

State Of Connecticut

Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS)

Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)

State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) to BESB

DRAFT MINUTES

Special Meeting January 29, 2025

Members Present:

Treasurer Ms. Melissa Thompson, Ms. Jennifer Jenkins, Ms. Enaida Mendoza, Ms. Heide Sulewski, Director Carol Jenkins, Ms. Deb Reed, Chairman Phillip Magalnick, Vice Chairman William DeMaio, Secretary Ms. Lucretia Jones, Ms. Laurianne Florio, Ms. Shannon Gale, Ms. Bernadette Jackel, Mr. John Carnemolla, Ms. Nicole Jezairian, Ms. Marilyn Wenzel, Ms. Brandy Altergott, Ms. Shelley McDermott

Others Present:

Ms. Ashley Morgan

Members Absent:

Mr. Joseph Carbone, Mr. Jay Brown, Ms. Contessa Big Crow-Jenkins, Ms. Laura Knapp

Welcome:

Call to order: Chair Mr. Phillip Magalnick called the meeting to order at 12:06pm. A quorum was present.

Synergy Report Discussion

Chairman Phillip Magalnick discussed how the Synergy report was emailed to SRC members back in December after the last SRC meeting. It was a rather lengthy report and he hoped everyone was able to read it over. He stated that this meeting was important to help transform the agency and the Bureau to do a better job meeting client needs by addressing the agency level problems that the Bureau is facing. He stated in the December meeting Synergy joined the

meeting and summarized their findings, which mostly hit on fiscal aspects. Some of the issues they identified are going to be mandated by the Rehabilitation Act and then the SRC can decide what to do as a council to help resolve some of these issues. He stated that during his tenure on the council it has taken him almost the same amount of time to really understand how the system works. The SRC has a substantial role in the VR program especially where it comes to finances and making sure that things are done properly.

He opened the floor to other members to bring up any questions or concerns they had regarding the report. Ms. Deb Reed mentioned that she didn't know how the department has functioned all these years with the needs that are so clearly laid out in this review. She mentioned she also knows that there have been voiced complaints and concerns that hopefully will be addressed by the work done today in this meeting. She stated that Director Carol Jenkins' determination to make this a better and more efficient department for the blind is noted and appreciated. Ms. Shannon Gale mentioned she was still new to the SRC and wasn't really prepared to vote on something this important and that she just wanted to know what the implementation plans were going to be after the vote was taken. Chairman Phillip Magalnick stated that there were not going to be any implementation plans that the SRC was going to vote to act based on the report. He stated this is in essence an issue between the Bureau and the agency (ADS) and that we support the agency, but we are strictly VR. He wanted to make sure everyone knew whether they were a new member or a seasoned member, everyone's thoughts are valuable and any comments they may have bring insight. Vice Chairman William DeMaio seconded these statements. Ms. Nicole Jezairian wanted to know if BESB clients were interviewed to see if there was a consensus among them with issues. Chairman Phillip Magalnick mentioned that a couple of clients were interviewed, he believed that he was one of them, but that the report was not focused on clients it was more focused on the fiscal aspects and how these issues trickle down into other aspects of the program because at the end everything comes down to the money and whether or not we can do something because of funding.

Chairman Phillip Magalnick asked Director Carol Jenkins if ADS responded to the report once they received it almost two months ago, if any discussions were happening between herself and ADS. Director Carol Jenkins stated that the discussions have mostly focused on staff vacancies and creating other positions but no plan itself to address the report's findings and fiscal concerns. Vice Chairman William DeMaio asked who the meetings have been with specifically. Director Carol Jenkins stated that these meetings were between herself, the commissioner, the deputy commissioner, and the director of the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS). She mentioned they are having another meeting tomorrow that will bring in the fiscal department staff. Chairman Phillip Magalnick asked if at any of these discussions if her right for parity with the general unit in respect to the report was discussed, Director Carol Jenkins mentioned that it had not been brought up at them. Chairman Phillip Magalnick also asked if Director Carol Jenkins knew if ADS had any meeting with the fiscal department with plans for training and education and if they had any plans for transferring that fiscal authority as regulated by law to the Bureau to the VR program. Unfortunately, they have only discussed that training is needed but not any discussions on what that actual training would be.

Chairman Phillip Magalnick went on to state that he has been aware of issues for the last couple of years specifically regarding information in fiscal. He has reached out to them since becoming chair several times to either have calls ignored, not returned, and emails not responded to by the fiscal department. He went on to say that the management and control of the fiscal dollars for the VR program should be under BESB and not someone at ADS. This would help the director make decisions in a timelier manner as the information she needs would be available to her more readily and in an accessible format. He went on to question if the ADS let's Director Carol Jenkins know when funds come in for BESB. Director Carol Jenkins went on to say it depends on the funding type. She is notified of the VR grant award, that goes to her but when it is program income funds or state funds, she is not notified those funds go directly to the fiscal department at ADS. She is aware that the funds come quarterly but

not when the actual deposits happen. She stated when it comes to drawing down funds from the feds, she does not always know how much is drawn down. Chairman Phillip Magalnick also mentioned a time when funds were used for something else. Director Carol Jenkins stated they were program funds that she had other plans for but were used to pay for something else by fiscal.

Chairman Phillip Magalnick brought up RSA will be getting a copy of this report as well. He mentioned that in the report the accountants on the team had some issues trying to figure out what was going on in the reports sent to them by fiscal. He went on to state that when RSA comes in, we're in jeopardy if we're mishandling federal funds. There was brief discussion on who was responsible for overseeing the fiscal department, the commissioner's office. Chairman Phillip Magalnick proceeded to state that if BESB had their own fiscal people the information needed would be immediately accessible to the director and she would be able to pivot and make timelier decisions, but BESB does not have its own fiscal unit in the office. This brought up discussion on the aspect of parity over the bureau versus ADS having control over everything.

Ms. Deb Reed asked is when RSA comes in to review the Bureau, if this report would be the driving force to expedite the changes needed. Chairman Phillip Magalnick stated that he thinks it will. He stated that after the report was issued by Synergy that the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, the BRS director, Director Carol Jenkins and a few members of the fiscal department had a meeting regarding this report. Fiscal was very defensive regarding this report. Chairman Phillip Magalnick stated that they should be using this report as a guide to help address and fix the problems so that the Bureau and Agency can both remain in compliance with RSA and to make the programs better for the clients they serve.

This brought up how this report should be addressed to make the changes recommended. Chairman Phillip Magalnick stated that sending this report to the RSA liaison in Washington D.C. could be a step taken. Another was making sure the Governor was aware of the situation. Mr. John Carnemolla asked that if it is legally mandated for

RSA to receive a copy of this report why is this something that the SRC needs to vote on. Chairman Phillip Magalnick clarified that SRC couldn't just email the report that a letter would need to accompany it from the SRC, and we would need to vote on it so that no one is blindsided on the Council that he sent a letter without the SRC's knowledge and authority.

Mr. John Carnemolla proceeded to ask if the meetings with ADS to review this report helping to work out various aspects of the issues presented by the report. He wanted to know if Director Carol Jenkins had been involved in a collaborative environment or if it had remained adversarial. Director Carol Jenkins stated that other than the few meetings she mentioned earlier there had not been much. She has been working on some other issues that needed to be addressed immediately and has not had enough time to work on all the issues the report addressed. She mentioned that the report brought a lot of issues up and that she is trying to prioritize certain things first like staffing so that client needs could be addressed first and foremost. Chairman Phillip Magalnick proceeded to praise Director Carol Jenkins for all the work she has been doing to lift the BESB program not just for VR clients but all BESB clients. He stated she has exhibited commitment and selflessness towards the BESB program to help provide the best services possible, but her hands are tied in a way since she is a state employee. But the SRC has the ability to help facilitate these changes.

Discussion proceeded as to how to implement this change. Vice Chairman William DeMaio suggested sending an email to the Commissioner asking for her to share her plan to address these issues with the SRC. Mr. John Carnemolla made a motion that the chair and vice chair cosign a letter to the Commissioner on behalf of the SRC requesting the perspective and stance of the ADS on this Synergy Report and to have this available to the SRC before the next meeting in March, preferably the beginning of March so that the SRC has time to read it. Ms. Nicole Jezairian seconded the motion. Motion carried, no objections or abstentions. Chairman Phillip Magalnick stated that the SRC is cautiously optimistic that the recommendations

outlined by Synergy secondary to their findings will result in a collaborative effort between ADS and the Bureau as all of the issues are correctable.

Adjournment

Chairman Phillip Magalnick asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Motion was made by Vice Chairman William DeMaio, seconded by Ms. Lucretia Jones, motion carried unanimously, no objections or abstentions. Meeting adjourned at 1:27pm.