified Training Center Manager will begin next week.

Ms. Marshall, Mr. Mendoza, and Commissioner Graham met with members of the USC Rehabilitation Counseling program to discuss SCCB recruitment needs and the possibility of hosting interns. This month, two students began internships with the agency.

Training – The VR Technical Assistance Center has returned to in-person training. Every other month they are providing training to the agency’s VR counselors.

Braille Challenge – Scheduled to be held in-person at SCCB in Columbia on February 9. Ms. John asked how many students typically participate. Ms. Marshall replied attendance was usually between 20-30 students, but it was expected to be lower this year. While the students are testing, parents who attend will receive information about SCCB services and tour the campus.

# Quality Assurance Update

Mike Daniels reported:

QA results have improved or hold steady across all programs.

About twenty reports are created either bi-weekly, monthly or quarterly and shared with the Regional Directors who create Corrective Action Plans, if needed to address issues found. Additionally, trainings for counselors by region have been identified.

In the spring, a Consumer Satisfaction Survey of active consumers will be launched.

Dr. Johnson asked if the Consumer Satisfaction Survey respondents for VR were contacted by mail or other means. Mr. Daniels replied surveys were sent by mail, adding that the new Customer Satisfaction Survey of active consumers would be disseminated electronically and by phone calls. He further clarified that the number of respondents, 59 for the VR Consumer Satisfaction Survey report, represented closed cases. Ms. Olker asked if counselors could give a consumer the survey when they close a case. Mr. Daniels said that consumers often want anonymity when they complete a survey.

Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment – Conducted by San Diego State University, it includes surveys for VR staff, community partners, employers and business partners, and consumers. A draft of the survey results will be available in April. The final report is scheduled to follow in May.

# Business Enterprise Program Update

Ryan Skinner reported:

Business Enterprise Program – As part of the transition to AWARE, which will help with federal reporting, clarification of the term “referral” was made. A referral occurs when a consumer completes training and is recommended for licensure. This is how the term is used in the BEP Board Report. Progress continues to be made cleaning up BEP data. It was noted that amounts for Gross Profit and Total Net Profit may not align with past reports due to information previously recorded in incorrect categories.

Ms. Olker asked for clarification about the training consumers receive. Mr. Skinner replied that during COVID, training had occurred online, but now, in accordance with state regulations, training was being conducted in the classroom (in-person) and on the job. Commissioner Graham added that regulations stipulate 16 weeks of training. Ms. Olker asked how many stands were closed and for clarification regarding the vending stands at the State House. Mr. Skinner said one stand was closed, while the stands at the State House were temporarily closed for remodeling. Remodeling of the canteen in the Gressette Building was complete and it was scheduled to open this week. Commissioner Graham added that she had spoken with a state senator who expressed how excited they are about the canteen reopening.

All BEP Consultant positions were filled. Applications were being received for a Maintenance Technician position. One BEP consultant with maintenance skills had been trained to provide interim assistance in one of the districts. In response to a question from Ms. Olker, Mr. Skinner said that BEP Consultants are agency FTEs who cover the districts where the vending stands are located. They inspect the stands monthly, ensure the blind licensed vendors (BLVs) turn in monthly reports, and receive work orders from the BLVs.

Positive comments had been received about the BEP, reflecting changes and updates to the training and the overall program.

Ms. John asked about the cafeteria at SCCB. Mr. Skinner said the agency has received guidance from a vendor regarding updating equipment, equipment available through state contract had been identified, and that old equipment will be sent to State Surplus.

# Old Business

None.

# New Business

Cathy Olker said that she would forward the names of two individuals for consideration as nominees to the Board of Commissioners.

Dr. Johnson asked for clarification regarding the nominees to the Board. Commissioner Graham said the nominees represent Congressional Districts 1 (Charleston), 2 (Columbia), 4 (Greenville-Spartanburg), and 6 (Orangeburg). Commissioner Graham added that federal regulations require the majority of Board members to be individuals who are blind or have a visual impairment.

# Public Comment

None.

# Executive Session

Chairperson Johnson stated the Board would go into Executive Session to discuss a Contract Update.

Chairperson Johnson stated that the members were out of Executive Session. No votes were taken during Executive Session. No quorum.

# Future Board Meeting Schedule

February 28, 2023 – Canceled

March 28, 2023

# Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 12:59 pm. No vote was taken. No quorum.

# Signatures

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Dr. Judy Johnson, Chairperson

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Cathy Olker, Secretary

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