South Carolina Commission for the Blind

1430 Confederate Avenue  
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes   
May 24, 2022

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

# Call to Order

Chairperson Johnson called the meeting to order at 11:00 am. The meeting was conducted in person and via Zoom Meeting software.

# Present

Dr. Judy Johnson, Chairperson  
Peter Smith, Vice Chairperson  
Mary Sonksen, Secretary   
Susan John  
Cathy Olker  
Darline Graham, Commissioner

# Adoption of Agenda

Peter Smith made a motion to accept the May 24, 2022, Agenda. It was seconded by Mary Sonksen. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Public Comment

None

# Approval of Minutes

Susan John made a motion to approve the April 26, 2022, minutes. It was seconded by Peter Smith. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Commissioner’s Report

## Darline Graham reported:

Spring Senior Camp – Consumers who participated in the camp, which is hosted by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), received Home Management instruction and attended the Farmer’s Market. Suggestions for improving future camps will be shared with NFB.

NCSAB Spring Conference – Staff who attended this virtual conference received updates from the Rehabilitation Services Administration Fiscal Unit, information about the Business Enterprise Program, and learned about the Vision Data project, led by the Vision Serve Alliance, which gathers demographic information about individuals who are blind or visually impaired on a state and national level. SCCB plans to participate in this project.

American Foundation for the Blind Leadership Conference – Mark Gamble and LaJuana Dawson attended this conference in Arlington, Virginia. They learned about innovative apps that could benefit SCCB consumers, new assistive technology, and best practices from various organizations around the country.

Career Ladders – The Quality Management VR Technical Assistance Center (VRTAC) at George Washington University has assisted SCCB in developing a career pathway for counselors and other staff. They have already provided aggregate information from ten state agencies for the blind as part of this process. Dr. Johnson asked if SCCB counselors are paid a competitive wage based on what was learned. Commissioner Graham replied that this occurred with the competitive salary adjustment which was part of the agency restructure plan. Dr. Johnson asked if the counselors were all masters level or if other states were hiring bachelor level counselors. Luis Mendoza replied that some states hire bachelor level counselors. Commissioner Graham added that the assistance from the VRTAC would benefit the agency in both hiring and retention.

Annual Blind Licensed Vendor Meeting – This event was held in-person on May 13-14 in Columbia. Elaine Robertson, Senior Consultant, presented on the updated bid selection process and Anthony Bernard, Business Enterprise Program (BEP) Vending Technician, discussed vending machines and repairs. Commissioner Graham thanked Ryan Skinner and the staff who helped make the Annual Meeting a success.

Summer Teen Program - Commissioner Graham recognized SCCB staff and NFB’s Successful Transitions for their hard work in planning this program. Twenty-eight participants are tentatively enrolled, and the event will begin June 6.

Employee Appreciation – Agency staff from around the state celebrated employee appreciation in-person at the Columbia Campus on May 20. The purpose of the event was to recognize and show appreciation for staff who serve individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Commissioner Graham thanked Dr. Johnson for attending the event. Dr. Johnson commended Commissioner Graham and her team for organizing a “phenomenal event.” Commissioner Graham recognized the planning team: Niki Outen, Nikki Green, Mark Gamble, Carrie Montgomery, Anna Foy, Rita Yeager, Felisa Massey, Cody Kirchner, Brandi Brooks, Kranisha Billie, and Donna Earley; Sam Outen and the facilities staff; and the employees who stayed in the District Offices to ensure coverage at those locations.

New Employees – New employees Erica Jenkins, Children’s Service Counselor in Greenville; Bryan Days, Counselor in Florence; and Chandler McIntosh, Communications Intern in Columbia, were welcomed to the agency.

# Finance Report

## Matt Daugherty reported:

State Budget - The agency is 83% through the State Fiscal Year. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has utilized 67% of the budget, the Training Center 85%, Transition Services 65%, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) 96%, Prevention of Blindness 36%, Older Blind 91%, Children’s Services 88%, and Administration 68%. Agency spending is on track at 76%. Dr. Johnson asked for clarification regarding low Case Services expenditures under Prevention. Mr. Daugherty replied this was due a staff vacancy. Commissioner Graham added that the vacancy had recently been filled, and that the 2023 Budget Request also included three additional FTE positions for Prevention which would allow for improved coverage across the state. Dr. Johnson also asked for clarification about funds listed as “unallocated.” Mr. Daugherty replied that this was a placeholder for funds that had yet to be assigned to other areas. Dr. Johnson inquired if these funds would be utilized by the end of the year and Mr. Daugherty replied that was the goal.

Federal Grants –The agency is 75% of the way through the two-year Period of Performance for the 2021 Federal grant. The VR grant is 53% expended, the Pre-Employment Transition Services portion of the grant is 101% expended (funds over 100% will be applied to the 2022 grant), the Older Blind grant is 88% expended, and the Supported Employment grants are 2% expended. For the 2022 grant, Supported Employment is 14% expended and Older Blind 38% expended. The agency is working to meet requirements to carry 2022 Federal Fiscal Year grant over to a second year.

Capital Improvement Projects – The Handrail Replacement project is completed. The Capital Complex canteen renovations are in the design phase. Lighting replacement around the Columbia Campus perimeter was completed. In preparation for the new generator, new wiring and piping will be installed under the parking lot. The Campus Site Improvement, which is still in the design phase, had been reviewed by the new Staff Advisory Council for accessibility for both consumers and staff. Campus building renovation is in the design phase. Dr. Johnson asked if the completion date of November was realistic and Mr. Daugherty replied that once the design phase was completed, a more accurate date would be listed. Planning for relocating staff and installing support equipment in preparation for the new HVAC would soon begin.

Office Relocation – In Rock Hill and Charleston, the floorplans had been approved and the agency was waiting for Real Property Services to provide the lease.

Other Projects – Smaller renovations at the Columbia Campus include a door relocation in Building D, refurbishment of the fountain, and additional outdoor lighting for the courtyard.

Cathy Olker asked if the accessibility evaluations accounted for both visual impairments and physical impairments. Mr. Daugherty replied yes.

# Human Resources Report

## Luis Mendoza reported:

Out of 16 management/program manager positions, there are two vacancies, the Attorney and the VR Training Center Director. Interviews for the attorney will begin next week. A second round of interviews will soon occur for the Training Center Director. Seven of 26 counselor positions are vacant. One offer had been made, one counselor was hired (Bryan Days), and one separation occurred. Dr. Johnson asked why two offers had been declined. Mr. Mendoza replied that one person had accepted an offer from another agency and the other person decided to retire rather than accept SCCB’s offer. Commissioner Graham added that sometimes candidates would take offers back to their workplace to negotiate a pay increase. Cathy Olker inquired if the VR Training Center candidate had experience working with blind or visually impaired individuals and Mr. Mendoza responded yes.

A start date of June 2 was set for the Oconee-Pickens counselor position. The counselor position for Charleston is advertised. The Children’s Services counselor position in Greenwood was filled on May 17.

Cathy Olker asked if the title of counselor was used for Children’s Services because that individual would stay with a consumer from an early age through transition services. Mr. Mendoza replied that the long-range goal was for counselors to be able to provide services to a broad range of consumers instead of one specific age group. Commissioner Graham added that this was part of Phase 2 of the restructuring plan. Ms. Olker then asked if the counselor in Oconee-Pickens would serve adults only or would that include younger consumers. Mr. Mendoza replied that the counselor position was for adults.

The Older Blind counselor positions in Rock Hill and Charleston were being advertised.

Candidates were selected for two Administrative Assistant positions and offers were being prepared. Candidates were being interviewed for the LPN position at the Training Center. Orientation and Mobility Instructor positions remained unfilled due to the difficulty of finding qualified candidates. The Residential Facility Manager position would be filled after the new Training Center Director was hired.

Trainings – Supervisory Practices training had been held for new supervisors. Mr. Mendoza noted that the trainer had commented on how the agency’s culture had become much more positive since 2020. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Equal Opportunity training plus Americans with Disabilities Act training will be offered. Cross generational training for leadership staff is also planned.

# **Program Services Update**

## Karma Marshall reported:

Residential Program – Several consumers completed their training and two BEP trainees completed on the job training. There are seven residential and ten day students. On May 27 the adult program will pause for the Summer Teen program. Training Center instructors are completing adult consumer case management documentation and finalizing the curriculum for Summer Teen program.

Summer Teen – Twenty-eight consumers are tentatively scheduled for Summer Teen. The VR Lead and Transition Counselors are finalizing placements for work-based learning opportunities. STEM week begins June 6 with 11 participants scheduled. Dr. Johnson asked how many days per week the students would attend and Ms. Marshall replied that they would arrive Monday morning and return home Friday afternoon. Group activities would occur Monday afternoon and Friday morning with full day classes on Tuesday through Thursday. Dr. Johnson asked about the student’s ages and Ms. Marshall replied that they were between 13 and 18. She explained that younger consumers participate in the independence track while older consumers do work-based learning and career exploration. Susan John asked about the complexities of coordinating the program. Ms. Marshall stated that a number of staff had previous experience with the program and that there were clear rules and protocols in place. In response to a question from Dr. Johnson, Ms. Marshall said that food for the students would be provided using the same process as for adult consumers (i.e., vendors that provide catering services). Responding to a question from Susan John, Ms. Marshall explained that many employers from previous years will again participate this year, including the SC State Library Talking Books program, ABLE SC, and EdVenture Museum. Dr. Johnson asked who pays the stipend for work-based learning experiences and Ms. Marshall said that was SCCB’s responsibility. Ms. Marshall added that NFB’s Successful Transitions will provide an evening curriculum and that a variety of speakers will present on different topics throughout the four-week program.

Student Internship Program – Orientation occurred on May 19. SCCB Employment Consultants provided the three participants (one of whom is a graduate student) with general work readiness training and guidance in preparation for their internships. The participants will spend eight weeks interning at the Ernest E. Kennedy Center in Moncks Corner (a substance abuse treatment center), the SC Works in Chester County, and ABLE SC.

Training – VR Counselors received a training on Counseling and Guidance, a core VR service, on April 29. This training focused on understanding the elements of counseling and guidance and how to appropriately document this service.

Staff Advisory Council (SAC) – The SAC met with Matt Daugherty and others coordinating the Columbia Campus renovations and provided feedback on elements of the design that could enhance safety and improve accessibility and enjoyment for consumers and staff. The SAC was excited to learn that the design included tactile structures, fragrant landscaping, and the possibility of a sound garden and wind sculpture. Other feedback included information about the location of the DART/paratransit shelter and the guide dog walk area.

Vision Education Partnership – Ms. Marshall attended this quarterly meeting which included an extensive discussion about the shortage of qualified orientation and mobility instructors in the state and how to remedy this shortage.

New Hires – The first round of interviews for the Training Center Director were completed and round two will occur next week. The Consumer Services Lead Program Assistant had been selected and will start on June 2. Interviews for other counselors, employment consultants, administrative assistants and BEP consultants continue.

Cathy Olker asked if all furniture for the residential facility had been received and what security systems were in place for those staying in the residential facility. Ms. Marshall replied that all new furniture was in place and explained that all consumers will use a swipe badge for access. Additionally, there are buzzers that will sound if a consumer crosses the boundary from the male or female side of the dormitory after lights out. Additional staff, including two security guards, will be on site in the evenings and overnight throughout Summer Teens.

# Old Business

None

# New Business

None

# Public Comment

Peter Smith commented on an article in the Post and Courier about employment programs for people with disabilities. The article noted that Governor McMaster has signed legislation to phase out payment of subminimum wages to people with disabilities. Dr. Johnson added that this would prevent employers from participating in the federal 14(c) waiver program, which lets employers pay below minimum wage to workers with certain types of disabilities. She added that the 14(c) waiver had been established to pay workers with disabilities based on individual productivity compared to the productivity of workers who do not have disabilities. She noted that although there are concerns for how eliminating subminimum wages may affect people with severe disabilities, it will also allow many people to receive competitive wages. Commissioner Graham added that under the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act, one of SCCB’s performance measures focuses on wages and that the agency works to help consumers obtain competitive employment with wages as high as possible.

# Executive Session

Chairperson Johnson called for a motion to go into Executive Session to discuss a contract update. A motion was made by Susan John and seconded by Peter Smith. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Chairperson Johnson stated that the members were out of Executive Session. No votes were taken during Executive Session.

# Future Board Meeting Schedule

June 28, 2022

July 26, 2022

The meetings will be held in-person and via Zoom Meeting Software at 11:00 am in the Building D conference room.

# Adjournment

There being no further business, Chairperson Johnson called for a motion to adjourn at 1:37 pm. A motion was made by Mary Sonksen and seconded by Susan John. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Signatures

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Dr. Judy Johnson, Chairperson

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Mary Sonksen, Secretary

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