



State of Rhode Island
Department of Human Services, Office of Rehabilitation Services
STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

To work with the ORS assuring that all Rhode Islanders with disabilities are able to obtain and keep meaningful and satisfying employment.



SRC Meeting January 26, 2021

Zoom Conference

3:30 PM – 5:30 PM

Present Members: Dr. Judith Drew, Chair SRC and Program Director, Rehabilitation Counseling Program at [Salve Regina University](#)
Catherine Sansonetti, Vice-Chair SRC, Attorney at [Disability Rights Rhode Island](#)
Jack Ringland, Secretary SRC, representing the RIDD Council and Co-Coordinator of [RI Cross Disability Coalition](#)
Christina Battista, representing the [RI Statewide Independent Living Council](#)
Melissa Brusso, Educational Advocate for the [Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities](#)
Jennifer Doucette, Director of Regional Transition for [West Bay Collaborative](#)
Anne Fartura, Peer Support Coordinator/Special Education at [RI Parent Information Network \(RIPIN\)](#)
Nina Fiasconaro, a Parent Advocate for a Child with Disabilities
Paul Harden, Director of the [RI Small Business Development Center](#) at URI
Nicole Rico Serrano, Project Director, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the [Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation Vocational Rehabilitation Services](#)
Jane Slade, State Transition Coordinator at the [Department of Education](#)
Christine Yankee, Vice President of Program Services at [Goodwill Industries of Southern New England](#)

[Office of Rehabilitation Services](#): Ronald Racine (Associate Director), Natalia Montoya (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor), Joseph Murphy (Administrator, Vocational Rehabilitation), John Valentine (Quality Assurance Supervisor) and Linda Deschenes, (Assistant Administrator of Operations)

Guest: Cathy Andreozzi, Founder of [Tori Lynn Andreozzi Foundation](#)
Regina Connor, Chair, [Governor's Advisory Council for The Blind](#), former Assistant Administrator, ORS
Tracey Cunningham, Chief of Employment Services at [Division of Developmental Disabilities](#) (DDD)
Michael D. Macedo, LCSW, Clinician at [Comprehensive Community Action Program](#) (CCAP)
Kate McCarthy-Barnett, [FEMA Rhode Island](#)
Allison Hitte-Robinson, Program Coordinator, for the [Office of Disability Services at CCRI Knight Campus](#)
Tanya Townsend, Program Director, [Communities for People, INC.](#)
Keri Rossi-D'entremont, Assistant Dean of Students, [Accessibility and Inclusion at Disability Services Rhode Island College](#)

1. Establish Quorum/Introductions Guests, ORS, and SRC – Quorum met.

2. Agenda Review/Additions or Deletions

3. Approval of Minutes from December 1, 2020

Motion Paul Harden made a motion seconded by Jack Ringland, and unanimously approved to accept the December 1, 2020 minutes. (Voting Members – Christina Battista, Melissa Brusso, Jennifer Doucette, Dr. Judith Drew, Anne Fartura, Nina Fiasconaro, Paul Harden, Jane Slade, Jack Ringland, Catherine Sansonetti, Nicole Rico Serrano, Jane Slade and Christine Yankee)

4. Summary of Follow-ups from Meeting

- Information on the CNA Transition findings at the March meeting.
- Paul Harden will reach out to Joseph Murphy to set up a meeting with SBDC and ORS.
- Have a conversation with RIDE colleagues about difficulties getting disability documentation or thorough assessments.

5. ORS Director's Report - Ronald Racine

* Waitlist - Categories I and II are now empty on the Waitlist and ORS is working to get the remaining clients off of Category III. ORS anticipates this will happen by the end of February, 2021. This is a big difference from two years ago when the Waitlist had all categories closed.

* COVID-19 has brought about many changes to the way ORS serves clients. At this time, most of our services are remote, with our staff working from home. To assist with these changes, and for better service response times moving forward, ORS is converting all of the phone land-lines to cell services for our staff. Electronic signatures and utilizing One Drive, are also now part of our ability to move services along at a faster rate. There has been a learning curve for our staff and clients with some of the new technology, but the staff is working well getting everyone comfortable utilizing it. It has been difficult over the past year, but it has also opened up new opportunities, and created more efficiency.

With the change of administration in D.C., our Governor will most likely be leaving for a Cabinet position with President Biden, and there will be a new Commissioner at the RSA. The new Acting Director for the RSA is Carol Dobak.

* Budget 2021-2022 - The biggest immediate impact effecting ORS is our ability to hire new staff. Disability Determination gets funding for new hires because it is 100% federally funded. But VR is concerned about matching State funds down the road as the impacts of COVID-19 take effect on the State budget. Matching funds are 78% federal to 28% state. If ORS does not get the state match, we have to return the federal money.

Reallotment Funds - Under section 110(b)(3) of the Act, funds received during reallotment are an increase to the State's allotment. Similarly, funds relinquished during reallotment are a reduction to the State's allotment. Some states return funds to lessen the state match, this allows for other states that can take on a higher state funding level to receive more federal funds. The last two years, ORS received much less allotment funds than requested, only getting a small percentage of past amounts. However, this year ORS was able to take on five million in allotment funds.

Early retirements could impact ORS; there is currently an early incentive package for people who are close to retiring. ORS has seven people who have said they are going to be take advantage of this incentive; two are at DDS, and five are at ORS. These decisions are not totally catching us off guard, however, ORS does not have a lot of time to try to fill these upcoming openings since the incentive needs to be taken advantage of by May. Backfilling these positions may be problematic with the State budget.

6. Chair's Report - Dr. Judith Drew

* Our Council is very pleased to have new members join the meeting. The official welcome will be at the Annual May meeting. We hope to see you again at the March 9th meeting.

* Our Executive committee meeting this month was a brainstorming session. We want to help ORS as much as possible as a partner and overseer of what ORS does. The SRC monitors what they do, encourages them to do everything they can to make services available in a timely way.

* The Council normally meets five times a year. We typically do our new member training in the summer. Th at meeting is approximately three hours long. We would like to do this in person; we will have to see how the COVID-19 situation stands at that time. We will share the history of VR program and introduce you to the different ways you could serve on the Council.

* The Council plans to focus more on advocacy and outreach for services this year.

7. Updates on Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) - John Valentine

The Comprehensive Needs Assessment is intended to determine the rehabilitation needs of Rhode Islanders with disabilities, identify the needs of individuals with the most significant disabilities, including those in need of Supported Employment, minorities with significant disabilities, underserved individuals, youth with disabilities and individuals served by other components of the workforce development network. Also, the Comprehensive Needs Assessment is intended to identify the need to develop or improve Community Rehabilitation Programs. This allows VR to gather the data on underserved populations and learn how best to serve them and how to bridge the gap with employers to limit the stigmas about hiring people with disabilities.

The first draft summary of the CNA has been completed, and ORS administrators are reviewing it. Once this is done, ORS will send it back to the SRC for their review. ORS wants to thank the SRC for working on the Community Rehabilitation Providers portion of the CNA.

The Council would like to get more information on the Transition findings at the March meeting.

8. Governor's Coaching Corps and Let's Get Back to Work - Joe Murphy

* The Business Engagement Specialist Team (BEST) - ORS has a business engagement team of counselors to increase our savvy and knowledge with employers. We are currently working to organize businesses to increase our engagement with them not just for ORS clients but DLT and BHDDH clients as well. ORS also has started a working relationship with the Community Action Programs (CAPs) for the RIWorks populations and working to formalize more active participation with school-age youth in these programs.

The Business Engagement Specialist Team unit was recently honored by the Providence Business News (PBN) with a Diversity and Inclusion Award. ORS/BEST was one of nine organizations recognized for their commitment to promoting and enhancing diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Comments about touching base over the next year to work together to do a small business initiative. It would be helpful for SBDC to meet with ORS staff. Paul Harden will reach out to Joseph Murphy to set up a meeting with SBDC and ORS.

Governor's Coaching Corps - ORS continues to reach out to DLT to offer technical assistance consultant providers to help with people who have disabilities get resources.

* Reengagement with transition age as things open back up from COVID-19. ORS will be working with the providers this summer to assess what steps need to be taken to get clients back into the community. ORS engaged providers in the network when things went virtual due to COVID-19. This has been working well, overcoming lots of the barriers that existed before the pandemic, but there will be a lot of incoming people once things open back up. ORS and the providers may be overwhelmed by this for a time, so we are working now to set up a system to minimize the effects. Some youth may continue to use virtual services and applications but others will want in-person services. And depending on where they are in the process, they will need to have community-based work.

*Transition Services (Pre-ETS) with mental health providers. ORS is trying to expand the behavioral health side of Pre-ETS by working with The Providence Center and Newport County Mental Health to help them provide Pre-ETS. This will allow a student leaving high school and already having a connection with a mental health provider a smooth transition since that provider is already aware of the services that person might need.

9. New Business - A discussion about virtual working, telehealth practices for providers, ORS employees and clients.

* Many positive things have come out of the virtual needs due to COVID-19. Transportation issues are lessened for providers and clients, modernization of communication methods has sped up, costs to run the operations after initial outlays for technology will go down, convenience for providers to make more appointments and meetings, easier for clients to reach out to counselors, and moving into the future best practices for this type of work will be established. It is hopeful that for many of the partners and clients who use these practices over time, it will not only save money, but allow for better and more timely services.

* Concerns for service delivery and potential uncovered costs.

Insurance companies may decide not to cover telehealth/mental health appointments once the pandemic recedes. There will certainly be a lot of advocacy for this practice to continue. For many people receiving health/mental health service via telehealth methods it is more than just a matter of convenience, these services allow them to get help if they are transportation challenged. And seeking mental health counseling may also be more likely if telehealth methods can be used. The downside; the ongoing concern that people who may already be homebound and isolated are becoming more so. This is leading to more mental illness and disorders as well as the possible increases in physical health risks.

* Difficulties getting disability documentation or thorough assessment within a certain window of time.

a. Anecdotally, some high school seniors going into college who are bringing paperwork over for disability documentation and were eligible for a three-year evaluation for their IEP, had it bypassed. Or if it would have included neuropsychological evaluation or comprehensive educational evaluation using adult measure from a school psychologist, they did not get that either. It could be a result

of the pandemic, or provider availability. Concern is that it could impact eligibility for services in different categories for VR or in college disability service as students are coming and trying to get supports.

b. Even before the pandemic RI was no longer doing the tri-annual evaluation. This can be problematic, if only relying on the educational component, we miss the opportunity if there has been any intervention for the student, and there is no neuropsychological evaluation, there is no way to measure the psychological change that occurred.

c. If documentation takes too long, they may not be able to take tests needed for jobs. For example, if a person wants to be a Teaching Assistant, they have to take a ParaPro Assessment. And if they want to take extra time for the test, educational services may bounce back their paperwork for being too old. If documentation is a checkpoint, we need to keep an eye on this, it could be a significant problem yet unmeasured.

It might be good to have a conversation with RIDE colleagues, and would be a good topic over the next year for the Council to keep up on.

10. Public Comments - There were none.

11. Correspondence - There were none.

12. Adjournment - The meeting was adjourned at 5:15 P.M.

Motion – *Anne Fartura made a motion seconded by Catherine Sansonetti and unanimously approved to adjourn the meeting. (Voting Members - Christina Battista, Melissa Brusso, Jennifer Doucette, Dr. Judith Drew, Anne Fartura, Nina Fiasconaro, Paul Harden, Jane Slade, Jack Ringland, Catherine Sansonetti, Nicole Rico Serrano, Jane Slade and Christine Yankee)*

Respectfully Submitted,
Nancy Baker
Nancy Baker, Staff, RISRC