

**Board of Vocational Rehabilitation (BVR)**  
**Wednesday, March 12, 2025**

**Meeting Held Via Zoom and DHS Hillview Plaza/Conference Room**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Jonathan Englund, 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:** Chris Olson and Eric Larson.

**OTHERS PRESENT:** Bernie Grimme, Katie Gran, Kim Ludwig, Lyle Cook, Gina Coley, Heidi Hewitt, Heidi Mecham, and Colette Wagoner. The interpreter was Julie Paluch.

**OPENING ACTIONS:** Jonathan Englund, Chairperson, called the meeting to order at 9:00 AM. A quorum was present. Welcome & Introductions. Everyone present introduced themselves. Review & Approval of Agenda: **MOTION TO APPROVE THE AGENDA AS DISSEMINATED – MADE (M), SECONDED (S) AND CARRIED (C).** YEAS: Brooke, Betsy, Michael, Sherry, Kara, Shawn, Vicki, Cole, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None.

Review & Approval of Meeting Minutes: Jonathan asked for changes/additions to the Board's November 25, 2024, meeting minutes and the Executive Committee meeting minutes from February 19. There were none. **MOTION TO APPROVE THE BVR'S NOVEMBER MINUTES AND THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES AS DISSEMINATED, MSC.** YEAS: Brooke, Betsy, Michael, Sherry, Kara, Shawn, Vicki, Cole, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:** There was no comment(s).

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:** There were none.

**DIVISION OF REHABILITATION SERVICES (DRS) DIVISION DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS & UPDATES:** Quarterly Data Report information was reviewed through the most recent quarter, 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter (October 1, 2024 – December 31, 2024). The report provides information on total applications, total eligibilities, total served, and closed case data. Eric spoke to his observations of the data, including the numbers are very consistent, applications are high, the total number participants served continues to increase. In response to a question, Eric highlighted the VR process from application to case closure, noting that VR is a time limited service.

Budget: The Division received \$400,000 through the reallocation process, which positively impacts the overall budget. This funding was secured with the necessary matching funds from the state.

The Division is currently able to serve all eligible individuals, but other states are considering implementing an Order of Selection - a waitlist that prioritizes serving individuals with the most significant disabilities first. With the increasing number of applications and rising service costs, the Division forecasts that it may need to implement an Order of Selection by 2028. However, they are exploring strategies to avoid this outcome and avoid a substantial impact on services.

Legislative Session: Tomorrow marks the 37<sup>th</sup> day of the legislative session, with the final day set for March 31<sup>st</sup>. The Department of Human Services introduced Senate Bill 4 which aimed to sell unused property in Spink County that belongs to Developmental Center in Redfield. However, the bill was deferred to the 41<sup>st</sup> day.

The Governor's budget proposal included a 1.25% pay raise for state employees and the same for provider inflation. The Joint Appropriations Committee approved this.

This session has placed a strong emphasis on internal controls to limit the risk of fraud. The Division has implemented various measures, such as annual and targeted case file reviews, running reports through the case management system, review of expenditures, and processing payments.

Possible federal changes: There have been significant federal changes since the last BVR meeting. One proposal under the new administration is eliminating the US Department of Education, which houses the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in programs receiving federal funds. Last year, May 2024, the Department of Health and Human Services issued final rules to update the current Section 504 regulations. The state of Texas filed 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. Disability advocates are advocating in support of Section 504, because the intent of the lawsuit is perceived to make Section 504 unconstitutional. A joint status report was filed that clarifies that the plaintiffs do not wish that the courts declare Section 504 unconstitutional and are requesting a pause to the lawsuit.

Outreach Campaign: The Division continues to work with a contractor on outreach materials and messaging. New ads are appearing on social media. Ads have featured

Shawn and Vicki who graciously agreed to share their stories to broaden information about VR services.

## **DIVISION OF REHABILITATION SERVICES - VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION**

**(VR) INITIATIVES:** Sioux Falls One Stop: Bernie shared that the Sioux Falls district office will move to a new location, which will be open to the public on March 17<sup>th</sup>. The Department of Labor and Regulation and the Department of Social Services staff have already moved to the new site. This location will house 14-16 state departments and have the capacity to accommodate 900 employees.

Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA): The CSNA is 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 CSNA findings into the State Plan. The Division is considering options for conducting the needs assessment, such as contracting with a consultant or a university.

Katie Gran, Division Transition Specialist, provided an update on Pre Employment Transition Services (PRE ETS), which focuses on short-term career exploration, job readiness, self-advocacy, and independent living skills for students with disabilities. In response to the Division's request for proposals for Summer Pre ETS programs, thirteen agencies were approved to conduct 25 Summer Transition Programs, a high number. These agencies include five educational cooperatives, five school districts, and three adult service agencies, with total financial support of \$200,000. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is required to set aside at least 15% of their federal funds for Pre ETS, and these programs support that requirement. Among the thirteen approved agencies, four are new—two school districts and two educational cooperatives.

Kim Ludwig, Division Business Specialist, provided an update on the work being done to businesses and employers. Business Newsletters: In 2024, DRS began sending quarterly newsletters via email to over 250 business contacts. These newsletters aim to share resources with current partners and engage new ones, covering disability-related topics and VR services. The feedback has been positive.

Business-Led Organizations: DRS continues to collaborate with the Employment Disability Resources (EDR) and the Workplace Disability Network of the Black Hills (WDNBH) to educate businesses on hiring and retaining employees with disabilities. Both organizations have full-time executive directors: Vicki Stewart with EDR and Heidi Mecham with WDNBH. EDR has been active since 2010, and WDNBH since 2014.

**PROJECT SEARCH UPDATES:** Katie Gran provided an update on the five Project SEARCH sites in South Dakota, Rapid City, Brookings, two in Sioux Falls and the newest in Yankton. The program is designed for students with disabilities, aged 18-21, who have completed high school educational requirements and have transition goals in their IPE. Students receive individualized support and job coaching while completing three rotations/internships. Since its launch in 2010, 307 students have participated, with an 87% employment rate. The goal is competitive community employment, with students working at least 16 hours a week at the prevailing wage. In 2024, the average wage for students was \$14.74 per hour, and they worked an average of 26 hours weekly. There are currently thirty-one student interns across the five sites, with a VR counselor assigned to each site.

Katie introduced Project SEARCH staff Gina Coley (Teachwell) and Heidi Hewitt (Sioux Falls School District). Heidi shared that three interns are working at Sanford USD Medical Center, which is a new host site. The interns rotate through environmental services, nutrition and food service, and laundry. Six applicants are being considered for next year, following a process of application, interviews, and skill assessments. Efforts are underway to expand rotations to additional areas.

Gina Coley spoke about Teachwell's long-standing partnership with Avera McKennan Hospital, now in its 15th year. There are 21 rotations at Avera McKennan, including off-campus opportunities like Prince of Peace, Home Medical Equipment, and Behavioral Health. Following the pandemic, new rotations were added, such as ambulatory care, the gift shop, patient transport, and the Quarry. In the 2023-2024 school year, 7 out of 8 interns were competitively employed by February 2025. For the 2024-2025 school year, 14 students applied, 12 were accepted, and the program started with 9 students. Student skills are assessed prior to entering the program and these include data entry, reading, following directions, and basic math and use of a calculator.

**ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDING REQUEST:** Vicki Stewart presented a funding request on behalf of the Sioux Falls ADA 35 Education Program. The request seeks financial support for speaker costs for an event scheduled for July 25 at Startup Sioux Falls, during the noon hour. The event aligns with Section 109 of the Rehabilitation Act: Training and Services for Employers. **MOTION TO APPROVE \$900 IN SUPPORT OF SPEAKER FEES FOR THE SIOUX FALLS ADA 35 EDUCATION PROGRAM, MSC.** YEAS: Brooke, Betsy, Michael, Sherry, Kara, Shawn, Cole, Jolleen, and Julie. NAYS: None. Abstained: Vicki.

**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 December 19<sup>th</sup>, 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 Heather Janes, who discussed dementia. The presentation covered various types of dementia. It also addressed reversible causes such as infection, stress, and substance abuse. The next meeting is scheduled for March 26<sup>th</sup>.

Eric displayed the state's Boards and Commission's website, demonstrating 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): The NDEAM Request for Proposal was issued in December and proposals were due February 2<sup>nd</sup>. Eleven funding requests were received, totaling \$48,575, with over \$16,000 in in-kind donations. The NDEAM Review Committee has representatives from BVR, SILC and B/SBVI and they met on February 19<sup>th</sup> to review the requests.

The NDEAM Review Committee recommended approving \$48,575 for the 2025 NDEAM activities. The committee's recommendation has been communicated with the B/SBVI, which meets on Friday, and it will be communicated with the SILC during their March 26 meeting. The boards and council provide financial support. The committee had one stipulation, and that involved Mitchell's proposal. Mitchell's proposal was approved for full funding. The proposal outlined having a speaker or conducting a lunch and learn event. Mitchell will be asked to submit an updated budget once the speaker or panel is determined.

BVR/SILC Nominations: The solicitation for BVR and SILC nominations was disseminated in January. The BVR received five nominations, which includes Allison White's nomination to replace Cole Uecker. Four of the five nominees were people with disabilities. The BVR will need two appointments to meet the minimal 15-member requirement. Brooke Lusk's term ends June 30<sup>th</sup>, and Cole submitted his letter of resignation. One of the new appointments must be a representative of the Client Assistance Program. The SILC received four nominations, and all four nominees are people with disabilities. The SILC will need one new appointment to replace Patty Kuglitsch, who terms off at the end of June.

Governor's Awards Update: The Solicitation packet for the Governor's Awards was disseminated on March 10<sup>th</sup> and nominations are due on May 2<sup>nd</sup>. There were no changes to the nomination forms or categories, and the forms can be found on the Department of Human Services/Division of Rehabilitation Services website. The nomination forms can be accessed as a Word document or as a PDF/fillable Form. The link is: <https://dhs.sd.gov/en/rehabilitation-services/governors-awards>.

The Governor's Awards Review Committee will be convened by Zoom sometime later in May or early June. Staff will disseminate a doodle poll to identify a date that works for the majority of committee members early in May. Committee members include: BVR: Jolleen Laverdure, Chris Olson, SILC: Kendra Gottsleben, CJ Moit and Joe Vetch; B/SBVI: Cherie Gerry and George Seamon.

Budget Update: Support services for the Board and SILC are provided through an agreement between the Division and Black Hills Special Services Cooperative. The current contract started January 1<sup>st</sup>, and it ends on December 31<sup>st</sup>. This budget runs on the calendar year. The budget pages disseminated showed no expenditures during January. Most expenditures fall later in the contract year, September through December, with expenses related to the Governor's Awards Ceremony, NDEAM and member related expenses with attending the Fall Conference.

Fall Conference: The 2025 Fall Conference will be held October 14-16 at the Ramkota hotel in Sioux Falls. One keynote speaker identified is Dr. Lester, who will focus on Personality Disorders, and he will be utilized for a few breakout sessions. "Save the Date" information will be disseminated towards the end of March; and registration information will be available sometime in August. The conference hosts tracks for VR, providers, and IL sessions. If board members are interested in attending, the Board would cover expenses to include the registration fee, mileage, per diem and lodging.

## **LUNCH BREAK**

**WORKPLACE DISABILITY NETWORK OF THE BLACK HILLS (WDBNH):** Kim introduced Heidi Mecham, who became WDN's Executive Director on January 18, 2024. Kim emphasized the role of WDN is providing job seekers with quality services in addition to recognizing businesses as an equal partner in providing services to address workforce needs. Heidi spoke about coming into her new role, looking back and planning for the future. She shared the organization's accomplishments, including marketing, social media initiatives, creating a donation page on social media, NDEAM training, and assistive technology demonstrations. WDN recognizes businesses promoting accessibility, partnering with BHSSC to develop a training program for NDEAM 2025, and has offered Windmills training on service animals, mental health,

and accommodating employees with disabilities. They have been distributing Accessibility Tip Cards to businesses and community members to raise awareness.

WDNBH is working to increase awareness, sponsorships, and donations to fund new programs. They are developing an online resource page to help with workplace accessibility and employment solutions. WDN will continue to collaborate with providers, educators, and employers, attend conferences for networking and advocacy, and offer training through YouTube to expand access for businesses. Heidi outlined WDN's five-year goals, including employer outreach, creating an internship program, increasing sponsorships and fundraising, and continuing training efforts.

**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: Staff disseminated a doodle poll earlier today and Jonathan encouraged members to complete the poll. The next meeting will be held sometime in June. Adjournment: Jonathan asked if there were any objections to adjourning the meeting, there were none. The meeting ended at 1:02 PM.