

Blind Services Planning Council

Meeting agenda for Friday, December 8, 2023, 9:30 AM

Chair: Sharon Howerton

Members Present: Edward Birmingham, Dustin Cather, Horacio Esparza, Daniel Hawkins, Whitney Hill, John Holtgreve, and Daniel Tevelde

Guests: Kim Borowicz, Andy Lasasso, Ingrid Halvorsen, Dawn Moushon, Derrick Phillips, Jasmine Gonzalez, Judith West, Karyn Campbell, Ray Campbell, Kelsey Thompson, and Marilyn Green

Council Support: Brittany Boston, Kiersten Baer, and Antonio Gomez

1. Opening remarks: Sharon Howerton, Chairperson

9:32 am Chair Sharon Howerton welcomed everyone and conducted a roll call

- Chair Howerton informed the council that Mindy Ely's term as secretary for the council is up, and she will not be able to remain. The council will be voting to fill this vacancy at the end of the meeting.
- Ingrid Halvorsen and Derrick Phillips will be retiring from DHS at the end of December.

2. Introduction and role of ISU support team: Brittany Boston, Kiersten Baer, and Antonio Gomez

9:40 am Chair Howerton introduced Brittany Boston from Illinois State University to explain their role in supporting the Blind Services Planning Council.

- Brittany Boston stated that the role of ISU is to support the council by setting up Zoom meetings and sending out calendar invites. Brittany will work directly with the chair to format the agenda and distribute necessary materials to the council members. ISU staff will attend the meetings to record and take minutes. The minutes will be shared with the chair for review and approved by the council at the following meeting. ISU staff will also post the Zoom links, agendas, and meeting minutes on a web page that is accessible to all.
- Chair Howerton shared that there were some concerns about the minutes and who was responsible for approving them. She confirmed that council members would be approving meeting minutes at the next meeting. She then opened it up for questions.

- Andy Lasasso shared that ISU staff have been supporting the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board (IWIB) for several years, in this same manner. They are also supporting the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC). They are strictly supportive and are not decision-makers. The secretary's role will be to communicate and officiate. The secretary should be working closely with ISU staff to make sure the meetings run smoothly. The primary function of the contract was to facilitate and make it easier for our leadership and assist with Open Meeting Acts compliance. Mr. Lasasso expressed appreciation for the ISU team and spoke highly of the professionalism they have brought to the IWIB.
- Chair Howerton noted that a discussion had been had about moving the meetings to Friday only rather than alternating Fridays and Saturdays. She asked for input from the council.
- Edward Birmingham expressed interest in staying with two Saturdays a year but will adjust based on the consensus of the group. Daniel Hawkins stated they are open either way. Whitney Hill is in favor of Friday mornings. John Holtgreve is in favor of keeping with the two Saturdays a year. Dan Tevelde is in favor of Fridays and Dustin Cather is in favor of what works best for the group.

3. State Rehabilitation Council Introduction

- Chair Howerton introduced Kelsey Thompson, chairperson for the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), and invited her to share the role of SRC.
- Kelsey Thompson shared that SRC works similarly to BSPC. The major difference is that SRC represents all the vocational rehab services that are provided through the state of Illinois. The council's purpose is to serve as the voice of the consumer and to ensure that the preferences, needs, and priorities of individuals with disabilities throughout Illinois are represented in the work that DRS does. SRC meets quarterly with a full-day meeting once a quarter. The full-day meetings are held in different locations throughout the state, always keeping in mind accessibility to public transportation. There is an option to attend meetings virtually. SRC bylaws stipulate that there should be one member who is a representative from BSPC. This role has been mostly vacant, and Ms. Thompson wanted to share the purpose of the SRC in hopes of garnering interest.
- Chair Howerton noted that the BSPC bylaws state that an employee of a state agency cannot be a member of the council and asked if this was the same for SRC. Ms. Thompson stated they can be non-voting members.

- Ray Campbell asked if there were other positions available, especially from an advocacy or consumer perspective. Ms. Thompson shared that there are different categories outlined in the bylaws, which include a certain number of representatives that can fall into a general disability and advocacy role. This could be individuals with lived experience with disability. There are other representatives from community rehab providers or service providers, and a specific number must be filled by representatives with a background in business industry and labor. SRC must have one visit from a council member who is a former recipient of state VR services. SRC also has representation from parent advocacy groups from second and postsecondary.
- Ray Campbell asked how one would apply if they were interested in any of the positions. Ms. Thompson stated that there is an online application that must be approved by the Governor's office. Robin Lewis, from DRS, has been helpful in walking individuals through the application process. Ms. Thompson encouraged anyone interested to reach out, and a meeting could be scheduled with herself or another member of the executive committee to get an understanding of expectations and interests.

4. Review and acceptance of meeting minutes from October 6, 2023

- Chair Sharon Howerton called for a motion to accept the minutes from the 10/6/2023 Blind Services Planning Council meeting as presented. Daniel Hawkins moved that the minutes be accepted as presented. Dan Tevelde seconded the motion. The minutes from 10/6/2023 were accepted into the record as presented.

5. Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Bureau of Customer & Community Blind Services (BCCBS) Reports

a. Rahnee Patrick, DRS Director

- Andy Lasasso presented the report for DRS as a proxy for Rahnee Patrick. Mr. Lasasso shared that ICRE Wood served 94 students, with a total of 24 graduates. Blind Services Bureau is serving 1,398 customers. A year to date of 176 individuals have been placed in competitive employment. Earning an average wage of \$20.81 per hour and working an average of 31 hours per week. The blind vending program is expanding into micro markets and has purchased its first accessible kiosk. Three Wi-Fi hotspots have been provided at ICRE Wood for the training center, BEPB training unit, and classroom. The Older Individual Blind grant program served 2,280 people during FY23. The Older Blind is an assistance program for assisted technology and other services such as orientation and mobility for people who are 55 years old and older.

- Andy Lasasso reviewed a performance snapshot. The average hourly rate wage amongst those classified with visual impairments is \$20.96. The average weekly wage is \$673.26. The average hours per week is 30.73. The percentage that has insurance through their employer is 26.56%.
- Andy Lasasso reported on job vacancies. There are currently 39 vacant positions in Blind Services, with 18 new hires for fiscal year 2023. One position in blind services is currently being updated by the supervisor. Eight positions are currently being rewritten internally. Twenty-two additional positions have been requisitioned, and the application/interview questions are being finalized. Once complete, they will be queued to be posted as soon as CMS approves the vacancy to be filled. Most of these 22 positions are the statewide Rehabilitation Instructor and Orientation & Mobility Instructor (O&M) (RMI) roles. There are currently no positions posted on the State's job site for the Bureau of Customer & Community Blind Services. One position has closed and has been removed from the State's job site. Depending upon the position and applicable union, the candidates who have applied for these positions are undergoing scoring and other closing activities. An additional three positions have gone to a status termed "Other Means," which identifies that the vacancy had no union bidders or that any employee with bargaining rights has been waived. Non-union and applicants who are not already state employees will be scored on the position's requirements, and job offers will be extended as applicable. Remaining in development are the O&M positions. The Division is waiting for the RMI positions to be posted and completed before revisiting headcount and how our O&M positions fit within our service strategy.
- Ed Birmingham had a question about the letter that was written four months ago and whether Mr. Lasasso had an update on an official response to said letter. Andy Losasso stated that the letter was received in late August, and multiple parties were requested to respond. Mr. Lasasso cannot respond directly and must go through the general counsel. The Governor's office was addressed in the letter and must respond. Mr. Lasasso reported that DRS updated its response and returned it to the general council for review.
- Ray Campbell echoed Mr. Birmingham's concern and stated that an acknowledgment of receipt of the letter and efforts being made to respond would be appreciated. Marilyn Green echoed those same sentiments. Andy Losasso stated that he would take these comments immediately to general counsel and that the response and a recognition of the letter are important.

- Horacio Esparza asked for clarification on the 18 hires mentioned during the report. Mr. Losasso clarified that there had been 18 hires since August 1, 2023.
- Mr. Esparza asked how many of the new hires were Latino or if Mr. Lasasso was privy to that data. Mr. Lasasso stated that he couldn't give exact numbers because that could lead to Personal Identifiable Information (PII). Mr. Lasasso did report that one hire in the Rockford office is a blind bilingual.
- Mr. Esparza shared that it can be frustrating for individuals when they call for services and English is not their native language. Mr. Esparza asked if the current vacancies listed bilingual as a preferred qualification. Mr. Losasso shared that there are positions where bilingual is a requirement. The state offers a 5% pay increase for those who are bilingual, and that is marketed as an incentive.
- Judith West asked for clarification on the two tasks still to be completed for the RMI positions. Mr. Losasso explained that before a position can be posted, CMS requires the agencies to produce the application questions and the interview questions to be verified. CMS may ask for some clarifying information, and this can delay the process.
- Ingrid Halvorsen added to Mr. Losasso's remarks to Mr. Esparza's question. Ms. Halvorsen stated that there are five employees in Region 1 who speak Spanish. If any frustration is expressed or if a client is not receiving assistance, Ms. Halvorsen advised those in attendance to contact her directly.

b. Kim Borowicz, Bureau Chief

- Kim Borowicz stated that the Business Enterprise Program for the Blind (BEPB) staff and the Illinois Committee of Blind Vendors (ICBV) held an in-person conference for all BEPB vendors and trainees on December 1st and 2nd in Springfield, IL. There are three trainees currently in the vending training program. A new trainer and business consultant have been hired in the Chicago area. Ms. Borowicz meets weekly with the Chair and Vice Chair of the ICBV. A contract has been finalized to have a consultant assist BEPB in ICBV in revising the program's procedure manual and Illinois Administrative Code rules. The program recently purchased its first accessible payment kiosk for its micro markets. Interviews for the Budget & Contracting Specialist staff position will be held on December 13, 2023. Interviews for the Business Consultant position in Springfield will be held in mid-January 2024. The Executive Secretary I position is being moved up to an Administrative Assistant I position.

- Ms. Borowicz shared that a grants manager was hired and began on December 1, 2023. Process improvements have been made this reporting period for the Older Individual Blind (OIB) grants program, including improving how data is collected and managed from the grantees. Quarterly meetings are being held for the grantees, and two have already been completed. Weekly meetings are being held with OIB grantees to complete the Rehabilitation Services Administration 7OB report.
- Ms. Borowicz presented virtually at the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois conference in October 2023. She also attended the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation and the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind conferences in November 2023. She also attended the SRC meeting in Bloomington, IL, in November 2023.
- The Bureau is working diligently on IT issues. Three WIFI hotspots have been provided at ICRE-Wood for the BEPB training unit and classrooms, and a fourth was provided in Springfield for BEPB training. Work is being done to get WIFI at ICRE-Wood for the customers.
- The Bureau is working on improving the accessibility of its documents and forms to work with screen reading software and conversion into Braille. Working with the Bureau of Customer & Community Field Services in Region 3 to put the Consent forms and Individualized Plan for Employment into Docusign to allow staff, customers, and guardians to sign electronically. Working to ensure the Bureau's Braille embossers are properly connected and working with Duxbury software.
- The main priority for BCCBS for the next quarter is completing the job descriptions for the Rehabilitation Instructors at ICRE-Wood, specifically in the areas of Assistive Technology and Industrial Arts. BCCBS also continues to develop best practices to increase the provision of pre-employment transition services to students who are blind, visually impaired, and Deaf/blind.
- Judith West asked what the timeline was for the Braille embosser project. Kim Borowicz shared that DRS rehab tech is doing onsite visits to different offices and looking at the embossers. They will be at ICRE-Wood at the beginning of January. Each office will have to have the Duxbury software installed on the computers and connected to the braille embossers. Ms. West shared that the embossers have not worked in the field offices in 4 years, and this project is being met with great anticipation.

- Marilyn Green asked if there is a plan in place to get someone in the role of BEPB permanently. Ms. Borowicz shared that it is not an open position, and nothing will be posted at this time. Andy Losasso echoed Ms. Borowicz remarks and said that DRS understands the importance of the position and is looking at ways to best support the role.

c. Ingrid Halvorsen, Assistant Bureau Chief

- Ingrid Halvorsen and Christy Peen from Services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing hosted a cross-training event for counselors who work with BBS. Best practices for serving people who have dual vision and hearing loss were discussed. One of which is to enhance collaboration between the two bureaus because if an individual with vision loss needs services, the blind counselor will work with them. If an individual has a hearing loss and communicates with sign language, the deaf counselor will work with that person. During the initial interview, individuals should be asked questions regarding their hearing and vision. The second idea is to connect the WebCM, a virtual case management system, with the other bureau. This will allow the appropriate bureau to provide assistance, guidance, resources, etc.
- Ms. Halvorsen shared that both bureaus are serving 65 individuals who are identified as having dual loss. An additional 79 individuals were identified to have the other sensory loss after certification and through case indicators. Christy Peen and the Services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing staff will host check-ins every 6 months to discuss ways services can be enhanced.
- Staff provided 785 blind skill training services. Those services include adjustment counseling, assisted tech, braille, communication, health and wellness, keyboarding, mobility, and pre-cane skills. Region 1 currently has one counselor with two new hires. There were two hires in Region 2, one in Region 4, and one in Region 5. Ms. Howerton acknowledged that the numbers for RMI did not match Andy Losasso's report. Ingrid stated that her report includes the incumbents or the people who left and a "wish list."

d. ICRE Wood – Derrick Phillips, Superintendent

- Derrick Phillips reported that there are currently 26 customers in the program. An additional 5 or 6 others may have dropped the program for various reasons. Ten individuals stayed in the dormitory, and 16 were commuters. One individual is Spanish-speaking, and one individual is deaf/blind in the program. Two other individuals have a mild hearing impairment. Graduations will occur on December 21, 2023, anticipate graduating 10-15 individuals. There are continued staffing concerns as ICRE-Wood needs instructors and

mobility instructors. An office coordinator will be starting on December 18th. The next term will begin on January 8, 2024.

- Horacio Esparza stated that he came to give a presentation to ICRE Wood students and wanted to know if that would be able to continue. Chair Howerton encouraged Mr. Esparza to contact Kim Borowicz in the new year.
- Andy Losasso thanked Derrick and Ingrid for their service and encouraged those in attendance to think about those in their network who may be a good fit for either position. Mr. Losasso will share the job postings with Chair Howerton and ISU staff once they are available
- e. **Business Enterprise Program for the Blind (BEPB) Kim Borowicz, Acting BEPB Program Administrator**
 - Kim Borowicz incorporated her BEPB report with the BCCBS report.

6. Committee Reports

a. **State Rehabilitation Committee (SRC) Sharon Howerton and Kim Borowicz**

- Kim Borowicz shared information on the quarterly SRC meeting that took place in Bloomington on November 15, 2023. Members were able to meet some of the ISU staff members as they assisted with the meeting. The council discussed the vacancies throughout the division of rehab services and the blind services bureau. The council also discussed sub-minimum wage to competitive integrated employment grant, which is termed Switzi. Also discussed were the needs assessment surveys that went out to customers and the state plan.
- Chair Sharon Howerton shared that SRC is being monitored by RSA, and they will be doing a soft audit. They'll be requesting some procedures and do some field visits starting in July.
- Kim Borowicz shared that state staff have cell phones that can send and receive text messages via their email, which allows them to be saved in case of a Freedom of Information Act request.
- Chair Howerton shared that there are 22 centers for independent living throughout the state. Those centers for independent living can submit transportation complaints. Equip for Equality is working with the client assistance program. SRC has a page on the DHS website. The next meeting will be in Springfield on March 12, 2024.

7. Consumer Group Reports

a. Illinois Council of the Blind (ICB) Sharon Howerton

- No report to share

b. National Federation of the Blind of Illinois (NFBI) Dan Tevelde

- No report to share

8. Guest Comments

- Chair Sharon Howerton shared that the next BSPC meeting is scheduled for April 5, 2024. BSPC will move forward with meetings on Fridays. All meetings are recorded for those unable to attend. Chair Howerton reminded individuals to complete their One-net training. Chair Howerton opened it up to public comment and questions.
- Dan Tevelde asked if BSPC still has a relationship with the Illinois State Library. Chair Howerton said that they have a new director, and BSPC has not had someone in that position for a while. If anyone is interested in pursuing it, they can reach out to her. Marilyn Green stated that Stephen McMahon is the new director, and he is interested in bringing the library committee back. Ms. Green has spoken to Ray Campbell. Ms. Green, Mr. Campbell, and Andrew Webb from Equip for Equality plan to meet quarterly with Mr. McMahon.
- Horacio Esparza had a question about the meeting time. Mr. Esparza suggested meeting after 6 PM. Chair Howerton stated that many individuals who participate in the meetings work during the day, and that needs to be taken into consideration. Chair Howerton asked that additional meeting time suggestions be sent to her via email
- Ray Campbell shared that on January 13th, the Illinois School for the visually impaired will be celebrating its 175th anniversary. They are hosting a gala in Jacksonville on Saturday, January 13th, at 4:30 PM for \$40 per person. Mr. Campbell will pass the information along to Chari Howerton for those interested in attending.

9. New business

- No new business

10. Elections for positions of Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, and Secretary

- Chair Sharon Howerton asked that non-voting members exit the Zoom call as the council was moving to a closed session to hold elections.
- Chair Howerton asked the council members if anyone was interested in the role of Chair. She shared that she would be happy to continue to hold the

position if no one else expressed interest. No other council members expressed interest in the role.

- Chair Howerton called for a motion to continue in her role as Chairperson. Edward Birmingham moved to keep Chair Sharon Howerton on as the acting Chair. Whitney Hill seconded the motion. Chair Howerton will remain as the BSPC Chair.
- Chair Howerton opened the nominations for Vice Chair. Edward Birmingham expressed interest in continuing in his current role as Vice Chair. No other council members expressed interest in the role.
- Chair Howerton called for a motion to reelect Mr. Birmingham as Vice Chair. Whitney Hill moved to reelect Mr. Birmingham as Vice Chair. Daniel Hawkins seconded the motion. Edward Birmingham was reelected as Vice Chair for BSPC.
- Chair Howerton stated that the role of the secretary is vacant and will be slightly different as the secretary will not need to take minutes while ISU staff is assisting with the meetings.
- Chair Howerton moved to elect Daniel Hawkins as secretary. Dan Tevelde seconded the motion. Daniel Hawkins was elected secretary for BSPC.

11. Next meeting April 5, 2024, 9:30 AM

12. Adjourn

- Chair Howerton called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Horacio Esparza moved that the meeting be adjourned. Whitney Hill seconded the motion, and the meeting adjourned.