South Carolina Commission for the Blind

1430 Confederate Avenue
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes
November 28, 2023

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

# Call to Order

Chairperson John called the meeting to order at 11:02 am. The meeting was conducted via Zoom Meeting software.

# Present

Susan John, Chairperson

Ronald Coleman, Vice Chairperson
Cathy Olker, Secretary
Dan Hanfland

Erica James

Mathias Chaplin
Darline Graham, Commissioner

# Adoption of Agenda

Mathias Chaplin made a motion to accept the November 28, 2023, Agenda. It was seconded by Ron Coleman. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Public Comment

None

# Approval of Minutes

Cathy Olker made a motion to accept the September 26, 2023, minutes. It was seconded by Mathias Chaplin. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Commissioner’s Report

## Darline Graham reported:

Refactoring of the agency’s case management system has started. Several staff meet with the developers of AWARE for two hours twice a week. They will go step-by-step through the entire system to ensure settings are correct, guarantee data integrity, and improve operation. This will be completed in April or May 2024.

In accordance with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), each state is required to develop a State Plan with a four-year strategy that outlines what that state is doing to help Americans (including those with significant barriers to employment) gain quality jobs and careers. It also outlines how agencies can help employers hire and retain skilled workers. States are required to update their plan every two years and staff have been working with the Department of Employment and Workforce and other WIOA partners to update the South Carolina’s Combined State Plan. A draft is due to the Department of Employment and Workforce by the end of December and the final plan will be submitted to the Department of Labor no later than March 4, 2024.

The agency entered into a technical assistance agreement with the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center on Quality Management (VRTAC-QM) that outlines how they will help SCCB ensure accurate federal reporting and assist with updating policies and procedures. The agency is also receiving assistance from the VRTAC-Quality Employment (VRTAC-QE) division; they will provide training and share best practices to better serve consumers in achieving quality employment and career advancement.

HVAC installation began in building B where (most classroom instruction occurs). To continue in-person training during this phase, instructors and classrooms have temporarily moved to other locations around the campus. The next phase, which affects buildings C and D, is expected to start in February 2024. At that time, training will switch to virtual. Carol Anderson, the Training Center manager, and the instructors are creating a detailed plan for virtual learning. Construction is expected to last until the beginning of July 2024. The Summer Teen program, usually held during June, will move to the second week in July or may be held off campus. These timelines may need to be adjusted for various reasons.

The Executive Budget Hearing was held on September 27. Following this, the agency met with its liaison for the House Ways and Means Healthcare subcommittee to assist in preparing for the House Budget Hearing to be held in January. The agency is requesting funds for Older Blind Services and match funds to meet its federal obligation for the VR grant (which requires the state to match at a rate of 21.3%). The agency is also requesting administrative support (it’s been ten years since the last request was made).

Several staff attended the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and the National Council of State Agencies for the Bind (NCSAB) fall conferences. Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) provided updates and other states shared their challenges and best practices. Several states continue to struggle with vacancies; two reached a vacancy rate of almost 50% (North Carolina and Hawaii). SCCB’s vacancy rate reached 34% in August 2022, but is now down to 18%. Human Resources staff and hiring managers worked hard to fill vacancies. Assistive Technology Instructors shared information about the Certified Assistive Technology Instructional Specialist credential for individuals who want to learn to teach the functional use of a wide variety of AT hardware and software. The training for this is offered online and in-person.

Commissioner Graham was elected to the Executive Committee of NCSAB as Chair of the Employment Committee.

The sidewalk extension from the bus stop to the parking lot of the building where the Charleston office is located was completed ahead of schedule.

New employees Lisa Hall, Business Enterprise Program Lead; Taylor Morris, Assistive Technology Consultant; Allison Kitler, Transition Services Lead; Sarah Leonard, Program Coordinator; Yvonne Scipio, Administrative Assistant (contractor); Majesty Priester, Administrative Assistant (contractor); Lynda Ramsey, VR Counselor; and Sandra Matthews, Receptionist; were welcomed.

# Finance Report

## Matt Daugherty reported:

State Budget – Beginning July 1, 2023, agency spending was at 41%. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has utilized 50% of the budget, the Training Center 30%, Transition Services 21%, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) 74%, Prevention of Blindness 34%, Older Blind 39%, Children’s Services 32%, and Administration 45%.

Federal Grants – The agency is 58% through the 2023 grants. The agency has utilized 15% of the VR grant set-aside for youth and adult consumers, and 13% of the VR grant set-aside for pre ETS (pre-employment transition services) consumers. 100% of the 2023 Older Blind grant had been utilized and 59% of the 2024 Older Blind grant, 11% of the 2023 Supported Employment grant for adult consumers and none of the 2023 Supported Employment grant for Transition consumers.

Capital Improvement Projects

* Bids were accepted and construction will start on the HVAC project, which is scheduled to be completed by July 2024.
* Renovation of the Wade Hampton canteen is awaiting final design.
* Renovation of the Rembert Dennis canteen is awaiting budget approval from the Joint Bond Review Committee (JBRC).
* Building A renovation is awaiting final design.
* Initial planning for the campus cafeteria, residential facility plumbing projects, parking lot project, and utilization of the property located at 1425 Victoria Street has begun.

# Human Resources Report

## Luis Mendoza reported:

The agency has a total of 109 employees, including contract and part-time employees, and vacancies have been reduced to 19. The agency continues to maintain a low turnover rate.

To sustain growth, HR has shifted its focus to retention initiatives. Since the launch of the performance management system, supervisors have had a total of 139 one-on-one meetings with staff, a 42% participation rate. Additional employees have been onboarded to the Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS will help ensure employees receive necessary training and that all training is documented.

The agency’s workforce is the most diverse it has been in a decade. There was a total of 35 hires and promotions.

The Staff Advisory Council (SAC), consisting of blind and visually impaired employees, continues to grow. The SAC is working to launch Aira, a visual interpreting service for blind and visually impaired employees. They are also testing an awareness training that will be offered to all new hires.

# **Consumer Services Update**

## Carol Anderson reported:

The Transition Lead joined SCCB on November 17 and will work with transition counselors on ways to increase services and referrals for Pre Employment Transition Services (pre-ETS).

Training on case documentation was provided for all counselors. Feedback received was positive and further training will occur throughout the year.

The Children’s Services team attended the SC Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired Conference (SCAER). This resulted in networking and discussions on how SCCB can work with teachers and school districts to better serve students with visual impairments.

Older Blind Counselors participated in training courses offered through the Older Individuals Who are Blind-Technical Assistance Center (OIB-TAC). In addition, the Independent Living Services Lead has worked with OIB-TAC to update policies, procedures, and best practices for the management of the Older Blind Program.

The agency recognized October as National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) by participating in events such as TruVista, Employer Sensitivity Training; SC Foundation Fighting Blindness Speaker Series; 8th Annual Employer Summit: Advancing Access & Equity; Trident Integrated Business Services Team Meeting, SC Works Disability Employment Resource Expo & Job Fair, Blue Cross BlueShield of SC Community Partner Roundtable, and Able South Carolina/Virtual Benefits & Employment Workshop.

The Training Center had ten residential students and seven day students. Consumer records are being reviewed to establish medical clearance prior to entering the program.

Taylor Morris, Assistive Technology Consultant, assists the blind staff with assistive technology needs and will be making recommendations for consumer equipment.

To meet consumer need, Vocational Evaluations are occurring at the Training Center and in local offices.

**Quality Assurance Update**

Michael Daniels reported:

In Quarter 1, a total of 733 open and closed cases were reviewed. The number of cases in compliance improved or are holding steady across all programs.

The Data Validation Review resulted in identifying targeted training by counselor and by region for VR, Older Blind, and Prevention of Blindness. Additionally, Older Blind Counselors closed 500 cases, the largest quarterly case closures to date. This was due to case cleanup.

The Consumer Satisfaction Survey indicated an overall increase in satisfaction rates. VR had an 88% Satisfaction rate and OB had a 100% satisfaction rate. Survey results were boosted by calling non-respondents. QA staff made 86 calls.

Consumer comments were positive, appreciative, and complimentary for VR and Older Blind. There was not enough feedback for Children’s Services and Prevention of Blindness to evaluate.

A review of Competitive Integrated Employment indicated VR has fewer case closures and fewer consumers entering Competitive Integrated Employment. The average wage reported was $17.00 per hour. Employers of consumers included Rock Hill School District, Saluda Primary School Real Estate Management Company, Business Management Consultant, Able SC, and Lowe’s Home Improvement.

**Business Enterprise Program Update**

Ryan Skinner reported:

Lisa Hall, Business Enterprise Program Lead, began employment on October 16.

Two Blind Licensed Vendors filed for an Evidentiary Hearing regarding stand 154, Fort Jackson, which was held at SCCB on November 15. The agency is awaiting the ruling. The agency is planning to increase the vendors at Fort Jackson from two to ten with interviews scheduled to begin Monday, December 4. Other stands have been placed on the bid line.

Plans are being developed to make improvements to the BLV Candidate Assessment and Training Program.

More than 150 outdated vending machines were replaced with new models last year with an additional 150 planned for 2024.

The SCCB cafeteria will be renovated and become a BLV training site.

The Elected Committee of Blind Licensed Vendors is planning its Annual Meeting to be held February 2024. BEP leadership is assisting with the planning.

The Department of Education (DOE) construction is projected for completion in spring or summer 2024.

# Old Business

None.

# New Business

None

# Public Comment

None

# Future Board Meeting Schedule

January 23, 2024 – 11:00 am

# Adjournment

There being no further business, Vice Chairperson John called for a motion to adjourn at 12:25 pm. A motion was made by Dan Hanfland and seconded by Mathias Chaplin. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.