

Montana State Rehabilitation Council Meeting
Havre, MT
November 30 – December 1, 2022
Meeting Minutes

Members present: Celina Cline, John Gorton (Zoom), Wes Feist, Chanda Hermanson, Kathy Hampton (Zoom), Lacey Keller, Kendra (Joyce) Lewis (Zoom), Mike Manhardt (Zoom on Thurs.), Tom Manthey, Denise May, Corinne Moore, Doug McElroy, Carlos Ramalho (Zoom), Marcy Roberts, Emma Rooney, Brian Tocher

Member absent: Jean Schroeder

Staff and guests: Gabrielle Broere, Joleen Weatherwax, Pamela Boucher (Wed.), Lacey Conzelman (Zoom), Anna Gibbs (Zoom), Tal Goldin of MT Disability Rights (Zoom on Wed.), Darrel Hannum, Brook Hodge (Zoom), Tammy Hogan (Zoom), Dana Kjersem (Wed.), Shannon Mackey (Zoom), Victoria Meagher (Wed.), Shawn Tulloch, Tiffany Melby of Bear Paw Development (Wed.), CART transcribers (Zoom), and two sign language interpreters.

Welcome, meeting rules, reading of mission statements and announcements.

Meeting Minutes August 2022 approved; Meeting Minutes Nov/Dec 2021 approved.

Reports from committees:

Education and Membership committee: Denise May presented. We currently have 3 positions open for Advocacy community members. We continue to try and reach out to bring more diversity to the council including the Veteran community, current and past VR clients. Please share names of possible people to recruit.

Introductions of all members present and on Zoom.

Consumer Satisfaction and Needs committee: Celina Cline presented. That project was rushed and sent out yesterday. We have a low response rate, discussed alternative ideas. Let us know if you have any ideas how to increase the response rate or feedback.

Policy and Procedure committee: Kathy Hampton presented. We discussed the new procedures that VR had sent out: hearing aid, childcare, and the case management expectations. New ones are the college training

procedure, the self-employment procedure, and the ASL interpreters' procedure. There is frustration that VR clients are being moved from one office to the other due to the shortage of VR counselors and VR supervisors. Is there something else we can do to make sure that clients' needs are being met and they are not being passed around from office to office?

Planning and Review Committee: Marcy Roberts presented. We have been working on the Governor's report. We created our own logo and added the SRC and VRBS mission statements. We have a new logo and new look. We revised recommendations to VRBS:

Group 1

- 1 - improve the quality of VRBS services by decreasing case load sizes and recruiting and retaining quality VR staff to provide the services.*
- 2- invest in current staff by providing ongoing training and opportunities for advancement as well as actively engage in suggest session planning.*
- 3 - evaluate current expectations of staff and modify as needed to decrease burnout and maintain quality staff.*
- 4 - increase recruitment and improve retention by reviewing requirements for professional staff and updating job descriptions as necessary.*

Group 2

- 1 - implement strategies and monitor processes to improve efficiencies for rapidly engaging individuals into services.*
- 2 - continue to increase the percentage of clients meeting and exceeding workforce innovation and opportunity act, WIOA, performance indicators.*
- 3 -maintain physical stability following completion of maintenance of effort MOE penalty years.*

Group 3

- 1 - continue to increase participation of students 14 to 21 with disabilities engaged in high quality preemployment transition services, Pre-ETS.*
- 2 -continue to increase the support for youth and foster placements in partnerships with Child and Family Services Division, CFSB.*
- 3 - increase engagement with schools and community partners to improve opportunities for youth in foster care attending alternative schools and the justice system, as well as at risk youth.*

Group 4

- 1 -continue to move individuals out of subminimum wage/sheltered workshops into competitive integrated employment, CIE.*
- 2 - continue to contract with centers for independent living, to provide career counseling and referrals and effective monitoring of 14(c) certificate holders.*
- 3 - continue and improve collaboration with Indian vocab programs*
- 4 - work with employers*

Consumer Survey Report: Lacey Conzelman presented. The survey is to inform the VR program leadership and local field offices about client perspectives on our performance. We sent out a total of 1440 surveys this year. We had 24 total responses this year. That's a 2 percent response

rate. The 2 percent response rate would be considered invalid. No decisions should be made from this data because it is so low. A good response rate is considered 5 to 30 percent. The committee discussed some strategies where we can improve that response rate.

I think probably the most interesting is the qualitative data that we collect. Here are some of the questions we asked with the answers.

What were you least satisfied with?

- Having to close due to my medical. Not anyone's fault.
- My VR counselor, working with her was like pulling teeth at times. I would call multiple times without a response. She would say she would do something but there was no response.
- The other person I worked with, more accurately tried to work with rarely responded to my voicemail or email. After I spoke to her supervisor, she was somewhat more responsive. She does not care about helping others. She was a joke.
- When I took my CNA course, I did not get the accommodations I needed and I failed. They would never get back to me. There was always some reason, excuse, another failure.
- Not being able to receive help. Staying on a wait list did help.
- COVID created challenges that I was not comfortable with working conditions.
- At times as well as frequent transfer to other counselors. It made coordination of needs difficult at times.
- The four years I waited for service then no reevaluation.
- Wait list.
- Past job coach.

What are you most satisfied with?

- Great counseling and caring helpful information and staff.
- My own instructor was the best. Wasn't always able to be consistent but she tried and truly cared.
- My job coach. She actually tried to find work I was interested in and was very supportive.
- The communication I had with Shanna. Flexibility, commitment, dedication. Receiving a call every year to stay on the wait list.
- Courtesy and friendly staff. I was the most satisfied with the compassion and willingness to help that I received from all staff.

- How they helped me get through school. And list support and dedication received. Help with cover letters and resumes, uniforms purchased.
- Getting to figure out job coaches and connecting with Anna. She was so great.
- The people were great but possibly over worked. Loved the second job coach.
- All of the help I received in the many facets of my life, not strictly finding a job.
- They do outstanding work. Belief in me by my counselor.

Is there something else you would like us to know about your experience with VR?

- Yes, the counselors who truly want to help and make a difference. Chanda was helpful in allowing me to become clear with my choice.
- Have other information for reference to help move forward even if VRBS could not help over the years.
- It was a good experience, but time ran out before a compatible job was found.
- I am so grateful to VRBS for the valuable help in pursuing my goals. I would not be able to succeed without you all.
- The transition into the program did not help financially with the job that was causing physical problems. I would have liked to see the VRBS coordinate with temp unemployment as the job was causing swelling in my hands.
- The wait list was very long but once off it, they were responsive.
- I would love another shot at it.
- My counselor was rude to me 99 percent of the time we talked, which is why I did not want to continue with my case.
- My son received nothing but empty promises and was constantly pawned off from caseworker to caseworker. VRBS was not integral to his employment search and gave him a false sense of hope that the program was designed to help him.
- The help from VRBS has absolutely changed my life in a positive way. I gave 100 percent to the program and it has never disappointed me. I think all of the staff and think the VRBS staff is amazing.

We discussed adding a question at the end, asking: Would you like somebody to follow up with you about your responses to this? We are considering contracting out the survey. How do you address the problems

without knowing where 1400 surveys even came from? It could be any office anywhere and any counselor.

Pre-ETS Report: presented by Tammy Hogan Fourth quarter numbers-2004, potentially eligible which means they hadn't applied for VR. The number we had for potentially eligible are 1,644. And the number who had applied for VR is 360 of that number. Our position for the contract manager is vacant. We are focusing on making sure that we are connecting with Child and Family Services division, reaching those students in foster care. We also did a presentation to the Reach Higher Montana program. Montana has been invited to participate in a three-year grant through the Utah State University and also Penn State. We are looking at core services and definitions. Really working on those instruments and making sure they are accurately portraying what we want them to. I met with Catherine Ipsa to talk more about an idea to developing some kind of curriculum for schools to use if they wanted to, a web-based application. We are working with the Deputy Director of Starbase in Montana. He has talked to us about how we can provide STEM programming and partner with them in reaching students with disabilities.

NCSRC conference report: presented by Wes Feist. The San Antonio conference was for SRC members to attend. I think it would be good for council members to actually go to the Voc Rehab services portion of the conference, for better application of programs and funding versus the training session. The conference did provide a good overview and utilization of resources. The next opportunity for one of you to attend the National Conference will be the week of April 15, 2023.

Madison IEP presentation: Celina Cline from our office and her team will be walking us through the Madison presentation. We will walk you through the full process from application, intake appt, plan of action, medical diagnosis, financial eligibility, functional capacity limitation, certificate of eligibility, identify service all the way to the end.

Tiffany Melby of Bear Paw Development presented us with information on what's happening in Havre with the Economic Employment Organization.

Federal/State and 14C certificates: presented by Chanda Hermanson Six members of the Leadership Team attended the CSAVR fall conference in San Antonio.

Federal law makers are questioning, why the public Vocational Rehabilitation program gave \$380 billion of federal funds back and participation rate of people with disabilities in employment has not increased.

There are very serious conversations happening right now with our federal partners, law makers and lobbyists saying what is going on here? We paid you your money and last year you gave us \$380 billion back and you're not doing anything. It is time to be creative and innovative and do things differently and figure out how we can do this and not return money.

We also talk about low retention of VR counselors. We are underpaid and overworked. We get the money but we don't have the authority to go hire as many people as we think needs to be done to get the work done and we don't get to determine wages ourselves. People now can choose if they want over-time pay or comp time. We are now able to pay for moving expenses, not much but \$2000 can help someone decide to take the job. We drafted and will be implementing within the next two weeks automatic eligibility for Voc Rehab clients. These are immediate action items.

Other actions to consider: contract out the full application process out. To help with the backlog, not require medical documentation to determine eligibility, do a cost analysis of our financial means test to make a proposal to the governor's office to eliminate the financial means testing, team is working on paperless systems.

We sent a letter out to all 14 people listed on the Department of Labor website. When you have new employees, you have to send a letter every six months for the first year, then yearly. We talked about what competitive integrated employment in the community looks like and how that is a realistic option for everybody. Then parents are scared because they are tied to their vendor. Questions about where are they going to live? What if they lose their benefits? We have staff who are working out of their benefit and being evicted from their homes because they no longer qualify for housing. The only accessible housing in our communities is the affordable housing tied to Section 8.

Fair hearings: When an adverse action takes place, meaning we denied service or withhold a new case, and the client doesn't agree because we haven't even been able to connect or they do not respond; we call that inaction. They may disagree and they reach out to Client Assistance Program and Disability Rights or you can contact the agency to press mediation or contact the Fair Housing office to appeal this decision. There are multiple ways to appeal that decision. From the date that letter is sent they have 45 days to go through a formal appeal process. They have a formal appeal that

goes to the Fair Hearing office under the Office of DHHS. They get a Notice of Appeal through writing, phone call, email. My first step is to make sure an administrative review gets done within a week. If we overturn the decision we get back with our staff and talk about why we didn't follow the procedure. And then you correct it. If you don't, it goes to a fair hearing.

Benefits Counseling: We trained a core of our own staff to provide benefits counseling. We are days away from finalizing the contract with OSU to provide benefits counseling.

Communication Access Program: All the money for MTAP comes from a tax to everybody's phone lines. It brings in lots of revenue. The problem is we don't have the appropriation to touch that cash except for small amounts. The money grows. The legislature notices it. They never give us authority to spend it. They now propose to give us more appropriations to access that cash and to create another full-time position.

We have ten rehab techs on staff, one in every office. Those are funded through the American Rescue Plan Act. Those positions are eliminated January 2024. Those positions allow us to create a waiting list and allow the counseling staff to focus on the transformational therapeutic services we are supposed to be providing instead of data, phone calls, emails, those things. Because of the impact that is having on people in Montana and our outcomes, the governor's office is proposing we get to keep eight of those permanently.

We are working with the legislature as it begins its session from January to May.

We have been accepted to participate in Learning Communities through the technical assistance centers.

We discussed caseload numbers. We expect a lot from our staff. We don't want to go below 50, the highest caseload is 110. We have to communicate the expectations and differences in special caseloads or if you have to travel.

Blind and Low Vision Services report: presented by Darrel Hannum We had older individuals, blind technical assistance training. We are working with the tech to accomplish our goals and missions there. We attended an Association of the Blind conference in September and also the Montana conference in October. And then attended CSAVR and NSAB. We are down to two Benefits Planners. The new BEP vendor group in Helena are up and running and very successful. We have one open O & M position in Billings We also lost a counselor supervisor in the Billings. We still also have three

driver positions, one in Billings, one in Butte and one in Missoula that are open.

December 1, 2022 - Meeting minutes

Member Moment – Gabrielle Broere

Budget Report: presented by Anna Gibbs The budget report was sent out a week before the meeting. She presented on the federal grant years and the state fiscal years.

Our FFY22 award is \$6,003,734. We applied for and received Reallotment* in the amount of \$5,080,773. Together, this brings our total federal award to \$11,084,507. This results in a Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) set-aside requirement of \$1,662,676 which leaves \$9,421,830 for General VR. The State General Fund Match is \$3,000,000.

Our FFY23 award is estimated to be \$13,838,885. This results in a Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) set-aside requirement of \$2,075,832 which leaves \$11,763,052 for General VR. The State General Fund Match is \$3,745,467 based on the estimated federal award.

The VRBS program receives program income for reimbursement of VRBS services provided to clients that are SSI and SSDI recipients under the Ticket to Work program. The Ticket to Work reimbursements we collected in Federal Fiscal Year 2021 from 10-1-20 to 9-30-21 totaled **\$1,024,175**. The Ticket to Work reimbursements we collected so far in Federal Fiscal Year 2022, from 10-1-21 to 9-30-22 totaled **\$951,136**.

VRBS Report: presented by Brook Hodge We currently have 59 field staff that consists of 30 VR counselors, 15 support staff, 9 techs and 3 temp workers, one support staff and we have a counselor temp worker who is a former counselor supervisor. The average caseload size is 90 but ranges from 20 to 120. Counselor supervisors are required to, in most cases carry a halftime caseload. Currently have 15 VR staff that are in a training assignment, they are currently in a master's degree program.

Biggest problem now are difficulties filling vacancies. In October many staff participated in the Montana Association for Rehabilitation conference in Whitefish. This is the first conference that has happened since 2018. Topics were indigenous leadership, cultural competency, adaptive recreation and

Windmills. We are going to be doing the Run, Lock, Fight training for staff and specialized training how to work with people who live with brain injury while continuing customized employment training and leadership training.

2023 Elections: Elections were held

Chair: Lacey Keller

Vice Chair: Gabrielle Broere (pending appointment by the Governor's office)

Functionary: Kendra (Joyce) Lewis and Denise May

Discussion - Current Bylaws Article 5 Section 5. Terms of Appointment Section D. reads "Upon completion of two consecutive terms of service, past council members are eligible to reapply to the Council after a six-month break in service". Vote to remove section D. Vote, all were in favor.

Discussed moving the election to the summer meeting so that the term ends in September/October. All agreed it was a good idea.

We will continue to update the membership manual.

Discussion on getting a logo for MT State Rehabilitation Council.

Discussion on the 2023-year meeting dates

Meeting ended at 10:00am