

**Montana VR Council
Meeting Minutes
May 9-10, 2013**

Vocational Rehabilitation Council

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Wilderness Room--Helena

Members present: Shaunda Albert (Thursday only), Amy Capalupo, Nina Cramer, Michael DesRosier (Thursday only), Mary Hall, Char Harasymczuk, Rick Heitz, Robin Johnson, Dale Mahugh (Friday), Jim Marks, Lois McElravy, Quentin Schroeter, John Senn, Mona Amundson, Chanda Hermanson, Marla Swanby

Members absent: Prairie Bighorn, Kate Gangner (excused), Mike Woods (excused), Anna Gibbs (excused), Rosalie Holliman (excused)

Staff and visitors present: Peggy Williams, Barbara Varnum, Mike Hermanson, Barb Schiedermayer (Thursday), Shawn Tulloch, Karie Whitlock; SILC members on Thursday afternoon

Thursday, May 9

Nina Cramer called the meeting to order and reviewed the Council Mission and Vision and the Operating Principles. The January minutes were approved. During the public comment period, a client who had contacted Council members was mentioned. It was noted that the Council does not deal in individual client complaints. It was also mentioned that we might want to look at our Mission and Vision statements to see if we want to keep #3. "The order of selection is a thing of the past".

NCSRC and Council of State Administrators of VR conferences—Lois McElravy

Lois reported on the conferences she attended in Washington DC. She stated that Montana is very fortunate that our Council works so well and gets along with the state agency. She noted that recently an IRI book was published which talks about state rehabilitation councils and it is very informative. She also suggested that we put on our agenda a resolution to join the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils. The Council considered this a number of years ago when the organization was first started, and decided not to at that time. Now, however, Lois believes that we could benefit from this membership. The Council will consider this at the next meeting. Lois also mentioned that one of the biggest challenges for state rehabilitation councils is collecting public comments. Ideas she heard offered were for staff to gather comments at specialty conferences, such as the brain injury or mental health or deaf association conferences. That way the state would get a variety of comments. Staff could man a booth and solicit comments or even have a breakout session where comments are discussed. Lois also mentioned that people said it takes a year and a half for council members to feel comfortable and understand the SRC.

Field Services Update—Barbara Varnum

Barbara stated that we have only one staff vacancy and that is in Billings. For a while, VRB experienced significant turnover, so having only one vacancy is wonderful. Barbara also mentioned that the new computer caseload system, Montana Accounting and Client System (MACS), is projected to be implemented in October. After the federal review last year, VRB instituted a corrective action plan and is making progress on that plan. One of the steps was to review rural territories to see if a new counselor is needed. VRB did do that, and

recently hired a new counselor in Havre. VRB also needs to work on getting the individual plan for employment (IPE) completed more quickly after the client is determined eligible. VRB has 120 days to write the plan, and usually this is done in a timely manner. However, sometimes there are problems getting the plan written quickly. One strategy that VRB will be using is to do fewer assessments before writing a plan. The plan can be amended if the original goal is not working out or if the client changes his mind.

Client Assistance Program (CAP)—Chanda Hermanson

Chanda stated that CAP provides advocacy for people with disabilities in the state VR program, the independent living program, and in the Section 121 Native American VR program. CAP is housed at Disability Rights Montana. Chanda handed out a copy of the CAP “Red Book” that all VRB clients receive. CAP can inform and advise applicants, help clients obtain services (often dental, self-employment, and car repairs), and assist in appeals (such as denied work goals or eligibility determination). Her caseload is between 35 and 45; some cases are resolved in one day, some in years.

Joint Meeting with Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)

Nina Cramer, chair of the VR Council, described the VR Council duties. The VR Council is advisory to the VR program. It helps with the state plan and the consumer satisfaction survey. June Hermanson, chair of the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), stated that Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act relates to independent living. Independent living does not refer to residential services, but rather advocacy, transportation, housing, and equal access to public venues. The state plan is written in partnership with the four centers for independent living. These centers are located in Helena, Missoula, Great Falls, and Billings and offer four core services: advocacy; information and referral; IL skills; and peer mentors. Some of the IL activities are conducted by six statewide task forces: self-determination, youth, housing, transportation, legislative/advocacy, and Native American. There will be an IL symposium on September 17 – 18, and the task force activities will be discussed. The center directors were asked how their relationship was with their local offices. Joe Burst (Billings) said it was 100% better than it was a year ago. Tom Osborn (Great Falls) talked about collaborating with VR for benefits planning. Mike Mayer (Missoula) stated that they have a very good relationship with their offices in Missoula, Hamilton, and Kalispell. Bob Maffit (Helena) reported that it is a mixed bag, but there has been some collaboration in activities like buying a vehicle for a client.

Shawn Tulloch, VR Program Manager for Deaf Services, demonstrated video remote interpreting. She used an iPad and Skype to connect to an interpreter. Shawn used sign language, and the interpreter voiced to the rest of the group. When a group member had a comment, the interpreter signed the question to Shawn, Shawn responded with sign language, and the interpreter voiced the response to the group. The cost is about \$80 per hour. All VR offices except Helena have video remote interpreting capability.

Jim Marks, Disability Employment and Transitions Division administrator, talked about some of the things happening at the federal level. Reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act is still being discussed in Congress. The House passed the Skills Act which includes the Rehabilitation Act, and the Senate will start discussing it. The Senate democrats have said that they won't accept anything that takes us backwards (which they believe the Skills Act does). The federal sequestration automatic spending cuts have been made. In most cases the cuts are a little over 5%, but the VR Section 110 funding is only cut 1.5% because there is an automatic cost of living increase in the law. Some funding sources, such as MonTech and Part C Independent Living will have the funding cuts go into effect on October 1, rather than March. On the state level, VRB had a good session. VRB did get provider rate increases and Montana Telecommunications Access Program got a small increase. However, the Medicaid expansion did not pass. That affects VRB, because it would have paid for some of the medical expenses that VRB currently picks up.

Barbara Varnum talked about the Order of Selection process and how it will affect VRB. Order of Selection is a waiting list process used when the state does not have enough money or personnel to serve all people who need services. Federal law says that states must serve the most significantly disabled people first. VRB costs are increasing now that VRB is fully staffed. On a positive note, Social Security reimbursements increased this year, which may be due to our new Ticket Tracker program finding old cases for reimbursement. The Order of Selection process puts people in one of four categories ranging from “Person with a disability” to “Person with a most significant disability”. Once VRB is on Order of Selection, everyone in the “most significant” classification must be served before anyone else. Montana has decided that if a person has been determined eligible for VRB services, then they will not be part of OOS when it starts. Recently Barbara studied the distribution of clients in the four disability levels: 21% were level 1 (most significantly disabled); 24% were level 2; 34% were level 3 and 22% were level 4. The Employment First initiative may affect the Order of Selection priorities. Employment First relates to helping people with very significant intellectual disabilities move into employment (other than sheltered workshops). In the past, the Developmental Disabilities Program has paid for sheltered employment services, and now these clients may be coming to VRB.

Barb Schiedermayer talked about some of the VRB activities for students transitioning out of school. VRB started an “Adopt a School” program in some of the larger school districts. In this program, counselors hold office hours in the schools on a regular basis. Also VRB has conducted a media campaign aimed at kids that includes a video and brochures. June Hermanson, director of Montana Youth Transitions and Montana Youth Leadership Forum, talked about the activities of those groups. Montana Youth Transitions is a large umbrella that includes transitions activities from many sources. It sponsors a transitions conference (this year November 6-8 in Billings), a website, Disability Mentoring Day (job shadowing for youth with disabilities—held in October), and regional transition teams. Montana Youth Leadership Forum will be held in July, and 23 youth with disabilities have signed up. The largest disability group is people with learning disabilities.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey Results—Mike Hermanson

Mike went over the annual consumer satisfaction survey and noted that the survey showed higher satisfaction this year than in the recent past years. This could be related to having a lower turnover rate of counselors. The return rate was a little lower this year. This is a mail survey, and VRB has allowed for responding on the internet. This year only 3 or 4 people responded on the internet.

Friday, May 10

SRC Training Module--Peggy Williams

Peggy went over the training module, “Development of the State Plan”.

Public Hearing Comments and Discussion on Strategic Plan—Mike Hermanson

Mike reviewed the strategic plan and state plan with the Council. He went over the Governor’s Report recommendations which the Council decided to use in the state plan. The strategic plan has 2 goals and many priorities under each of those goals. Looking at the staff satisfaction priority, the Council discussed how to measure it. Chanda mentioned her organization got completely different results when they used Survey Monkey (anonymous) and an email survey (names attached). It was also mentioned that there is a huge disparity between counselors and there needs to be consistency in the field, even though there are many statewide trainings conducted across the state (VRB All Staff, bi-monthly webinars). Barbara Varnum suggested that people contact her when they notice something like that. Council members also suggested

changing performance measure 2.2 to “The number of employees leaving VRB for non-retirement reasons will not exceed 10% a year.”

Regarding the public hearing comments, Mike discussed the summary of comments and stated that VRB will respond to the comments in the near future. Next week’s VRB staff meeting will be devoted to looking at the comments. Mike noted that this year’s public hearing had many more comments of appreciation than previous years.

Mike also addressed Ticket to Work and Partnership Plus. Ticket to Work was designed to provide Social Security recipients with alternatives to VR in their quest to get back to work. The process relies on Employment Networks (EN). The EN is only paid if the person gets a job at a certain salary level. This is not always a good investment for the EN, because often the client does not earn enough money, so the EN gets no money. In Partnership Plus, VR works with the client, gets him a job, and gets reimbursed from Social Security. Within 90 days the client can take his ticket to an EN to get ongoing support services. Montana does not use this program, because Montana does not have a cluster of clients in one geographical region that would be candidates for this program. Also, many of the clients with enough earnings are not interested in someone checking up on them every 90 days. The state of Utah was very excited about this program originally; but even though they were working hard on the program, they have now determined that it is not working for them.

Montana got a large amount of Social Security reimbursement this year, because VRB purchased a Ticket Tracker software system that looks at former clients to see if they are currently earning enough money and have gotten off of Social Security benefits. Many people don’t earn that much money until 4 or 5 years after VRB closes their case. This program checks to see if VRB can submit their cases for reimbursement. Now that the old cases are cleaned out, VRB does not anticipate as much reimbursement in the future.

Next meeting: July 18-19 in Helena

Agenda items:

- NCSRC—should we join?