



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 November 6, 2023**  
**Sherlock Center / Room 017**  
**600 Mt Pleasant Ave, Providence, RI 02908**  
**4:00 PM – 6:00 PM**

Present Members:

Chairperson: Melissa Brusso, Educational Advocate for the [Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities](#)

Regina Connor, Chair, [Governor's Advisory Council for The Blind](#), former Assistant Administrator, ORS

Tracey Cunningham-Martins, CEO/President [AccessPoint RI](#)

Bethany Hogan, (Vice for) Sharon Kochan - Senior Transition Support Coordinator at RI Parent Information Network

Nicole Rico Serrano, Project Director, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the [Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation Vocational Rehabilitation Services](#)

Christine Yankee, Vice President of Program Services at [Goodwill Industries of Southern New England](#)

[Office of Rehabilitation Services](#): Joseph Murphy, Associate Director, Karen Davis, Administrator - Vocational Rehabilitation, Natalia Montoya, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor II, John Valentine, Strategic Planning Supervisor

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

**2. Agenda Review/Additions or Deletions – There were none.**

**3. Approval of Minutes from May 8, 2023**

***Motion***

*Christine Yankee made a motion seconded by Tracey Cunningham-Martins, and unanimously approved to accept the May 8, 2023, minutes. (Voting Members, Melissa Brusso, Tracey Cunningham-Martins, Regina Connor, Nicole Rico Serrano, and Christine Yankee)*

**4. Chairs' Report - Melissa Brusso**

- We have lost members due to retirement and advancement into new working positions. Jane Slade, our former Co-Chair was promoted at the RI Department of Education (RIDE) and is no longer able to sit on the SRC. Once her former position is filled at RIDE, they will contact the Council to find a new person to represent them on the SRC. At this point there is no definite timeframe for this. Catherine Sansonetti, the Council's former Vice-Chair and Chair of the State Plan, Policy and Quality Assurance committee has retired from Disability Rights Rhode Island (DRRI) and moved out of state. At this time DRRI is working to fill her spot on the Council. Barbara Fernandez, the former Secretary of the SRC, has stepped down from the Council due to work scheduling. Jennifer Doucette, Regional Transition Coordinator for West Bay Collaborative, has stepped down from the SRC for personal reasons. At this time no one from any of the Collaboratives is on the Council. The loss of these members is going to have repercussions on the Council's work. They all have been working with the SRC for years, in Catherine's case, over 20 years, and Jane 10 years. It is difficult to say goodbye to such dedicated people, but the Council can only wish them the best and hope to have productive contact with all in the future.

- **Recruitment of New Members** – With the loss of the above-mentioned members the Council will need to recruit hard this year.

The Council lacks any representation for Business, Industry and Labor, a category we are supposed to have four members in.

As mentioned above, we need one representative from the Department of Education.

We need a representative from the Client Assistance Program.

One representative from the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)

And one representative from the State Workforce Development Board.

It would also be important for the Council to recruit former clients of ORS or family members as well as underserved populations.

It would be nice to have someone who works with occupational, physical or speech therapy.

Judi Drew offered to speak with Thrive Behavioral Health and Newport County Menzies health.

Melissa Brusso mentioned she would speak with someone she knows who has a young adult with disabilities.

Natalia Montoya can reach out to someone from IGT.

Joe Murphy will be meeting with the Governor's Workforce Board and will see if there may be someone we can get.

- Once the ORS updates to the State Plan and Annual Report are completed, we will move into full recruitment mode. To help with recruitment, an email will go out to all members with two attachments to give to interested candidates. The attachments are What We Do - the State Rehabilitation Council, and SRC members wanted. We will also reach out to the National Coalition of Rehabilitation Services Councils for advice on recruitment. To offer greater opportunity for people to attend meetings, we will send out a survey email directed at days of week and times people might be better able to attend,

- **Slate of Officers** – The Council needs either a Vice-Chair or a Co-Chair as well as a Chair for the State Plan, Policy, and Quality Assurance Committee. These officers along with the representatives from ORS leadership make up the Executive Leadership Committee.

- The responsibilities of the Executive Leadership are to meet prior to all business meetings of the Council and at other times, as necessary. To act in an advisory capacity and to have a general supervision responsibility of the Council. To provide oversight, monitor committee work plans and activities, and review emerging issues and subsequent activities. The Executive Committee reports at each meeting of the Council on any actions it has taken between meetings. They also set agendas for the full Council meetings, keep the focus of the Council on required duties, and run the full meetings.

- ❖ **The Council is small right now so it would be a suitable time for folks to step up and help out with these vital positions.**

## 5. The Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS) Director's Report – Joseph Murphy

- The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Fall Conference – The RISRC membership issue that we were having is something that seems to be the same for many other states. COVID really hurt membership of Councils throughout the country. At the conference there were discussions on fiscal issues as well. Many states are having to send their funding back because they are unable to get the state matching funds. Thankfully, Rhode Island is not one of them and we met our state match so have received our full funding.
- Marketing of the ORS - Discussion about the methods used by Vermont to re-brand their vocational services in a more employment-minded look to help reduce the stigma of “disability and rehabilitation” for potential employers. [HireAbility Vermont](#), changes have yielded a noticeable increase in new referrals and hires. At our

office, a marketing committee formed and moved to bring this to DHS, where it stalled. At this time, we are trying to get DHS to collaborate with us on this plan.

- Personnel – the ORS has a staffing shortage that, if not resolved, may begin affecting our ability to give timely services to clients. We are struggling with vacancies, primarily for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors. This is due to several factors, competition from other states and programs, a smaller pool of candidates, and an increasing number of states dropping the Master’s degree requirement. The ORS has recently lost three Counselors due to these issues. At this time, our supervisors are covering the vacancies but that is not a sustainable plan. Due to the lack of qualified candidates for vacancies, the ORS continues to explore multiple ways to restructure the Rehabilitation Counselor position while maintaining the Master’s Degree Requirement. If any methodology is developed that might allow for recruitment efforts of candidates who might have a Master’s Degree in a related field, the ORS will work with the SRC and State Personnel to bring that change forward. At this time, to help with the workload, the ORS has hired five Rehabilitation Technicians to help with peripheral work for the Counselors.
- The New Case Management System – The system’s name is, “Informed,” and it will be up and running on November 27<sup>th</sup>. There will be a customer service representative at the ORS from the company, Libera, which made the system, for the first few months to help make sure we have a smooth transition for our clients and staff. In the future the ORS would like to add S.A.R.A., a digital assistant software that allows case managers to shift their focus from administration to client outcomes by automating communication and compliance.


**6. Public Comment** – There were none.

**7. Adjournment** - The meeting adjourned at 6:00 PM.

### **Motion**

*Christine Yankee made a motion seconded by Tracey Cunningham-Martins, and unanimously approved to adjourn. (Voting Members, Melissa Brusso, Tracey Cunningham-Martins, Regina Connor, Nicole Rico Serrano, and Christine Yankee)*

Respectfully Submitted,



Nancy Baker, Staff, RISRC