



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 22, 2024
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

Guests: Dr. Judith Drew, Olivia Lozier, Disability Right Rhode Island

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

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

3. Approval of Minutes from November 6, 2023

Motion

Regina Connor made a motion seconded by Christine Yankee and unanimously approved to accept the November 6, 2023, minutes. (Voting Members, Melissa Brusso, Regina Connor, Bethany Hogan, and Christine Yankee)

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

- The State Plan – Joe thanked everyone on the Council for their efforts reviewing the Plan. The working meeting approach was an effective way of doing the review with the Council. For the next update, the ORS will get sections of the Plan update earlier to the SRC, giving the Council more time to work on their remarks.
- The New Case Management System – The system's name is, "Informed," and it went up on November 27th. 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. We are working with Libera to add additional functions that were on the older system, which are not on this new one. One issue is not being able to view a counselor's entire caseload. At this point we can only view eight clients at a time. However, the data collection is working as well as 911. As with anything new, there have been issues, and staff training is continual at this time. Wyoming and Montana are also up and running on the new system. 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.
- Marketing of the ORS – At our last meeting we mentioned the methods used by Vermont to re-brand their vocational services in a more employment-minded look. Those 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. We are also trying to get funding from the Rehabilitation Service Administration (RSA). We have reworked a position, and hired staff, to help work on rebranding, while also working on other duties.

- Personnel – At this time, we have a staffing shortage that, if not resolved, may begin affecting our ability to give timely services to clients. We are struggling with vacancies, soon to be at ten, primarily for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors. Our Counselors are working 50 to 75 client caseloads, and if we are successful with the rebranding initiative, these numbers are expected to go higher.
 - The staffing shortages are 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 Rehabilitation 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 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. Additionally, Ron Racine is working to change Counselor requirements, which may help in the short-term. Long-term fixes will need to have pay increases for Counselors 1 and 2 and the addition of a new level of Counselor 3, as well as re-working the Administration salaries. All of these plans will need to be approved by the Union and State Administrators.

Reminder – The 2025 Comprehensive Needs Assessment, which drives the State Plan is starting to gear up. This year we want to focus on out-of-school youth, and underserved populations. *The Council will collaborate with the ORS on this.*

5. Chairs’ Report - Melissa Brusso

- State Plan – We are incredibly pleased with the way things went in reviewing and working to get the Council’s comments to the ORS. We want to thank the ORS for coming to our meetings and being there when we had questions or needed insight. The weekly standing meetings worked out well, allowing everyone to participate. It made it easier for people to attend, if they could not come to all the meetings, then they could come to one in which they were particularly interested. The next time we plan to do this same method, refining it a bit. We will be more topic specific, asking people to target areas of the Plan that is their interest or specialty. We will work with the ORS to get the sections out with a better explanation and directives. I want to thank everyone for taking their time and making this is success.
- ORS personnel Shortfalls – The Council will support ORS in their efforts. We can advocate at the public hearing and write letters if the ORS needs this. Our goal is to see clients get the best services they can, and if personnel shortages negatively affect services, we must act to alleviate this.
- Membership and Meetings– We can clearly see by the State Plan SRC section, the Council lacks any representation for Business, Industry and Labor, a category we are supposed to have four members in. We are still waiting for a representative from the Department of Education and from the Client Assistance Program, one representative from the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and from the State Workforce Development Board. The ORS has also offered ideas for recruitment.

- As discussed in our last meeting it would also be important for the Council to recruit former clients of ORS and/or their family members as well as underserved populations. And it would be nice to have someone who works with occupational, physical or speech therapy.
- Suggestions made that in addition to the usual outreach, the Council should target employers that the ORS has awarded in the past, as well as industries sectors in the Cyber Security industry, Tax Consultants, Med Techs, New England Tech, and supermarkets.
- To offer greater opportunity for people to attend meetings, we have done a survey of the membership regarding meeting day and times and Nancy shared the results with everyone. As agreed, upon by members, moving forward we plan to hold our meetings on Monday afternoons at 3 pm. Our next meeting will be on March 18, 2024, at 3 pm via ZOOM. This will be an informal meeting, one where we hope to have new candidates come and meet us as well as get updates from ORS. We will not be voting on anything at this meeting.

Reminder - 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.**

6. Public Comment – The Sherlock Center is seeking three full time Educational Advocates. If anyone is interested or knows someone, let Melissa know.

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

Motion

Regina Connor made a motion seconded by Bethany Hogan and unanimously approved to adjourn. (Voting Members, Melissa Brusso, Regina Connor, Bethany Hogan, and Christine Yankee)

Respectfully Submitted,

Nancy L. Baker

Nancy Baker, Staff, RISRC