South Carolina Commission for the Blind

1430 Confederate Avenue  
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes   
January 23, 2024

Notifications of all regular, called, or special meetings are compliant with FOIA requirements, Section 90-4-80.

# Call to Order

Chairperson Susan John called the meeting to order at 11:00 am. The meeting was conducted via Zoom Meeting software.

# Present

Susan John, Chairperson

Ronald Coleman, Vice Chairperson  
Cathy Olker, Secretary  
Dan Hanfland, Board Commissioner

Mathias Chaplin, Board Commissioner  
Darline Graham, SCCB Commissioner

# Adoption of Agenda

Cathy Olker made a motion to accept the January 23, 2024, Agenda. It was seconded by Ron Coleman. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Public Comment

None

# Approval of Minutes

Cathy Olker made a motion to accept the November 28, 2023, minutes. It was seconded by Ron Coleman. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Commissioner’s Report

## Darline Graham reported:

The AWARE case management system refactoring process is going well. Staff continue to meet with Alliance at least twice a week and the process is scheduled to be completed by May or possibly June.

Carol Anderson and the Program Leads have developed and conducted trainings to help ensure program staff are better prepared to deliver quality services to consumers.

Carol Anderson and Commissioner Graham were accepted to the National Executive Rehabilitation Leadership Institute. This in-person training provides an opportunity for state directors and senior administrators in vocational rehabilitation agencies across the nation to learn from experts in the field (and each other) to increase their knowledge and skills to better meet the needs of consumers, employees, businesses, and community partners.

The House Budget Hearing is scheduled for January 30. A meeting was held with the agency’s budget analyst and the House Ways and Means Healthcare subcommittee chairman to discuss the agency’s request. The agency is requesting recurring funds for Older Blind, state match, and administrative support. The data that supports the Older Blind request is very impactful. South Carolina has the fifth highest rate of increase in population that is 65 and older. Between 2010 and 2020, the 65 and older population increased by 53.8%. South Carolina is also among the top four states where retirees are moving. Approximately 7.7% of the 65 and older population in the state are blind or have a visual impairment. That is 74,840 individuals out of 971,951. With the increase in the state’s aging population, more individuals are seeking services from the Older Blind program. Last year SCCB served more than 700 individuals in the Older Blind program and the number is increasing.

Commissioner Graham thanked SCCB’s Foundation for hosting a legislative breakfast on January 11. The Executive Team shared information about the agency’s services and informed legislators of its needs. There were more than 250 attendees with at least 8 Senators and more than 30 representatives.

The agency has over 100 employees with a 91.9% Equal Employment Attainment rate. This is the highest it has been in more than 10 ten years.

Carrie Morris, Finance Director, has resigned. The agency is currently interviewing for this position.

Last month, interviews were held for the attorney position. An offer was made, but the candidate declined. The position has been reposted.

Ryan Skinner, BEP staff, and Donna Earley are assisting the Blind Licensed Vendors with planning their annual meeting. The meeting will be held on February 2-3 at Embassy Suites in Columbia.

SCCB and the School for the Deaf and Blind will host the annual Braille Challenge on February 22, 2024. Due to the HVAC project, it will be held at Segra Park. The Braille Challenge is an opportunity for students to utilize and showcase their braille skills, which are essential to academic and employment success. Top scoring students from each state will have an opportunity to attend the national Braille Challenge.

The HVAC project is currently ahead of schedule. The project involves planning, moving furniture, parking issues, and dismantling part of the roof to gain access to air handlers. Replacement of existing lighting with LED lighting for energy efficiency is also involved. The residential facility will not be accessible.

Carol Anderson has worked with Training Center staff to develop an alternative learning plan incorporating in-person and virtual training. In-person trainings will rotate between the Columbia campus and regional offices around the state. Instructors will travel to the offices to ensure consumers are on track and reinforce the virtual training. The project is anticipated to be completed by July.

New employees Ashlyn Morris, Older Blind Counselor; Susan Cook, Administrative Assistant; and Christopher Armstrong, Prevention of Blindness Coordinator, were welcomed.

# Finance Report

## Matt Daugherty reported:

State Budget – As of December 31, 2023, agency spending was 50% through the State Fiscal Year. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has utilized 59% of the budget, the Training Center 35%, Transition Services 35%, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) 84%, Prevention of Blindness 41%, Older Blind 46%, Children’s Services 38%, and Administration 52%. The agency as a whole expended, 49.5% of its budget.

Federal Grants – The agency is 62% through the total period of performance for the 2023 grant cycle.  The agency has utilized 24% of the VR general use portion of the grant, and 36% of the portion set-aside for the provision of pre-ETS (pre-employment transition services). 100% of the Older Blind grant has been utilized. 11% of the Supported Employment general use grant was used, and none of the Supported Employment grant for Transition. Both grants have been closed out.

The agency is 12% through the total period of performance for the 2024 grant cycle, and spending has just begun on the VR and Supported Employment grants. The agency has not utilized any of these funds and will seek to match these funds before October of this year to be able to utilize them during the carryover year. The agency has utilized 100% of the Older Blind grant and is looking for alternative sources of funding.

Capital Improvement Projects

* The landscaping and generator projects have been completed.
* Construction is progressing on the HVAC project, which is scheduled to be completed by July 2024.
* Building A renovation is awaiting final design.
* Renovation of the Rembert Dennis canteen is awaiting a budget change review by the Joint Budget Review Committee (JBRC).
* Renovation of the Wade Hampton canteen is awaiting a budget change and then review by the JBRC.
* Initial planning has begun for the Columbia Campus cafeteria, residential facility, plumbing projects, parking lot project, accessible ramp project, and utilization of the property located at 1425 Victoria Street.

Information Technology Update

* The AWARE refactoring project has moved through most of the participant module and is moving to the fiscal functions.
* IT is in the process of completing a network upgrade.

# Human Resources Report

## Luis Mendoza reported:

The agency currently has 100 full-time employees. Including temporary employees and contract employees, the total is 110 employees. This fiscal year the agency has hired 16 full-time employees and had 9 separations. The agency currently has a 9% turnover rate, a slight increase from 6% in August. A lot of time and resources are invested in selecting the best candidates for positions and the Wonderlic assessment is utilized to help predict performance of staff.

Human Resources (HR) staff attended orientation and mobility (O&M) schools in North Carolina, upstate South Carolina, and other states in search of qualified O&M candidates. One staff member is on track to complete the O&M Certification Program by April. This will allow the agency to host interns to increase talent and the applicant pool.

To sustain growth, Human Resources has shifted its focus to retention initiatives. Through the new electronic performance management system, a new self-reflection survey has launched. Self-reflections are conducted every quarter and allow employees to reflect on past performance and accomplishments. HR is working to shift annual reviews to a universal date where all employees are evaluated at the same time. The agency is participating in a pilot with the Department of Administration to use this new annual grading system.

HR is working to onboard staff with the new learning management system. Documenting training on the new system has been successful.

The agency’s workforce is the most diverse in nearly a decade. Preliminary numbers released from the Human Affairs Commission show the Equal Employment Opportunity attainment rate has increased to 91.9%, the highest ever. The full report in February will show where the agency ranks compared to other agencies.

The agency will offer Aira, an app and visual interpretation service free of charge to blind and visually impaired staff. Aira helps employees with reading names on packages, serial numbers, and other written materials. The Staff Advisory Council, which consists of blind and visually impaired employees, continues to work on initiatives to help foster a workplace of inclusivity.

# **Consumer Services Update**

## Carol Anderson reported:

Consumer Services draft policies were completed and are being reviewed by Executive staff. A training schedule for counselors, Employment Consultants (ECs), Administrative Assistants, and Training Center staff was developed. Trainings will occur monthly. Monthly community check-in meetings with counselors began in December. The check-ins allow counselors to learn best practices, problem solving, receive clarification on policies, and staff cases for guidance.

The Deaf-Blind Coordinator is coordinating translator services in multiple languages for more than seven consumers as a part of the service delivery process.

The Region II Prevention of Blindness Coordinator position was filled January 2. Prevention of Blindness currently serves 119 consumers with sight saving procedures.

The Consumer Services Program Lead will attend the “First Five SC Website Training: Connecting families to South Carolina’s public services for young children” on February 13. The training will introduce ways to better serve young children in South Carolina.

All Older Blind Counselor positions are filled, and the agency is currently serving more than 800 Older Blind Consumers. Since July 1, the agency has closed more than 200 Older Blind cases for individuals who received this service. Commissioner Graham stated that more than 700 older blind consumers were served in FY23. It is projected that in FY25 the agency will serve more than 1,400 older blind consumers. This is double what the agency served in FY23 and why additional funding is being requested.

A transition services email box was set up to streamline transition activities, including personal activity reports (PARs) for time spent on pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) activities, vendor invoices, and transition related communications. This will better enable the agency to monitor pre-ETS activities and spending. In addition, the staff met with vendors who provide pre-ETS activities to ensure they understand the conditions of the pre-ETS contracts and required documentation to support service delivery to youth.

The agency met with key leaders at the South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind to discuss enhancing service delivery and increase collaborative services to students.

Planning of the Summer Teen Program began and staff is working with vendors to secure a location and plan activities.

The agency continues to work with the National Teacher Assistance Center on Transition: Collaborative (NTACT:C) for guidance on improving service delivery and positive outcomes for students. January trainings focused on Supported Employment and utilizing labor market information (LMI) in each region.

Employment consultants will work with Human Resources to attend job fairs across the state to promote services and develop employment opportunities for consumers. Attending these events in the fall led to referrals and meeting employers who want to work with the agency to hire qualified candidates.

The CVS Pharmacy Pilot Project is in the planning stages. This may lead to a partnership and creating an internship program to assist job seekers. Meetings will be held over the next few months to discuss the project that could include customer service, call center jobs, stocking, and technicians.

Several staff will attend the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) conference in Orlando, Florida, on January 25-27, 2024. The conference is a gathering of practitioners, leaders, caregivers, and persons with disabilities. It is an opportunity to learn, network and share information on the best in assistive technology.

During the HVAC installation, an alternative learning plan will be used to avoid disruption in service delivery for consumers who receive services at the Training Center. Staff will provide virtual and in-person training including traveling to regional offices for class instruction. This will occur on a rotating schedule.

**BUSINESS ENTERPRISE PROGRAM UPDATE**

Ryan Skinner reported:

The Department of Education (DOE) vending stand construction is progressing. The Wade Hampton canteen construction is ahead of Rembert Dennis canteen, but both are progressing.

The Evidentiary Hearing officer for Fort Jackson upheld the agency’s decision to re-bid the Fort Jackson stand and take it from 2 blind licensed vendors (BLVs) to 10. The two vendors currently at Fort Jackson filed a Federal Injunction. The next step in the process was filing a Federal Arbitration. SCCB’s interim attorney was reviewing it to recommend next steps.

The Blind Licensed Vendor annual meeting will be held Friday, February 2, and Saturday, February 3, 2024, at the Embassy Suites on Stoneridge Drive in Columbia.

During installation of the HVAC, an alternative learning program will be in place. Lisa Hall, BEP Lead, will update BEP training to better address becoming a self-employed independent business operator.

Mr. Coleman inquired if there are any opportunities to place a BLV at Paris Island. Mr. Skinner replied the Marine contract was previously on the bid line but went into arbitration. The Department of Education ruled that the solicitation should be re-bid, but so far the military has not done this. The agency is waiting on further guidance.

# Old Business

None.

# New Business

None

# Public Comment

None

# Future Board Meeting Schedule

March 26, 2024 – 11:00 am

# Adjournment

There being no further business, Chairperson Susan John called for a motion to adjourn at 12:08 pm. A motion was made by Mathias Chaplin and seconded by Ron Coleman. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.