

**Montana State Rehabilitation Council &
Montana Statewide Independent Living Council
Joint Meeting via Virtual Platform
May 14, 2020
Meeting Minutes**

State Rehabilitation Council Members present: Monique Casbeer, Tiffany Costa, Barbara Davis, Chanda Hermanson, Coreen Faulkner, Kathy Hampton, Dale Kimmet, Michele Letendre, Denise May, Kathy Meier, Cheri Reed-Anderson, Marcy Roberts, Tom Sullivan, and Sandy Taylor.

Statewide Independent Living Council Members present: Lisa Allensworth, Beverly Berg, Scott Birkenbuel, Barbara Davis, June Hermanson, David Hood, Bonnie Kelley, Brent Morris, Carlos Ramalho, Tom Thompson, and Scott Williamson.

SRC Members absent: Scott Eychner and Marvin Weatherwax, Sr.

SILC Members absent: Julie Lane Tudor

Staff and guests: Lisa Alvarez, Beth Brenneman, Lacey Conzelman, Sandy Dearman, Anna Gibbs, Bill Harant, Brook Hodge, Tammy Hogan, Shannon Little, Kim Marchwick (CART), Shawn Tulloch, Bob Maffit – Montana Independent Living Project (MILP), Mike Mayer – Summit Independent Living Center (Summit), and Tom Osborn – North Central Independent Living Services (NCILS), and Carlos Ramalho – Living Independently For Today and Tomorrow (LIFTT)

Report from SILC: Scott Birkenbuel, Chair of SILC, reported that they are in the middle of writing a 3-year state plan for Independent Living using Microsoft Teams. The Executive Committee attended the SILC Congress in San Diego. Their Program Performance Report (PPR) was submitted and rejected. Scott found out that 50 of PPRs were rejected across the nation – only 4 were accepted. This is due to learning how to use Microsoft Team program. Bill Harant has written out a response which Scott feels that it would be accepted. Scott also reported that Bill, David Hood and himself are attending Utah State University training called Action of Leading which is targeted at SILC membership and SILC leaders. After the State Plan gets completed, the SILC members will update bylaws, policies & procedures, and conflict of interest statement.

Report from SRC: Tiffany Costa, Chair of SRC, reported that she is the chair and Michele Letendre of Bozeman is the vice-chair of the State

Rehabilitation Council. This Council's role is to advise VRBS program and the delivery of the services to consumers. There are 16 members who meet 4x/year generally in Helena. The next SRC meeting will be in Browning which is more of a cultural field trip plus meeting. The DPHHS website (<https://dphhs.mt.gov/detd/vocrehab/mvrcouncil>) has the Governor's Report with success stories and the Council's achievements. The Council has four committees: Education & Membership, Planning & Review, Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment, and Policy, Procedures, & Personnel Development.

Reports from IL Centers:

- Carlos Ramalho of Billings, Executive Director of LIFTT, reported that the staff have been working from work since March 15. The LIFTT office is closed to the public but is providing services via telephone and over Internet. The staff completed OSHA protocol for self-cleaning and protection while in the office. They will follow partial schedule to avoid all staff members in the office at the same time. The number of consumers decreased at the start of COVID restrictions, but the number is slowly increasing. The staff is constantly brainstorming ideas to provide services to the consumers. The office has a new program facilitator and two new independent living specialists. The office also established contacts with Cheyenne and Crow reservations and hoped to re-open in the area when restrictions are lifted.
- Bob Maffit of Helena, CEO of MILP, reported that within 36 hours after the office closure due to COVID, each staff was able to work remotely with an accessible VPN and directed all calls to their cell phones. The staff could no longer meet in person or conduct group training or one to one interviews, etc. Instead, the staff were able to work digitally. One staff had to go to New Jersey and was still able to provide digitally-based peer support – that led to more attendance with wider geographical spread than in person peer support. The office completed policy change due to COVID (return to work, closed to public, alternative methods, etc.). PPR was submitted and approved.
- Tom Osborn of Black Eagle, Executive Director of NCILS reported that the office was able to provide services in 17 counties. The office developed skill trainings and peer development. They initiated three new classes with Rural Institute. The office continued to work with VR program and with youth who were not pursuing education but rather more interested in employment opportunities. The office maintained their community partnership with work and focused on delivery of customized employment. The office was also working on getting certified for the Discovery modules. Some staff can work in the office and others work from home.

- Mike Mayer of Missoula, Executive Director of Summit, reported that the offices closed the doors on March 16 due to COVID and suspended all activities such as classes, peer advocate, community meetings. The offices made the transition to working remotely – all staff were able to work from home. They were also able to return to the main/branch offices depending on what they need to do. While all have been busy, the number of consumers dropped. They get referrals for assistance with applications or appeals with Social Security and benefits and other public assistances. The office was able to set up remote classes in Missoula, Hamilton and Kalispell. It seemed that Zoom was a better platform for those with disabilities. One of the barriers that the consumers faced were the lack of computer or internet access. He hoped to use Cares Act funding to take care of that. The offices maintained network with community partners. They will move two locations into one building for staff offices and meeting space in Hamilton.

Federal & State Reports: Chanda Hermanson, DETD Administrator, reported ACL is more responsive to provide funding for those in the IL. The public offices are closed statewide and have been since mid-March. After working out the telework agreements and sorting the proper equipment for the staff, many staff members were able to work from home. Some can work in the office, too. Even with the offices being closed to public, people can come to the doors and we work with them. We continued to work with our partners: Community Rehabilitation Program providers, Pre-Employment Transition providers, and Extended Employment providers. We made some changes to allow flexibilities such as transportation to/from work. We did some analysis with the types of personal protection equipment (PPE) for our staff. Blind & Low Vision Services staff would need specific PPEs compared to VR counselors who can maintain the social distance in the office. Or even working with deaf/hard of hearing consumers who need to read lips, clear masks would be best option. The Strategic Planning sessions have been postponed to June. The Mark Gold Associates' Discovery training have been changed from in-person to virtual platform which worked out fine. The VRBS applications declined since the COVID. Montana Telecommunication Access Program has an increase with applications – they are using virtual platforms to communicate with clients. We have ordered UV sterilization chambers for each VRBS office. We have many pens, so people can just take them rather than leaving them with us. Disability Determination Services, a Federal program but housed in the State, have staff working from home. We were able to hire to fill positions and continued to invite people off the waitlist. Chanda also talked about the Governor's plan to distribute the \$1.25 billion care fund. A question was asked when the VR offices will open to the public. It is uncertain at this time.

Budget Report: Shannon Little, Budget Analyst, reported on the SILC budget. She stated the first budget category (actual expenses) for this fiscal year to date is \$9,380.00 which is 38.14% of the budget to date. The administrative cost, which is 100% general fund, is \$40,483.00 (49.37% of the budget spent). The indirect column shows the actual expense of \$15,259.00 which is 95.11% of budget spent year to date. The total budget category of these combined we have spent of the budget year to date at 53.10% of the projected budget. Anna Gibbs, Chief of Program Support & Operations, reported on the VRBS budget part. The total fund is \$11.79 million. There is a breakdown of the federal funds, state general funds, and Pre-Employment Transition Service fund set aside. There is also the Ticket to Work reimbursement. She explained the actual VRBS expenses through the end of April: \$3.55 million and the breakdown as follows is \$2.54 million federal, \$675,000 state and \$426,000 Pre-ETS set aside. Projected expenses through the end of September are \$6.2 million federal, \$2.5 million state, and \$1.13 million Pre-ETS set aside. There are three categories: personnel services, operating expenses, and client benefits. The projected personnel services costs are \$4.4 million, operating expenses are \$883,000, and client benefits costs \$5.6 million. She also reported on the total award and total expenditures (combining both federal and state): \$13 million award and \$8.4 expenses for FFY19 (end of September 2019). For FFY20, we are managing two open grants – combine both federal and state grants of \$11.79 million; total expense is \$2.183 million. A question was asked about reducing the number of people on the waitlists. Chanda responded that we have invited several off the list and will continue to do as long as there are funds to support it. A question was asked about Pre-ETS and its purpose. Pre-ETS is a set of services for high school students with disabilities – the students must be 14-21 years old and in education program. Due to WIOA, VR must set aside 15% of the budget for Pre-ETS.

SILC -- State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL) Report: Scott Birkenbuel and Bill Harant reported that the SILC committee met the day before and worked on the document. Goals, objectives, and activities were written in. Financial plan from Shannon Little showed how much money will be anticipated for the next three-year plan. SILC also developed a resource plan to explain how the funds will be spent. Bill also talked about the Disability, Employment, and Transition Division as the designated state entity. SILC has the capability and authority to do its own resource development so they can seek funding and supports from other agencies. They are also mandated to explain how they plan to partner with other agencies and organizations to promote independent living in the State. This plan must be submitted by 11:59 pm on June 30th. If approve, this will go in effect starting in October this year.

VRBS Waitlist & Field Services Report: Brook Hodge, Chief of Field Services reported that since the last SRC meeting, the following positions have been filled: VR counselor in Bozeman and Missoula, administrative support in Bozeman and Kalispell, Pre-ETS specialist in Helena and Great Falls, and vision rehabilitation therapist in Great Falls. Following are the vacancies: $\frac{3}{4}$ administrative support in Great Falls, VR in Missoula and Miles City, Pre-ETS in Billings, Havre, Kalispell, and Miles City, Orientation & Mobility specialist in Great Falls and counselor supervisor in Billings. Brook reported that the morale among the staff is uplifted due to staff participated in a weekly theme on Wednesdays such as 80's days, Masquerade, Food Bank collection, and hometown pride. Pictures are posted on SharePoint. She also talked a bit about the training with Mark Gold Associates on customized employment. VRBS also does the monthly webinar training – Pat Sanders talked about what he does as Transportation Coordinator last month and Anna Gibbs and Rachel Heaton will be talking about dashboard report this month. She is looking into self-employment and Pre-ETS training opportunities. Montana VRBS has been accepted into the Center for Innovative Training through George Washington University – a grant training opportunity. This means that VRBS staff will get the training needed on eligibility determination, developing Individualized Plan for Employment, job placement, etc. The VRBS teams continue to meet monthly; a new team has been added: Self-Employment. Brook talked about the new policies and procedures such as motor vehicle travel policy, credit card reconciliation policy, client cost share for purchases, and purchases exceeding \$5,000.

Benefits Training Update & Blind and Low Vision Services (BLVS) Report: Beverly Berg, BLVS Administrator, reported on the benefits planning training – currently have three counselors completed the second stage of the training. Previously, Beverly would send a VRT trainee to South Dakota for various VRT activities to get a feel of what a person with vision loss experiences. However, with the COVID restrictions, the newly hired VRT ended up taking online trainings with Mississippi State University, Helen Keller National Center, and Hadley School for the Blind. Beverly reported that COVID changed how her staff worked with clients. All have switched to phone calls and having meetings online. Support groups were still be offered. Staff can do low vision evaluations and some training. Equipment can be dropped or mailed to the individual's home. Staff are taking advantage of online training for continuing education credits. They are also checking their demo equipment to make sure they are up to date. More people are calling about the I Can Connect program. Beverly talked a bit about the new electronic Braille machine – the old one would punch holes through paper. The new one does not. She also talked about how the blind vendors got hit pretty hard with the COVID. They were not allowed in the

buildings where the vending machines were located. By the time, they were able to get to the machines, many products were expired and had to be disposed. The RSA fund will allow replacement of the products. Beverly is on the MonTECH Council and announced that it is open and has started the evaluations and loan equipment program – if you know anyone in need, please contact MonTECH directly.

Pre-Employment Training Services (Pre-ETS) Report: Tammy Hogan, Chief of Pre-ETS reported that this is a Bureau specifically designed to provide Pre-ETS services to students with disabilities ages ranged between 14 – 21 years old in high school or college or any other kind of recognized education program. Fifteen percent of the budget must be set aside for the Pre-ETS services such as job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on postsecondary programs, workplace readiness training and instruction on self-advocacy. Andrew Lowney was hired as the specialist in Missoula. Ann Carpenter was also hired for the Helena, Butte, and Bozeman areas. Lillian McGinn was hired for the Great Falls area. Tammy reported that she is in the process of interviewing for Kalispell and Billings areas. Another position to be filled is a data technician which will help a lot with data and keeping track of program information, etc. With the COVID restrictions, Tammy talked about using email and phone calls to communicate with people at schools as well as students. Community Rehabilitation programs and providers are working hard to do the Pre-ETS services remotely. She also talked a bit about MSU-Billings' Movin'On and MYLIFE/Montana Youth Leadership Forum programs and how they may be converted to virtual platforms.

Wrap-Up and Closing statements: Scott thanked everyone for participating via Skype and for being flexible with this adjustment. Tiffany reminded SRC to join the committee meeting the next day at 8:30 a.m. and then join the Council meeting at 9:20 a.m.