

Minutes
Vermont State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)
Thursday, October 6, 2011
12:30 PM – 3:30 PM
Maple Leaf Conference Room, Gifford Hospital
Main Street, Randolph, Vermont

Members Present: Neal Meier (Chair) John Alexander, Ben Chater, Clayton Clark, Diane Dalmasse, Karen Hussey, Sarah Launderville, Sam Liss, Ellie Marshall, Christine McCarthy, Whitney Nichols, Don Parrish, William Pendlebury and Jennifer Alexander-Whitmore.

Members Absent: Diane Fowler, Christine Kilpatrick, John Spinney

Staff Present: James Smith, DVR Budget & Policy Analyst and SRC Liaison; Jim Rader, Outgoing SRC Coordinator; and Rebekah Stephens, SRC Coordinator.

Interpreters Present: Cory Brunner & Kristal Hier.

Presenters: Peter Burt, Project Coordinator; Jackie Dzewaltowski, Benefits Counselor, Burlington; and Boyd Tracy, Benefits Counselor, Bennington.

The meeting was convened at 12:34 PM.

1. **Agenda:** There were no amendments to the agenda.
2. **SRC Ground Rules:** Neal read the SRC Ground Rules.
3. **Consent Agenda (Minutes, SRC Meeting, June 2, 2011; Minutes, Performance Review Committee, June 2, 2011; Minutes, Policy & Procedures Committee, May 5, 2011; Minutes, Advocacy, Outreach & Education Committee, May 5, 2011; Coordinator's Report):** On a motion by Clayton the Council voted unanimously to approve the minutes as submitted. Jim handed out copies of his Coordinator's report.
4. **Director's Report:** Diane reported that employment outcomes for FY 2011 have been exceeded to date. VR was notified two weeks ago that re-allotment funds in the amount of \$4.5 million are available for draw down. Monies may be used to support CWS infrastructure and replace AARA Fund (Car Coach/Progressive Employment). It is VR's hope to have two to three years of re-allotment funds available in order to establish ability to work productively with partners.

In response to a question from Don, will any of the \$4.5 million be used to increase counselor funds? Diane responded; it is equivalent to adding \$5,000.00 to each counselor's discretionary allotment. Essentially, it could increase their individual funds from \$30,000.00 to \$35,000.00.

Diane reported that ticket payments are lagging. Alice will dive deeper in an attempt to determine why so that strategies may be developed to potentially move in another direction. Also CWS survey and analysis of results is finished. Results will be shared with all.

Due to flood, September 2011 Employment Institute was cancelled. It is set to be rescheduled sometime in Spring of 2012. Dr. Harrington will be the keynote speaker. The Governor's Retreat is planned for December 2011. In preparation for this retreat, VR is working diligently to compile data from the first quarter of this fiscal year.

BAM position in Middlebury is vacant. Thoughts of moving 1 FTE BAM position to Chittenden County and retaining .5 FTE in Middlebury are on the table. Diane discussed a couple of potential creative options for determining BAM assignments (industry based or geographically).

James has been working hard on employment outcomes (CRT/DS programs). There is some real excitement that designated agencies are taking this seriously. At some point, VR would like to get SRC input on how VR is doing. At this time, looks like most programs are exceeding the employment goals.

Diane gave an overview of the offenders program. This program involves employment opportunities for offenders. VR is attempting to create a statewide network to target newly released offenders and their employment goals. VR, with the assistance of VABIR, continues to oversee the work of 6 offender placement groups around the state. VR is working with Reach Up and General Assistance to improve employment rates. VR was recently assigned 800 GA recipients. The staff working the cases were able to move over 100 of the consumers off the GA program and into SSI program. This shift represents considerable money back to the State.

Vermont Employment and Rehabilitation Information System (VERIS) is in production. VR is nearing the conclusion of the 15 year dream of having an automated integrated case management system. The contract with vendor responsible for developing system has been signed. Beta testing is set to begin and roll out of the completed system is expected in approximately 9 months.

Diane also reported that VR has committed to the rolling out of 4 pilot sites to support the youth employment counselors. The Youth Employment Specialists (YES) are currently being recruited. The program has an anticipated launch date of October 2011. The YES staff will work with schools to assist students with employment and post secondary opportunities.

In response to question about letting BAM in Middlebury go; Diane responded: Movement of the slot to Burlington is being considered, however, a ½ BAM position would remain in Middlebury. It is also being considered to adding an additional BAM in Barre.

Neal: He is particularly happy to hear about GA program and recoupment of State money. In response to a question from Sam regarding the MWPD contract; Diane responded: VR has been awarded additional MIG funds that will be targeted toward health care reform and Medicaid buy-ins. The work will be done by Brendan Hogan (Bailit Health). In prior years the personnel and funding resources were not available. This caused great frustration for Sam and other advocates. However, the resources are now available for movement forward.

Sam responded: This proposal had been brought before the SRC and no one was against it on principle only on staff shortages.

5. **Order of Selection for Services (James):** Addressed later during meeting.
6. **Briefing on the Recovery Effort for VT State Government following Tropical Storm Irene, particularly as it affects DVR (Diane,James):** James stated he did not inform Diane of this agenda item. However, Diane gave Council an overview of current situation. Waterbury Complex was completely flooded by Hurricane Irene. The basement of the Weeks Building was completely flooded; however, the first floor escaped the water. Clean up crews are mandated to wear hazmat suits due to the resulting dampness and dust. The HVAC and electrical systems are entirely gone. The septic system is partially intact. The clean-up is estimated to take millions of dollars and many months. VR has been told to expect relocation to last at least 6 months. Even though the staff is experiencing disorientation, VR has not missed a beat. The field offices are fully functioning and support services are available.

VR will be moving to 94 Harvest Lane, Williston, VT. DDAS and VR will be sharing space. The space is new and very large with much natural light. Diane believes the space will be adequate. There will be conference space at this location. The hardship will be for Waterbury employees that now have to drive to Williston. Diane was informed today that a bus service from Waterbury to Williston may be instituted and subsidized by the State for a period of time to assist dislocated employees.

James feels the biggest challenge has been the separation of his team. It has been more difficult to accomplish the work. He agrees it has been very disorienting.

In response to William's question regarding video conferencing; Diane responded: Point to point is currently working. The bridge that enables all 7 sites to participate has been moved to York (private leasing company) at this time. VR is in the process of reestablishing the bridge and moving the video conferencing equipment to Williston.

In response to Sam's question, "What are the odds Waterbury will be condemned?" Diane responded: It is doubtful as the State is spending a lot of money to clean up the complex and why would the State spend the money if the complex will not be inhabited again.

John stated that he had heard that the union thought employees should get double pay. Diane responded: You heard correctly. The contract states that in emergency situations, an employee is entitled to double time if employer specifically calls the employee in to work during this time. The governor's position is that the Monday following the hurricane is the only day that qualifies under this contract definition.

Neal congratulated VR and expressed his pride in the work VR has done during this trying time. Everyone agreed unanimously and clapped to show their appreciation.

7. **Report on Meetings with Patrick Flood/Shumlin Administration (Sam)**: Sam shared the background on the purpose for the meetings with Patrick Flood (Shumlin Administration). The SILC and the two SRCs got together and decided to ask for regular meetings with the administration. Patrick Flood, under Governor Douglas, came up with the idea that he be liaison to the disability organizations. Because of the change in administrations, there had been a delay in getting these meetings off the ground. Sam shared that to date the meeting with Patrick has been very successful. Sam believes that the change in administrations has made the agency more receptive to the meetings. The meetings will be held quarterly and will include additional members of the administration when appropriate. Sue Bartlett will be present for the upcoming meeting. She will serve as the link to the governor's office. Patrick has agreed that groups will be consulted ahead of time and not brought out after the fact. Sam gave examples of concerns to be broached at the meetings (i.e., budget issues, DAIL attendant services, Choices for Care, and elimination of consumer control (e.g., challenges for change)). These meetings are planned for the foreseeable future. Sam informed the council that Sue pledged that people with disabilities will have input into healthcare reform.

Diane stated that Sue Bartlett is making herself the advocate for people with disabilities within the administration. Diane has met with Sue and feels that Sue has opened the door for people to meet with Vermont Business Roundtable; a group of 200 very influential business organizations in Vermont. These business organizations are quite influential with the legislature and with the governor. Diane shared the two questions asked before the Vermont Business Roundtable: 1. Could we engage them about CWS (creative work solutions) and PE (Progressive Employment)? and 2. Taking on initiative with hiring people with disabilities?. The responses from the VBR were encouraging.

Neal commended Sam, Diane and Don for being so dogged in pursuing these meetings.

8. **Break** (10 minutes) 1:25 PM to 1:37 PM.
9. **Panel: The DVR Benefits Counseling/Planning Program (Peter Burt, Project Coordinator; Jackie Dzewaltowski, Benefits Counselor, Burlington; and Boyd Tracy, Benefits Counselor, Bennington)**: James introduced the Presenters. James stated that he realized during the Steering Committee meeting that the SRC was not aware of the details of the Benefit Counseling

Program. He went on to explain. There are two large barriers for persons with disabilities returning to work: 1. Substantial disincentives both real and perceived and 2. The programs are so complex that even when incentives are in place, people did not take advantage of them because they did not understand them. In 1999 the Tickets to Work Incentive Act created the WIPA program (National Benefits Counseling) and a number of improvements were added to build in incentives to the SSI/SSDI programs. We are glad to welcome Peter, Boyd and Jackie today.

Diane added; we like to think of ourselves as pioneers in this area. We were invited to the signing ceremony with the President of the United States. It was very exciting.

Peter Boyd made a power point presentation on “Benefits Counseling – a proven strategy for promoting independence and self-sufficiency for Vermonters with disabilities”. Peter also referred to a specific article, “Impact of Specialized Benefits Counseling Services on Social Security Administration Disability Beneficiaries in Vermont”, (Journal of Rehabilitation, 2004, Volume 70, No. 2, 5-11: Tremblay, Tim; Smith, James; Xie, Haiyi; Drake, Robert). Peter went over the key components of the program. Per Peter, integration of benefits counseling into services is unique to Vermont. The benefits counseling program targets DVR consumers who want to work. Benefit counselors provide a one-stop-shop for information geared at reducing the fear of the consumer. The staff provide a reliable source of information which serves to reduce the fears related to the potential of losing State benefits when returning to work. Good planning through reliable information assists in preventing future crises.

Peter detailed how benefits counseling results in increased earnings and employment for those that participate. And among those that participate, 98% are satisfied with the services offered by the Benefits Counseling program.

Peter introduced Boyd Tracy, Bennington Benefits Counselor.

Boyd described how it is his goal to provide timely and accurate information to his consumers. To achieve this goal, Boyd takes an inventory of the consumer’s benefits and then determines if there are any benefits missing. Boyd shared that it is amazing how many people do not realize what benefits are available to them and that they may qualify for them. Boyd will also ensure that all rules have been applied fairly when a person has applied for a benefit. Boyd distributed a copy of a letter he sends to all of his consumers. The letter gives a detailed explanation of benefits and eligibility information. For example; the letter explains that “even if you got no SSI in a month due to working, you do not lose Medicaid.” The letter provides Social Security contact information as well as specific Social Security law references. Boyd finished up his presentation with a story about a consumer who had initially been denied SSDI. After meeting with Boyd it was determined that an income error had caused the denial of the SSDI. Boyd assisted the consumer with filing 5 years of past due tax returns and correcting the income

error. The consumer was approved for SSDI and received a retroactive SSDI payment for the missed 5 years.

Boyd introduced Jackie Dzewaltowski, Burlington Benefits Counselor.

Jackie shared some personal stories with the council. Her stories focused on providing support for her consumers during high stress times. Her support during these times enabled one consumer (a mom) to go out and secure part-time employment. Jackie clearly displayed her love of her job and the positive impact she has in a person's life.

Diane addressed all three presenters. Diane stated "It shines through how much you love your work."

Sam thanked James for suggesting this presentation. Sam went on to say that he remembers when he first came to the SRC that the general perception was that VR lacked the knowledge of work incentives and disincentives. He is glad to see that is no longer the case.

John wanted to know if DET has anything like the Benefits Counseling Program. Jackie responded that the DET Navigator will refer consumers to Benefits Counseling if necessary. The agencies try to work together.

Whitney added that he has been doing new employee orientations at the Brattleboro Retreat. He referred to an article in Counterpoint (Fall, 2011 Vol. XXVI No. 2, pg. 8) regarding the SAMHSA grant. The Retreat is planning to host a consumer advisory group to address issues brought to light at its latest consumer work group.

Clayton asked the panel what referrals you make when working with veterans. Boyd responded: I try to do a benefits summary that includes all veterans' benefits. I know the basics of the VA benefits system, but I generally refer people to the VA.

Clayton stated a VA Benefits 101 class will be held in November 2011. Clayton will provide Diane with more information.

Peter expressed a desire to have the Benefits Counseling staff involved with this training. He believes it will be beneficial.

A brief discussion among the members showing agreement that the Benefits Counseling program is beneficial and provides consumers with a trustworthy source for information and support.

William mentioned that he works with Linda Bird, Benefits Counselor, and that it is his experience that the program is uniformly helpful.

Whitney shared that Linda Bird is his Benefits Counselor.

Karen finds Benefit Counseling tremendously beneficial. She is very appreciative that the service is available.

Break: (2:27 PM to 2:33 PM)

10. Brainstorming/Planning for the 4th Annual SRC Retreat (to be held Thursday, Dec. 8, at Noble Hall, Vermont College of Fine Arts, 36 College St., Montpelier):

Ellie introduced idea of best practices for an SRC.

Don thought IRI booklet (2011 36th Institute on Rehabilitation Issues – The State Rehabilitation Council – Vocational Rehabilitation Partnership) was useful. He thinks there are a lot of suggestions as to what would work best as best practices for an SRC.

Diane suggested VT SRC sponsor a panel of SRC chairs, perhaps from New England, to discuss their SRCs and what each SRC is doing.

James added that the SRC is in a transition and has a new SRC coordinator. He suggested developing a work plan for the 2012 calendar year. Sam liked the idea.

Neal agreed with Diane's suggestion for a panel. It will provide a benchmark as to what they are doing and what we are doing.

William suggested telephone conference for the panel if too far to drive.

Discussion of changing venue of 4th Annual Retreat to Brattleboro (Union Institute & University/Vermont Agricultural, Business and Education Center) and cancelling Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Sam spoke of advantages of having a long term plan for SRC.

Neal proposed changing of Annual Retreat venue to Brattleboro and cancelling of VCFA. Neal and Rebekah will draft letter to chairs of other SRCs. Diane will contact other VR directors and lay some groundwork. Diane suggested New Hampshire, Maine, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Diane will make contact and report back to Neal and Rebekah by mid next week. Neal stated that overnight travel may be necessary for some of the participants of the panel. Diane stated VR will pay the expenses related to overnight stays for any of the panel participants.

Neal asked who will moderate the panel and facilitate the day? Steve Dickens and Karen Blakeorne were offered as suggestions. James will follow up on securing the moderator/facilitator for the Annual Retreat.

5. **Order of Selection for Services (James):** James gave background on OOS (Order of Selection).

We have one

Individual who has been identified as not severely disabled. Council approval is needed to open services for this individual. We recommend opening up services for this one person.

Ellie asked if approving this individual would have any impact on the morale of the staff. James responded: Not one, but if we opened a lot of people, maybe. Diane also responded: Historically the number of these cases has been small and money is not the issue.

John opened motion to open services for this individual. Sam seconded the motion.

Don asked James if there has ever been a case that services were not opened. James responded with no. Don responded with why not dispense with OSS then? Diane was concerned that dispensing with OSS would open the flood gates for people without significant disabilities to apply for services. Discussion followed. James stated that OSS is a mechanism to adjust services if funding situation were to change.

The motion to open services was passed with 6 ayes and 3 nays.

11. **Other Business:** Neal opened up other business with a discussion on Jim. Jim will be missed. Jim was presented with a card signed by all members of the SRC and a Barnes and Noble gift card to support his retirement reading habit.

Diane shared that "We are very sad to have you go." Jim has provided soft leadership. He has made the group successful. His efforts will be forever appreciated. Thank you. Diane presented a plaque to Jim.

Jim made a brief speech. "It was a joy." He thanked everyone. He did admit that leaving for Italy and France will help with the sadness.

James shared that he will miss the long drives to Bennington.

12. **Round Table and Parking Lot:**

Sam: Likes the idea of a work plan to assist the new coordinator.

Jennifer: Appreciates that SRC is now an active participant. Appreciated the SWOT memo (October 6, 2011 Agenda Item 5 – Performance Review Committee) and the amount of work it took.

Whitney: Glad to be a part of the SRC.

John: Jim has made the SRC a family.

Ben: Honored my first meeting is your last. I am privileged to be part of it. Thank you, Jim. I am looking forward to a long stint on SRC. Thank you.

Clay: Jim enjoy the wine.

Ellie: Jim, I wish you the best.

Sarah: Thank you, Jim, for all you have done. Good Luck.

Don: I appreciate all you have done. Welcome Ben and Rebekah.

Jim: Thank you all. Thank you, James.

Rebekah: Thank you all for your welcome. I look forward to working with you all.

William: Jim, I have so enjoyed working with you. Thank you for your involvement. This has been a wonderful proactive experience.

Karen: Welcome Ben and Rebekah.

Christine: Thank you. You have made me feel comfortable and at home. This is a safe place to have a voice.

Neal: Jim made my job easy. He was always in constant contact on what needed to be done.

13. **Adjournment:** Meeting adjourned at 3:15 PM by consensus.

Respectfully submitted by Rebekah M. Stephens, SRC Coordinator.
Approved by the Committee on December 1, 2011.