
VIRGINIA STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL FOR THE BLIND AND VISION IMPAIRED
(SRC)
Quarterly Meeting

Draft Minutes
August 9, 2024

Held virtually Via Zoom

SRC Members in Attendance

David Andrews, Hampton, Representative of a Current/Former Recipient of Rehabilitation Services
Christine Appert, Charlottesville, Current/Former Recipient of Rehabilitation Services
Susan Bowmaster, Annadale, Representative of a Disability Advocacy Group
Rebecca Ceja, Richmond, Representative of the Virginia Department of Education
Lasonya Jackson, Crozet, Representative of a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor
Beth Klein, Stafford, Representative of the Virginia Disability Law Center of Virginia (dLCV)
Heidi Lawyer, Henrico, Representative of Parent Training & Information Center (PEATC)
Gerald Meredith, South Chesterfield, Representative of a Disability Advocacy Group
Chanthen Nene, Manassas, Representative of an Applicant or Recipient of Rehabilitation Services
Mark Roane, Richmond, Applicant or Recipient of Rehabilitation Services
Rachael Rounds, Midlothian, Representative of Community Rehabilitation Services Program
Beth Sellers, Harrisonburg, Parent/Guardian of a Person with a Disability
Milford Stern, Roanoke, Representative of Business, Industry, and Labor

SRC Members Not Able to Attend

Francisco Semiao, Fairfax, Workforce Council Representative (Personal Matter)

DBVI Staff Present

Rick Mitchell, Richmond, Commissioner, DBVI, Ex-Officio Member
Megan Hall, Director of Vocational Rehabilitation and Workforce Services
Becky Keller, Pre-Employment Transition Specialist
Kathy Malone, Acting Deputy Commissioner for Services
Maggie Mills, Executive Assistant to Commissioner Mitchell
Justin Sheets, Assistant Director of Vocational Rehabilitation
Ashley West, Executive Assistant to Deputy Commissioners – Recorder of Minutes

Guest

Cara Kaufman, Policy Analyst/Regulatory Coordinator (DARS)

ASL Interpreters

Kristin Dunstan
Elaine Hernandez
John Folker

Public

Reid Herskovitz (DBVI Employee)
Mr. Rothwell

Call to Order / Welcome and Introductions

Chair Stern called the meeting to order. A roundtable of introductions took place. Quorum was met.

Adoption Agenda

Ms. Appert moved to adopt the proposed agenda; Mr. Roane seconded the motion, and the motion was passed unanimously.

Adoption of February 9, 2024, Meeting Minutes

Ms. Lawyer moved to adopt the December 2023 SRC Quarterly Meeting minutes as amended, Ms. Sellers seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

Adoption of May 17, 2024, Meeting Minutes

Ms. Lawyer moved to adopt the December 2023 SRC Quarterly Meeting minutes as amended, Ms. Appert seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

Public Comment

None

Commissioner's Report – Commissioner Rick Mitchell

Written report provided. Additional comments are as follows:

Within the DBVI Services Division, DBVI uses a case management system called AWARE. DBVI is in the process of moving the AWARE case management system to the cloud. This transition to the cloud is expected to be completed by January 2025. By moving the AWARE system to the cloud, DBVI will be able to customize this system to meet significant agency needs. Currently, DBVI has two staff members who work on the back end of AWARE and provide training to other staff on how to use the system. DBVI has identified that by only having a limited number of staff fully understand the AWARE system this created a vulnerability to the agency, and as of July, DBVI will have a team of staff members fully trained on the functions and functionality of AWARE. A system administrator through the developers of AWARE, Alliance, will be contracted to provide administrative functions for the AWARE system for the next 12 months. It is anticipated that DBVI will hire a systems administrator once the contracted services end. In the meantime, Alliance will be providing a systems manager that will help make the transition to the cloud smoother. Once this transition is complete, DBVI will be able to get real time information on the clients we serve.

Due to Governor Youngkin declaring a State of Emergency, for Tropical Storm Debby coming into Virginia on August 8th and 9th, this SRC Meeting was transitioned from an in-person meeting to a virtual meeting. The Commissioner thanked the SRC members for their flexibility in going virtual for this meeting.

Deputy Commissioner's Report – Acting Deputy Commissioner for Services Kathy Malone

Written report provided. Additional comments are as follows:

Kathy Malone is currently the acting Deputy Commissioner for Services while DBVI works to fill this position. Kathy Malone introduced herself to the group and expressed her excitement to meet the SRC members and attend this meeting.

The regional offices across the Commonwealth are almost fully staffed. The Norfolk Regional Office currently has one vacancy for a VR Counselor, which is a newly established position. DBVI Headquarters will be interviewing for an additional Pre-ETS outreach specialist on August 16th to provide student, parent and school outreach for the Southern region of the Commonwealth. The Virginia Rehabilitation Center for

the Blind and Vision Impaired (VRCBVI) has hired an Orientation and Mobility staff member, and they are now fully staffed.

Each spring, the VR staff, put on a program called Blind Design workshop at Virginia Tech. This immersive five-day workshop work focuses on non-visual architectural design process. This program is the recipient of the 2024 Sally Brown Excellence in Education Award winner. This award acknowledges those educators who have advanced in education and innovative methods and ways to reach students and help students succeed.

VR Program Update – Megan Hall

Written report provided. Additional comments are as follows:

Megan Hall highlighted various events that have been taking place over the summer as well as upcoming events this fall.

Cyber Space was a weeklong camp in June held on the DBVI campus. Students were provided a computer, and learned about ethical hacking, website design, coding and various career pathways to enter the IT field. An Executive team from Palo Alto Networks (the company that provides the cloud based cyber security for the top 100 companies in the world) attended this camp and spoke with students about their personal career paths, and how they became interested in cyber security. At the end of the week, Students presented their week-long projects to family and peers at a Cyber Space celebration. During this week, an employee from Palo Alto, was able to give personal insight to the students about his journey as an employee with a vision impairment and gave students information on the tools and tricks he uses to do his job. This was the first time he has told this story out loud, and his supervisors were not fully aware that he has vision impairments. This conversation led to the consideration of further supports for this employee.

Launching Point at James Madison University (JMU) was a successful event. Students stayed on the campus of JMU for a week, lived in the freshman dorms, ate at the cafeteria and talked with financial aid, various professors and the student success center about college life. Fun learning activities for this event included rock climbing, roller skating, and a group trip to an ice cream shop. Students were exposed to college life and activities they have not done before, which help build a comradery within the group leading to increased self-advocacy skills.

The Learning Independence and Feeling Empowered (LIFE) program was held at VRCBVI in July/August 2024. This four-week residential training program is for students between the ages of 14-18 years old who are returning to a high school academic program in the fall of 2024. Students learned skills of blindness, and talked about their fears and worries they may have as students who might be the only vision impaired individual in their school or county. Students learned useful skills and participated in various events such as learning how to grill, white water rafting, and a talent show to include singing, dancing and magic tricks. Students also went to a local art studio where they painted ceramic plates, mugs and vases and were able to take those home at the end of the program. There has already been great feedback on the success of the LIFE program from students as well as parents, and DBVI looks forward to providing this opportunity again in the Summer of 2025.

Cyber Warriors is a series of weeklong all virtual STEM camps. During this program, students learn things such as 3D printing, practical threat hunting with SPLUNK, Nano AI and how artificial intelligence affects people with disabilities. One session during this camp focused on building their own gaming PC and drone hacking and programming. Kits were sent to students' homes and the students worked with instructors and peer mentors to assemble the apparatus and learn to code it.

Upcoming events will include:

Peer mentoring with Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Last year was the pilot program with 12 students, and four mentors. This program will begin in September and run through the end of the school year, June 2025.

Careers in Action will take place at the Delta Hotel in downtown Richmond, from October 4 – October 6, 2024. This weekend program will allow students to tour the hotel and speak with employees as they experience various employment opportunities in the hotel industry and what goes into running a hotel. Students will take a tour of the State House and visit the Science Museum of Virginia to talk about jobs in the science industry.

In November, a virtual IT credential fair will take place. Students and adult job seekers will be able to log onto a presentation about the technology field and learn about training opportunities from community colleges, four-year universities and credentialing opportunities through the local workforce offices.

On page 11 of the VR report, Deborah Collard provided preliminary numbers for the FY23 Federal Program, consumer satisfaction surveys. It is requested that members, read over that data and see how DBVI is doing. By September 30th, DBVI will have all of the fiscal year data, and Deborah will work to get data together for the annual SRC report as well as present the findings at the next SRC meeting.

Old and New Business

Cara Kaufman – SRC Hearing Officers

Ms. Kaufman reviewed the three different methods of appeals, which include informal administrative review, mediation and fair hearing. During a fair hearing, a hearing officer is assigned to the case to preside over the hearing to render a finding. Each hearing officer can serve up to five consecutive terms and each term is renewed every year. Ms. Kaufman presented the three hearing officers that are up for renewal. Sarah Freedman and Carl Schmidt, this is their last renewal term that will expire on September 20, 2025. Rhonda Mitchell is the third hearing officer to be voted on, and this is her first renewal. DARS is working to get recruitment started to identify two more candidates to become a hearing officers given the two vacancies that will occur in September 2025. The last time this advertisement was sent out there were not any applicants, and a second round of recruitment was necessary. The second time the recruitment went out, one application was received, but DARS feels this time we are going to have better recruitment outcomes due to starting this process early.

Ms. Lawyer moved to adopt the one-year renewal for Sarah Freeman and Carl Schmidt, and the renewal of Rhonda Mitchell as amended, Ms. Appert seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

Annual Report

Chair Stern asked for 2-3 volunteers to assemble the SRC Annual Report. Chair Stern outlined what was involved with preparing the report such as proofreading the report and inputting success stories. For those members who volunteer for this, there are plenty of examples that can be used. The council discussed the format of this report, and if the format should be changed or not. It was determined that due to the fact that we are already in August, the format of the annual report would not change this year.

Ms. Appert volunteered for the reports section, Ms. Bowmaster volunteered to for the success stories portion of the report and Ms. Lawyer will proofread the report. Chair Stern and Megan Hall will work with those members that volunteered for the annual report going forward to ensure that the necessary agency information is provided so that the report can be completed in time to review with the full council at the November 2024 meeting. The annual report is due to the Governor's office by December 31, 2024.

SRC Member Term Expirations

Chair Stern and Ashley West presented members with their term expirations. Currently, Ms. Rounds and Ms. Lawyer's terms are set to expire on September 29, 2024. Both, Ms. Lawyer and Ms. Rounds have reapplied for the SRC. An overview was given to other members of when their terms expire.

Representative Roundtable

Several of the SRC members provided highlights on their organizations upcoming events.

Adjourn

Ms. Lawyer moved to end the meeting. Ms. Rounds seconded the motion. All were in favor.

Next SRC Quarterly Meeting is November 8, 2024.