**State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind**

**Bi-Monthly Meeting Minutes**

Thursday, June 5, 2025

**I. Call to Order**

Chair Samantha Flax called the regular meeting of the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind to order at 5:40 PM on Thursday, June 5, 2025, people were present on zoom and in person.

**II. Roll call**

Samantha Flax conducted a roll call, and the following people were present:

**SRC-B Members:** Samantha Flax, Chair; Hannah Harriman, Vice Chair; Paulo Castro; Diane Dohnalik; Deborah Gleason; Frank Eller; Tom Heinl; Rob Hobson; Jeff Mihelich; Corbb O’Connor; Justin Salisbury; Kelly Lemke, and Patrick Vellia.

**SSB Staff:** Jon Benson, Director’s Report on behalf of Natasha Jerde; Nyia Vang, SRC-B Staff Liaison; Jennifer Beilke; Brianna Holeman; Isaac Hanninen; Sheila Koenig; Susan Kusz; Lisa Larges and Lisa Rogers.

**Members of the Audience:** Matt Langland, Judy Sanders, Rocky Hart, Steve Sawczyn, Jennifer Dunnam, and Steve Jacobson.

**III. Approval of Minutes**

The Chair called for a motion to approve the minutes of the April 3, 2025, meeting. Rob Hobson moved for approval, and Frank Eller seconded the motion. The motion passed.

**IV. Council Annual Report**

The Chair reminded all committee chairs that annual reports are due by October 15. While this may seem early, the deadline approaches quickly. Committee chairs were encouraged to begin planning their reports in the coming months. The Chair invited anyone with questions to reach out directly for assistance.

**V. Applications for Committees**

The Chair announced that committee appointments for the upcoming year (September 1–August 31) will be made at the August meeting. Members interested in joining or chairing a committee are encouraged to email the Chair with their preferences. A review of all committees will take place later in the meeting.

The Chair emphasized the need for broader participation, noting that leadership roles have been concentrated among a few individuals in recent years and encouraging new councilmembers to step into chair roles.

**VI. Upcoming Fall CSAVR/NCSAB/NCSRC Conference**

The Chair informed the council that there are upcoming fall conferences council members can volunteer to attend. While the exact dates were not immediately available, it was noted the event will be held in San Diego. The Chair committed to sending the confirmed dates to all members and indicated the topic would be revisited in the future.

**VII. NaviLens Discussion**

Jenny Pelletier introduced NaviLens, a technology using QR-like codes to help with navigation and information access, especially in large public spaces. She proposed discussing its potential use with MnDOT for bus stops and transit signs. Corbb O’Connor from the National Federation of the Blind recommended involving advocacy organizations like the NFB for feedback and advocacy, rather than the council. Others emphasized including DeafBlind perspectives and noted mixed experiences with NaviLens technology. The group agreed to connect Jenny with relevant organizations to explore the idea further.

**VIII. Accessibility Discussion (DNR)**

Sara Tozier and Jamie McBride introduced their work on improving outdoor accessibility through the “Get Out More Funds” initiative, which includes funding for adaptive equipment for state parks. They are seeking input and perspectives from the group to help guide their efforts. Several members, including representatives from various Blind consumer organizations like the National Federation of the Blind, American Council of the Blind, and Minnesota DeafBlind Association, expressed interest in collaborating and providing feedback. They emphasized the importance of engaging diverse consumer groups, including DeafBlind communities. Contact information for Sara and Jamie was shared to facilitate ongoing communication, and the group expressed appreciation for their outreach and willingness to work with advocacy organizations to expand access to parks and recreation.

**IX. Budget Task Force**

The Budget Task Force confirmed that the Council is on budget for the current fiscal year. The total budget is $35,730, with $24,023.19 spent as of early June, leaving a balance of approximately $11,000 to cover expenses for the current and August meetings. Minor budget adjustments were made, including moving funds from the out-of-state travel line (which will not be used) to cover court reporting expenses. Councilmember Corbb O’Connor moved to maintain the same Budget Task Force for planning the FY26 budget that prepared this year’s mid-year budget report. The motion was seconded by Frank Eller. The motion passed with agreement from all parties. Councilmember Corbb O’Connor amended the previous motion to appoint Rob Hobson as Chair of the Budget Task Force. The task force will also include Corbb, Ada, and Briley to work on the budget for the upcoming fiscal year. Frank Eller seconded the amendment. The motion passed with agreement from all parties.

**X. Committee Structure Task Force**

The Committee Structure Task Force met twice in 2025 to update the committee framework, primarily building on the work from 2024. The updates included several language changes, such as replacing “visually impaired” with “low vision” and standardizing the spelling of “DeafBlind” with capital D and B. The phrase “resource plan” was changed to “budget” for clarity, and committees were given the option to appoint anyone, not just staff, to take meeting minutes. The Minority Outreach Committee was renamed to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee, with plans to update the associated website URLs accordingly. The Task Force also replaced the term “minoritized” with “marginalized” to describe groups, aiming for broader understanding. The DeafBlind Committee’s description was revised to focus on individuals with combined functional hearing and vision loss. Although the idea of creating a new committee to address consumer organization legislative and advocacy priorities was considered, it was ultimately decided that these topics should continue to be addressed through consumer organization reports rather than forming a separate committee. Additionally, the Task Force recommended that committees conduct an annual review of their charges and submit proposed updates each April for consideration. Redundant, abbreviated committee descriptions were removed to encourage members to refer to full descriptions on the committee pages. Following the presentation of the report by Justin Salisbury, the council voted to approve the proposed updates, with a motion made by Frank Eller and seconded by Hannah Harriman. The motion passed with broad support from the council members present.

**XI. Director’s Report** *(full report included in transcript.)*

* **Projected $400,000 deficit** in state-funded programs, especially **Communication Center** and **Senior Services**.
* No program income was budgeted; any received will help offset the deficit.
* Staff shortages continue in **Audio Services** and **Radio Talking Book**, prompting a need to rethink service delivery models.
* Leadership plans to consult with the **Communication Center Advisory Committee** for input on addressing budget challenges.
* **Senior Services** will rely more on **in-house services** due to limited flexibility in funding.
* A recent **federal VR award increase (FFY25)** offers some relief for WDU, but caution is necessary due to **uncertainties in the FFY26 federal budget**.
* **Medicaid work requirements** moved up to 2026.
* **Eligibility re-verification every 6 months** for expansion population individuals with disabilities.
* States covering undocumented individuals (MN included) will see a **10% reduction** in federal Medicaid match.
* **Waivers** for home/community services no longer considered **budget neutral,** potentially straining budgets further.
* Proposes **$4.6B total funding** for vocational rehabilitation (VR), including **$4.5B in mandatory VR state grants.**
* Includes a **$523M cut (CHIMP)** by aligning post-sequester funding to FY24 levels.
* Justification: States have returned unspent funds in recent years; no increase deemed necessary.
* SSB recommends the State Rehab Council write a letter to RSA Acting Commissioner Chris Pope, urging an increase in funding to prevent deepening deficits and support critical services in Minnesota.

**General Updates**

* Outreach Team has participated in 4 conferences and multiple presentations, including with Explore Minnesota and the Governor’s Office Mind, Body & Soul webinar.
* Media Coverage: WCCO featured SSB’s Audio Services and Judy Sanders in May; ongoing media campaigns are planned in greater Minnesota.
* Upcoming events include the DA2 Audio Player launch (August) and White Cane Day (October).
* Ongoing collaboration with eye care clinics and staff from Senior and Youth Services.
* Monitoring efforts are **on track to be current by the end of 2025**.
* Feedback from CPs has led to updates in the **monitoring tool** and a push for more CPs to use **WorkForce 1 (WF1)**.
* **8 CPs have adopted WF1**; more are in training and using the new **fillable invoice template**.
* Ongoing work includes **website improvements**, an **elevator pitch initiative**, and updates to the **CP Manual**.
* Audio Services active with custom recordings, including a U of M textbook and a rare Bible translation; featured in a WCCO segment.
* Engineering/RTB: Launching KLAS software on July 1 and digitizing RTB content for BARD.
* New **CVS pharmacy tech cohort** starting in August.
* Discussions underway for **Walgreens training program**.
* New BEP assessment tool launched to evaluate technology, mobility, and physical readiness.
* Multiple summer programs launched, including camps, outdoor activities, and job experiences.
* Exploring **micro markets in correctional facilities** and improving vending in **state buildings**.
* Site visit to **MSOP in Moose Lake** to learn about commissary operations.

**XII. Committee Reports**

* 1. **State Rehabilitation Council:** no report was received.
  2. **State Independent Living Council:**

Kelly Lemke provided an update on MN SILC which promotes events for Minnesota’s eight Centers for Independent Living, including celebrations like Access North’s 40th anniversary and accessible deer hunts planned by several centers. They also support fully accessible facilities such as an indoor playground in Rochester. MN SILC has submitted its annual program performance review and distributed the 2024 annual report. New council members have recently been appointed, though a few vacancies remain. One MN SILC member will attend the National Council on Independent Living conference, which includes advocacy efforts with Minnesota legislators. Committees have been active reviewing position papers on Medicaid funding and participating in educational conferences and resource fairs, including events for educators and the DeafBlind community.

* 1. **Communication Center Committee:**

Steve Jacobson provided an update on the Communication Center’s recent activities. At the May 7 meeting, the committee focused on the new eBraille file format, which is especially relevant for users of refreshable Braille displays. This format allows better navigation of Braille documents—similar to how users navigate web pages by headings—and adapts to different Braille display sizes, solving common formatting issues. The committee anticipates that eBraille will significantly impact the Communication Center in the coming years. The next meeting date has not yet been scheduled and will be set after the committee appointment period.

* 1. **Community Partner Outcomes & Measures Committee:** no report was received.
  2. **Customer Satisfaction Goals and Priorities Committee:**

Corbb O’Connor shared that there is no current report but mentioned that a meeting will be scheduled in the next few weeks. He encouraged anyone interested, even those not on the committee, to watch their inboxes for the meeting details and to reach out to him directly if they want to be involved.

* 1. **Deafblind Committee:** no report was received.
  2. **Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee:**

Sam Flax shared that there isn’t much new to report, but a key focus right now is figuring out how SSB can best support customers facing challenges during these uncertain times. They also mentioned that they are working on scheduling a new meeting time that will better accommodate people and encouraged everyone to stay tuned for updates.

* 1. **Employment Committee:**

Justin Salisbury reported for the Employment Committee, highlighting several key points. The committee discussed a program by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) that sponsors Blind federal employees affected by recent federal layoffs to attend the NFB’s National Convention, where they receive targeted programming to help them find new job opportunities. They emphasized that, given the challenging job market, it’s an important time for Blind individuals to invest in themselves by attending Adjustment to Blindness Training, raising awareness about these resources. Lastly, the committee explored the idea of hosting an online event, such as a Zoom webinar, to connect current SSB customers with employed Blind individuals who can share their employment experiences and offer mentorship. While staff resource constraints exist, using a virtual format could make such an event more feasible.

* 1. **Senior Services Committee:** no report was received.
  2. **Transition Committee Report:** no report was received.

**XIII. Public Comment**

* Corbb O’Connor shared updates from the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota. He announced their annual convention scheduled for November 14–16 in Rochester at the Best Western, with registration details to be posted soon on their website. Additionally, the NFB will be hosting the Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning Program in Minnesota, a camp for children ages 4 to 12 that teaches Braille and daily living skills, set to take place at the Minnesota Waldorf School in late June. Lastly, the NFB plans to exhibit and speak with SSB at the Cornea Research Foundation Conference at the end of June.

**XIV. Adjournment**

Samantha Flax adjourned the meeting at 8:15 p.m.

1. A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Corbb O’Connor and seconded by Frank Eller. The motion passed unanimously.

Minutes submitted by: Nyia Vang

Minutes approved by: Samantha Flax