**Massachusetts Commission for the Blind**

**State Rehabilitation Council**

**Annual Report 2019**

The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) Rehabilitation Council (RC) is appointed by the Governor to partner with and advise MCB’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program. Council members are the voice of consumers receiving VR services. Council members represent: the Statewide Independent Living Council; a parent training and information center; the Client Assistance Program; a community rehabilitation program service provider; a disability advocacy group; the business, industry and labor sectors; the state educational agency and the state workforce investment board among others.

Some of the RC responsibilities include: advocating for the VR program to the public; working in partnership with MCB to maximize employment and independent living; and taking an advisory role in the preparation of the VR state plan**.** The RC has for many years been involved in the preparation of the Massachusetts Combined State Plan as required by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) as well as any required updates and modifications. Council members volunteer their time to review MCB’s goals, priorities, policies, procedures, program service delivery and provide valuable feedback. The RC has appointed a sub-committee that includes the chair and four other members to work with MCB on the draft of the 2020-2023 Massachusetts Combined State Plan. This sub-committee has already developed a draft of the “MCB State Plan Goals and Priorities Jointly Developed with the Rehabilitation Council” for consideration of the agency. It has also been agreed that this sub-committee will work with the agency on plans to develop a new comprehensive needs assessment and client satisfaction studies. The RC has been updated on, and contributed to, the entire state plan process at several meetings in 2019 by agency staff and by RC member Cheryl Scott who is the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Workforce Development Board. During 2019, the RC members also rated the agency’s performance relative to the goals described in the state plan.

The council meets quarterly and receives program and staff updates from the commissioner, deputy commissioner, policy, and the general counsel. During 2019 Joanne Dubray, Executive Assistant to the Commissioner, assumed the responsibilities of liaison to the RC; the transition has been smooth and the RC appreciates her assistance. The RC directs and approves the comprehensive consumer needs assessment and satisfaction surveys and other evaluations of the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program. During 2018, the RC reviewed and made recommendations on the Comprehensive Needs Assessment; MCB developed an electronic survey for consumers via Google Forms which had some accessibility difficulties that need to be resolved. The RC and MCB will re-think and re-evaluate future use of web-based surveys. MCB will work closely with the RC and a sub-committee on needs assessment to plan future needs assessment methodology. Recently, the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) engaged a consultant to develop an MCB survey of its consumers to support MCB’s efforts to better ascertain the data dynamics of people with blindness throughout the Commonwealth.  The goal of this innovative program is to enhance its development and targeting of future programming and to contribute to its comprehensive needs assessment.  The consultant developed a short survey to be asked during the intake process.  The consultant developed a much larger panel of questions that could be used in the survey of existing clients.   Now MCB is looking to progress to the next stage which will be implementing the surveys. MCB has issued an RFR to seek a consultant to provide guidance via a report and to implement the long survey that will go to existing consumers and provide analytics on the data collected.  Representatives of the RC will provide feedback and advice throughout this process.

The RC also discusses, reviews, and makes recommendations on policy, programmatic changes, and agency performance indicators.

In the past, the RC has had several standing sub-committees to work between quarterly meetings and to focus on critical issues; the RC intends to discuss reactivating these standing committees in 2020. For example, the Technology Sub-Committee might be able to compile a list of JAWS script writers as a resource for companies.

**MCB’s 2019 Rehabilitation Council is comprised of the following individuals. Several other individuals have been awaiting appointment by Governor’s Office for some time.**

**Members**

Bruce Howell Community Service provider representative - Chair

DeAnn Elliott Current/Former Recipient of VR Services - Vice-Chair

Karen McCormack Representative for individual who is blind and multi-disabled and unable to represent him or herself - Secretary

Richard W. Curtis Business, Labor & Industry

Nancy Rumbolt-Trzcinski State Independent Living Council

Darren Black Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor (MCB)

Nora Nagle Disability advocacy group Representative

Cory Kadlick Former Recipient of VR Services

Lydia Green Business, Labor and Industry

Jerry Berrier Disability advocacy group representative for people who are blind

Nancy Mader Parent, Training and Information Center

Charles Curti Business, Labor and Industry

**Required Designates from State Agencies**

Naomi Goldberg Representative - Client Assistance Program Representative

Cheryl Scott Representative - Department of Workforce Development

Martha Daigle Representative - Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

**Ex Officio Member**

David D’Arcangelo Commissioner, MCB

**Vacant Seat**

Business, Labor & Industry

**Supporting Staff**

John Oliveira Deputy Commissioner

Mary Otiato Chief of Staff /Director of Policy

Loran Lang General Counsel

Joanne Dubray ` Executive Assistant to the Commissioner

Patricia Hart Policy Development

**Issues and Progress**

For the year 2019, the RC concentrated on the following issues:

* Vocational rehabilitation funding concerns
* Monitoring and Audits
* Innovative Programming
* Outreach
* WIOA implementation

**Vocational Rehabilitation Funding Concerns**

The RC, along with the MCB Commissioner, became very concerned in 2018 that the MCB VR program was facing serious funding issues. The RC appointed a sub-committee to work with MCB to explore possible implementation of an Order of Selection (OOS). RC members joined other Massachusetts advocates in successfully urging the Massachusetts Legislature to increase MCB’s state appropriations. With increased state funding and re-allotment funding awarded to MCB in both 2018 ($1,061,979) and 2019 ($2.5 million) by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), the agency and the RC have been able to table any consideration of an OOS. The RC supports the agency’s efforts to increase innovative and expansion activities and services with the increased funding available.

**Monitoring and Audits**

RSA had, in its 2017 Program Monitoring review, expressed concern about the way funds were allocated to the Mass Hires Career Centers. As a result of the finding, MCB is now encouraging the Regional Directors to speak to each career center and to look at utilization of the assistive technology and services. The first year MCB focused on assistive technology, but now funding is based on utilization data. The RC agreed with this approach.

The MCB vocational rehabilitation program underwent two audits in 2019, one conducted by KPMG as a single state audit and one conducted by the Massachusetts State Auditor’s Office. The RC was briefed on the results of both audits and was pleased that the issues found were minor and quickly addressed by MCB.

**Innovative Programming**

During 2019, the RC reviewed and supported the agency’s innovative programming including:

* The Summer Internship program. The internship program is nationally recognized as a model that supports high school, college, post-graduate and non-traditional students who are legally blind to acquire work experience. In 2019, the program reached its 16th year and involved 80 interns and approximately 60 employing partners. During the program’s 16-year span, there have been approximately 1,000 internship opportunities with approximately 400 private and public business partners. It is notable and very much appreciated that several of the RC members who represent Business, Labor and Industry have been responsible for arranging internships for blind consumers at their organizations.
* A new employment initiative similar to Project Search began in January, 2019. The Polus Center and the Carroll Center enrolled four participants each. The new program is called Employment Now and will be administered locally based on a model similar to Project Search. Three of the four consumers served by each provider must, with MCB assistance, be placed in full-time positions in order for the provider to receive funding for the next year. Re-allotment funding was used. Benefits counseling is provided up front to address any concerns that clients might have about returning to work. Participants are learning transferable skills. The RC supports this program given the success of the Project Search program during the past few years.
* The RC discussed, and enthusiastically supported, the concept of MCB convening a statewide event held in March 2019. The conference was called “Visions of Collaboration: Focus on Success in Work and Life”. The focus of the conference was pre-employment transition services; the 150 attendees included Teachers of the Visually-Impaired, Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists who work with schools, MCB staff, Special Education Directors, IEP Team Chairs, Guidance Counselors, and other transition professionals. MCB held a similar conference in March 2018 that was very well-received.
* This year the partners (Carroll Center, Perkins, MCB and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard) decided to modify the job fair event that has been held at Radcliffe each year. Instead, they conducted an “employer listening session” that provided information about how MCB and the other partners work on helping consumers to obtain employment with the ultimate objective of establishing an ongoing in-depth information exchange with employers. The Commissioner and the RC agreed to express to attending employers that MCB works with both entry-level job candidates, as well as mid-career professionals. We felt that this latter pool of job seekers may not generally be what employers understand MCB has the capacity to supply to them.

RC members endorsed this approach and suggested inviting staffing agencies as well as direct employers and also asking employers who have successfully employed blind persons to share their knowledge and experiences. As a result of this event, the RC Chair and the President of the Carroll Center for the Blind, one of the most significant MCB service agency vendors, are conducting ongoing meetings with representatives of two of the attending employers.  Discussions are centering on improvements to their online employment application process, and exploration of potential internship or job possibilities for MCB VR clients.

During 2019 the RC committee meetings included several formal presentations on topics relevant to the RC:

* Emre Sarbak, Co-Founder of Mediate, a Cambridge technology startup, spoke at our quarterly meeting in June about innovative mobile application technology he is developing that may enable blind employees to more independently navigate within buildings where they are working.  He sought and received feedback about what would be helpful, and it resulted in further onsite testing at the Museum of Science, where one of the RC members is employed, with primary responsibility for access to the museum’s offerings.
* MCB’s legal counsel presented to the Council information about the Conflict of Interest and Open Meeting Law training sessions that are required for members of state committees such as the Rehabilitation Council. A summary of the COI law is required of each member annually, with completion of a short online training program required every other year. Additionally, members are required to complete an online program on the Commonwealth’s Open Meeting Laws.
* MCB’s Director of Employment Services updated the RC on MCB’s employment services including internships, mentoring, supported employment, and individualized job search and job development services. He also informed them of a new program for part-time employment which, while not funded by MCB, may be beneficial for some consumers. The agency has identified approximately 50 clients who are currently job-ready, not including current college students. Many are enrolled or will be enrolled in these employment/training programs.
* MCB’s policy development staff discussed the agency’s progress and plans at several meetings and asked for and received the council’s recommendations relative to the Comprehensive Needs Assessment and state plan development.
* Cheryl Scott who is an RC member and also the Director of the Massachusetts Workforce Development Board gave a presentation on both the updated combined state plan and the state’s current labor and workforce development initiatives.
* As requested by the Council’s Chairperson, MCB’s Chief Financial Officer presented an in-depth report on MCB’s financial situation and resources.

**Outreach**

MCB’s commissioner David D’Arcangelo has identified outreach across the state as a major goal, in line with the RC’s continuing focus. The Commissioner and the RC have been exploring new outreach initiatives during 2019. One Council suggestion has been to recruit former VR clients in the community as ambassadors for outreach to consumers who may have reservations about employment. The RC also met with an individual who was hired to be the Director of Communications and began a dialogue about outreach. The agency made progress with this goal by establishing a strong presence on social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Unfortunately, that MCB staff member left the agency and the position is currently an open position that MCB is seeking to fill again. When hired, the RC looks forward to working with the new director of communications to expand MCB’s outreach efforts.

The RC promoted and participated in the annual White Cane Safety Day celebration which was held at the Massachusetts State House in October. The event offered an ongoing opportunity to educate the public, show support and expand understanding of independence and safe travel by persons who are visually impaired. Highlighting the abilities of persons who are blind or visually impaired is critical for creating a positive perception of their abilities in the minds of potential employers.

**Braille**

For some time, the MCB RC has been concerned that the availability and quality of braille instruction provided by school systems to elementary through high school age children can vary in quality and frequency from town to town. The MCB RC supports and encourages the agency’s decision to take the lead in revitalizing the Braille Literacy Council (BrLAC). Over the past year, the BrLAC focus has been on encouraging the College Board to provide SAT and other tests in the Braille format which is most appropriate for each student, sometimes Unified English Braille and sometimes the traditional English Braille System.  Commissioner D’Arcangelo signed off on a letter to the College Board, requesting that it accommodate each student’s individual needs. The BrLAC also has also been working on Braille Certification/testing of TVIs.

**WIOA implementation**

The RC closely monitored the agency’s implementation of WIOA during 2019 and received regular updates from the Deputy Commissioner on the relationships with the MassHiresCareer Centers, including the accessibility of centers, local Memoranda of Understanding, and infrastructure funding. One of the biggest challenges at MassHires Centers is staff turnover – refreshing the training for entry level staff is an important part of making centers accessible for users.

The RC also received frequent updates on MCB’s provision of pre-employment transition services to students with visual impairments.

**Plans for Federal Fiscal Year 2020**

The RC will continue to review and work on some of the issues which are still of ongoing concern: braille literacy; facilitation of transportation for people in need of transportation (either to look for work or go to work); and accessibility through assistive technologies of online content commonly required by high school students, college students, job seekers, and employees who are legally blind. The optimization of governmental resources to benefit the employment interests of legally blind persons and the enhancement of vocational rehabilitation services of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind continues to be the primary function of the RC.

The RC continues to pay close attention to the agency’s implementation of the Work Force Innovation and Opportunity Act. MCB provides updates on the effort at each meeting. The Council agrees with the increased emphasis on Pre-ETS and receives regular updates from agency staff on Pre-ETS services. However, the RC remains concerned about the elimination of the homemaker employment outcome goal.

The RC has the following goals for federal fiscal year 2019:

* Make budget recommendations and advocate, when appropriate, to ensure that MCB both receives sufficient VR funding and provides appropriate and cost-effective services for consumers;
* Through interaction with pertinent MCB staff, as well as the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Accessible Instructional Materials (AIM) Library, continue to try to ascertain the number and percentage of blind students currently receiving braille instruction and orientation and mobility instruction, and what criteria are being used to make decisions about an individual student’s need for braille instruction and orientation and mobility instruction;
* Ensure that MCB’s social services and vocational rehabilitation staff can fully participate in IEP meetings for children and youth;
* Enhance the service delivery of MCB VR counselors to increase job development activities, job placement services, technology services, job retention, and job coaching services to all individuals (including individuals with other disabilities in addition to blindness) receiving vocational services at MCB regional offices;
* Participate in the development process for the next Massachusetts Combined WIOA State Plan which will be due in 2020. This will be a major focus of the RC during the next year since the council is responsible for offering advice and recommendations as well as for evaluating the agency’s effectiveness in reaching state plan goals. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts workforce development system has undertaken a two-year development process for the state plan that began in December, 2018 and that includes formal visioning, development, and refinement processes to be completed during 2019 and 2020 with the goal that the State Workforce Development Board and the Rehabilitation Services Administration will approve the state plan before June 30, 2020.
* Revive the RC’s sub-committees and establish new sub-committees as needed.
* Work and advocate for accessibility of state and local government portal systems, including all applications for services and all documents posted on these portals; and
* Continue to work with state officials to support the Commonwealth’s initiative to move forward as a model employer of individuals with disabilities.