

Board of Vocational Rehabilitation (BVR)
Thursday, June 26, 2025

Meeting Held Via Zoom and DHS Hillview Plaza/Conference Room

MEMBERS PRESENT: Jonathan Englund, Chris Olson, Betsy Drew, Brooke Lusk, Sherry Van Liere, Shawn Lyons, Vicki Stewart, Jennifer Trenhaile, Michael Kokesh, Jolleen Laverdure, Kara Schweitzer, Julie Johnson, Eric Weiss, and Cole Uecker.

MEMBERS ABSENT: Kara Schweitzer and Eric Larson. **OTHERS PRESENT:** Tann Zwart, Bernie Grimme, Katie Gran, Jessica Sehnert, Lori Kwasniewski, Dr. Faye LaDuke Pelster, and Colette Wagoner. The interpreter was Julie Paluch.

OPENING ACTIONS: Jonathan Englund, Chairperson, called the meeting to order and invited everyone to introduce themselves. A quorum was present. Review & Approval of Agenda: Vicki asked permission to add an agenda item "Sioux Falls ADA Event" to the agenda, **MOTION TO APPROVE THE AGENDA WITH THE ADDITION – MADE (M), SECONDED (S) AND CARRIED (C).** YEAS: Brooke, Betsy, Michael, Sherry, Shawn, Vicki, Cole, Chris, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None.

Review & Approval of Meeting Minutes: Jonathan asked for changes/additions to the Board's March 12, 2025, meeting minutes and the Executive Committee meeting minutes from May 28. There were none. **MOTION TO APPROVE THE BVR'S MARCH MINUTES AND THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES AS DISSEMINATED, MSC.** YEAS: Brooke, Betsy, Michael, Sherry, Shawn, Vicki, Cole, Chris, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None.

PUBLIC COMMENT: There was no comment(s).

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Jonathan referenced the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks video highlighting the availability of Trackchairs in some parks across the state and encouraged members to check it out. Vicki outlined the upcoming activities in Sioux Falls, REFOCUS Exhibit at Shriver Square showing the month of July, Beer and Bingo/July 15/Severance Brewing; Lunch and Learn/July 25/ADA Employment and Access, ADA Festival/July 26/Levitt at the Falls.

Vicki reminded members about the previously approved funding designated to support speaker fees for the upcoming Sioux Falls ADA Lunch and Learn event. She noted that one of the panelists is a person who is deaf, and therefore interpreter services must be arranged to ensure accessibility. Vicki requested permission to allocate a portion of the approved funds to cover the cost of the interpreter services. **MOTION TO ALLOW THE USE OF APPROVED FUNDS FOR INTERPRETER SERVICES NEEDED FOR THE**

SIoux FALLS ADA LUNCH AND LEARN EVENT – MSC. YEAS: Brooke, Betsy, Michael, Sherry, Shawn, Vicki, Cole, Chris, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None.

DIVISION OF REHABILITATION SERVICES (DRS) DIVISION DIRECTOR'S

COMMENTS & UPDATES: Quarterly Data Report information was reviewed through the most recent quarter, 3RD Quarter (January 1, 2025 – March 31, 2025). The report provides information on total applications, total eligibilities, total served, and closed case data. The numbers reflect that services are back to pre-COVID numbers, numbers for application, eligibilities, total participants served are all increasing.

Social Media Campaign: Work conducted with an outside entity is working on outreach information in hard copy as well as other materials. The Division is purchasing media placement ads, brochures and flyers have been printed, and information specific to the local offices has been printed.

Section 504 Lawsuit: At the last meeting there was discussion of the state of Texas filing a lawsuit declaring Section 504 unconstitutional and sixteen states signed on, including South Dakota. The lawsuit challenged the previous administration's categorization of gender dysphoria as a disability under Section 504. Eric reported that he hasn't heard more about this. Cole noted that this lawsuit has been dropped.

Budget: Eric provided an update on the Vocational Rehabilitation Program budget, highlighting an unexpected 11% increase in federal grant funds for 2025. The projected increase would remove the possibility of going on an Order of Selection (using current numbers and projecting future numbers/expenses). Despite this positive news, he raised concerns about the state's capacity to match these funds. There is also the federal requirement of maintenance of effort which requires the agency to spend more funds than it did two years prior, which further complicates matters.

Eric noted a recent U.S. Department of Education budget request made public June 10th. Changes include an increase of \$250 million over the FFY2024 mandatory level, along with a mandatory program change that would reduce the funding level to the same amount as the 2024 appropriation. This request also proposes to eliminate several programs, such as the Client Assistance Program, Supported Employment grants, and Protection and Advocacy of Individual Rights Programs, which have been long term programs. These areas are concerning, as they could lead to a loss of funding for specific programs and negatively impact the funds available for services.

DIVISION OF REHABILITATION SERVICES - VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

(VR) INITIATIVES: Katie Gran provided Kim Ludwig's update: Quarterly Statewide Virtual Training Opportunities for Businesses: DRS, Employment Disability Resources (EDR), and the Workplace Disability Network of the Black Hills (WDBNH) are launching

a quarterly virtual training series for businesses called “The Morning Blend: Employer Disability Solutions.” The goal is to provide businesses with resources and information to support the employment of people with disabilities. The First Session will be held July 29 (in honor of the ADA anniversary), with the topic of ADA and FMLA. The presenter will be Kim Dorsett, Richardson Law Firm, in Aberdeen and the focus will be ADA and FMLA basics, application to businesses, and intersection in disability employment. The second session will be held in October. Participant surveys will follow each session to guide future training content.

Counselor Peer Mentoring Program: The Division launched a peer mentoring program for newly hired Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors. Experienced counselors across the state volunteer as mentors in this semi-structured 8-week program, which covers topics such as office expectations, job duties, and soft skills. This will enhance new counselor training from a peer perspective, foster rapport, and support onboarding and improve employee satisfaction and retention. Both mentors and mentees will complete surveys at the end of the program to provide feedback, which will be used for ongoing program improvement.

Katie continued with information on Project SEARCH, a one-year school to work program for high school students with disabilities with competitive employment as their goal. She talked about the 5 Project SEARCH sites, orientation, host businesses, daily schedule, internships (students experience three internship rotations), graduation and job search. She provided examples of students, internship positions, and where most students are competitively employed. A total of 18 of the 30 students are competitively employed, average wage/\$16.65 and work 26.6 hours/weekly.

Youth Leadership Forum Overview: A total of 47 high school students with disabilities were accepted and 39 attended. She outlined daily activities including learning more about their team building, disability, self-discovery, goal setting, advocacy, employment, post-secondary education, disability disclosure, introduction to other disability related service providers, introduction to league of women voters and Partners in Policymaking. Partners involved with YLF are the Transition Services Liaison Project, DRS, Department of Education/Special Education, SD Parent Connection, and USD Center for Disabilities.

Jessica Sehnert, Policy and Quality Assurance Specialist reported on the annual case file review and targeted case file review results. Results from the annual review show areas of improvement in verification of benefits received and intake documents; presumptive eligibility completed within 14 days, correctly completing specific forms, closing cases in the file director – areas rated above 90%. Areas that remained the same (below the 90%) included signatures on individualized plans for employment, sending the eligibility extension letters, financial needs forms completed correctly,

offering the plan for sustaining employment. New areas identified below the 90% included measurable skill gain recorded/correct dates, referrals/documentation to DakotaLink, start date of employment, wages, and hours verified through supporting documentation. New areas for program clarification and/or training include eligibility extension, recording measurable skills gains, financial needs, repossession of equipment/repo request, and employment verification.

Six Performance Indicators: The employment rate 2nd Quarter after Exit, met the 61.9% negotiated rate with Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). The 4th quarter after exit, met the negotiated rate of 56.1%; all for Program Year 2024. The median earnings 2nd quarter after exit was \$3,600. The credential attainment rate was 34.5% and measurable skills gains was 50%. The effectiveness in serving employers information is reported in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity (WIOA) report, which is information/data provided to the Department of Labor.

POST SECONDARY OUTCOMES/INDICATOR 14 SURVEY RESULTS: Lori Kwasniewski, Department of Education (DOE), Office of Special Education, Transition Program Specialist. Lori spoke of the partnership between the Office of Special Education and Black Hills State University. Lori turned to Dr. Faye LaDuke Pelster (BHSU), to speak to the Indicator 14 Survey results. Dr. Faye LaDuke Pelster summarized the data obtained by the survey for 2023 graduates from high school.

Indicator 14 specifically targets the percent of youth who are no longer in secondary school, had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in effect at the time they left school and were enrolled in:

- a. higher education
- b. higher education or competitively employed
- c. higher education or in some other post-secondary education or training program; or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school.

This study involves a two-step process. Appendix A information: School districts provide information about students once they leave high school (IEP information about transition goals and activities and family contact information). Appendix B information: independent contractor collects survey information. Data is collected through a telephone survey which consists of volunteer callers from school districts and hired callers. The response rates are significantly higher when students are contacted by someone they know. An attempt is made to contact all student exiters.

Exiter data included 353 total respondents; 58 respondents were enrolled in higher education (17%); 192 respondents were engaged in competitive employment (54%); 5 respondents were enrolled in some other post-secondary education or training (2%);

and 28 respondents were engaged in some other employment (9%). Target levels were met this year.

There is ten years' worth of data and other statewide reports available on DOE's website: <https://www.sdposthighsurvey.org/reports.statewide.php>. Dr. Faye LaDuke Pelster and Lori were thanked for attending and sharing the survey results.

DRS INITIATIVES CONTINUED: Bernie reported on the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA): an assessment conducted every three years to evaluate the agency's service history for the past three program years (2023-2026) and forecast needs for program years 2026-2028. The data collected will help update the agency's goals, priorities, and strategies. The Board's role in the process includes collaborating with the Division, providing input, reviewing, and analyzing the results, and advising on how to integrate the findings into the State Plan. The Division is contracting with Black Hills Special Services Cooperative with Dr. Ryan Young. The assessment will involve reviewing data/information and conducting interviews. This assessment will focus on 6 areas: persons with disabilities, persons with the most significant disabilities, persons of minority backgrounds, unserved and underserved individuals, individuals served through other components of the workforce system, youth with disabilities, and providers. He reviewed completion dates for the assessment in comparison with the timelines of the State Plan. Bernie will arrange to have Dr. Young present at the December meeting.

Annual Fall Conference will be held October 14-16 in Sioux Falls at the Ramkota Hotel. He displayed the SDR rehabACTion website where additional information can be found <https://www.sdrehabaction.org/fall-conference/2025-fall-conference>. Various tracks will feature speakers for VR, IL, and providers. Registration will be available in August.

Office Location Updates: The Sioux Falls One Stop is now open and 14 different state department staff are co-located and available to meet with individuals. The Aberdeen district office is in the process of upgrading the building, such as remodeling to add security features, and new carpet.

STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL (SILC) UPDATE: Eric provided an update on the SILC explaining that the state receives Independent Living (IL) funds from the Administration for Community Living (ACL), and each state is required to have an established SILC. The SILC is responsible for developing and monitoring the State Plan for Independent Living.

The SILC met on June 17th and agenda items included updates from the Division on the status of the Centers for Independent Living (CILs), a report on the consumer satisfaction survey, updates on the status of CIL contracts and funding, a summary of

the CIL quarterly report information, and CIL updates on their activities and staffing levels. The SILC hosted Rhonda Erickson, who provided information on ABLE accounts. The presentation included information on eligibility, advantages of having an ABLE account, impact on benefits, and enrollment. The next meeting will be held on September 30th.

Eric displayed the state's Boards and Commission's website, demonstrated how to access the BVR and SILC pages, and how to find meeting related information (agendas, membership listings, meeting information). The state's boards/commission's website is located at <https://boardsandcommissions.sd.gov/>.

BVR STAFF UPDATE: National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), 11 communities received funding earlier this year to support local events, with a total of \$48,575 awarded. Funding contributions came from the SILC (\$5,000), the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Board of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired (also contributing \$5,000). Most communities are in the midst of planning, including selecting topics, speakers, and dates. Sioux Falls has confirmed its speakers who will present during the Fall Conference. Jana Burke will provide sessions on *Self-Advocacy in the Workplace*, *Neurodiversity in the Workplace*, and *Business Benefits of Disability Inclusion*, and Parker Hanson will deliver the luncheon keynote. NDEAM event details will be shared with SILC, BVR, and B/SBVI members once finalized, and BVR members are encouraged to attend events held in their communities.

Governor's Awards: The nomination period for the Governor's Awards opened in March, with submissions due in May. A Governor's Awards Review Committee, comprised of representatives from the BVR, Board of SBVI and the SILC, met earlier this week to review nominations. The committee was tasked with identifying a recommendation for each award category. The committee's recommendations will be forwarded to the Governor for final approval. Once approved, planning will begin for the awards ceremony. Committee representatives included Jolleen Laverdure and Chris Olson (BVR); Kendra Gottsleben, CJ Moit, and Joe Vetch (SILC); and Cherie Gerry and George Seamon (B/SBVI). Nominations for the Governor's Awards are accepted year-round through the Division's website at: <https://dhs.sd.gov/en/rehabilitation-services/governors-awards>.

Budget Update: Support services for the BVR and SILC are managed through a contract between the Division and Black Hills Special Services Cooperative, which began on January 1 and runs through December 31, with the possibility of four one-year renewals. The budget report shared shows expenses through May, including costs for the Zoom subscription (shared with SILC). Most expenditures are expected later in the year, from September to December, covering the Governor's Awards

Ceremony, National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) activities, and member expenses for the Fall Conference.

The 2025 Fall Conference will take place in Sioux Falls at the Ramkota Hotel from October 14–16, speakers/topics include Dr. Lester on personality disorders, sessions on Trauma-Informed Care, Technology & Artificial Intelligence, Homelessness & Addiction, Call to Freedom (focused on supporting survivors of trafficking), Disability Determination Services, and Home Again. BVR members are welcome to attend, with expenses covered by the BVR/SILC staff support agreement. To date, Jonathan, Cole, Shawn, Jolleen, Sherry, and Vicki have expressed interest in attending. Please let staff know if you are interested in attending.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS: Jonathan passed the gavel to Eric, asking him to speak on behalf of the Executive Committee. BVR officer positions consist of Chair, Vice Chair, and Member At Large. Eric introduced the proposed slate as Shawn/Member At Large, Vicki/Vice Chair, and Jonathan/Chair. All have indicated an interest in serving as officers again, if elected. He emphasized that nominations can be made from the floor, noting that each position will be taken one at a time.

Eric started with the position of Chairperson. He called for further nominations for the Chair position in addition to Jonathan's name, two times. Hearing none – **MOTION TO CEASE NOMINATIONS AND ELECT JONATHAN AS CHAIR – MSC.** YEAS: Brooke, Besty, Michael, Sherry, Shawn, Cole, Chris, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None.

Eric moved onto the position of Vice Chairperson. Eric called for further nominations for Vice Chair, twice. Hearing none – **MOTION TO CEASE NOMINATIONS AND ELECT VICKI AS VICE CHAIRPERSON – MSC.** YEAS: Brooke, Betsy, Michael, Sherry, Shawn, Cole, Chris, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None.

Eric moved to calling for further nominations for the position of Member-At-Large, twice. **MOTION TO CEASE NOMINATIONS AND ELECT SHAWN AS MEMBER-AT-LARGE – MSC.** YEAS: Brooke, Besty, Michael, Sherry, Cole, Chris, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None. Abstain: Shawn Lyons.

Eric encouraged members to think about serving as an officer, as a number of members will term off in a year. Following his remarks, the gavel was passed back to the Chair. Jonathan extended heartfelt thanks to Brooke and Cole for their dedication and service to the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation as this will be their last meeting.

OTHER BUSINESS: There was no other business.

CLOSING ACTIONS: Future Agenda Items: Jonathan encouraged members to pass along agenda items or topics of interest to staff. Next Meeting: will be held September 3rd via Zoom. Adjournment: Jonathan asked if there were any objections to adjourning the meeting, there were none. The meeting ended at 12:07 PM