

**Montana State Rehabilitation  
Council Virtual & In-Person Meeting  
Helena, MT  
February 13-14, 2025  
Meeting Minutes**



**Members Present:** Corinne Moore, Lacey Keller, Joleen Weatherwax, Tommy Roberts, Celine Cline, Chanda Hermanson, Doug McElroy, Heidi Gibson, June Hermanson. Online: Gabrielle Broere, Jennifer Owen, and Kendra Lewis

**Members absent:** Eva Belatski, Desiree Johnson, Shandra Bell, and Brian Tocher

**Staff and Guests:** Tammy Hogan, Amy Jamison, Desiree Dean, Allyson Talaska, Darell Hannum, Sarah Seltzer. Online: Lacey Conzelman, Anna Gibbs, Aundrea Gee, Ona Lepard, and CART Transcribers

**Day 1: February 13, 2025**

Welcome, meeting rules, reading of mission statements and announcements.  
Meeting minutes from August 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024, motion to approve by Chanda Hermanson, second by Lacey Keller, approved unanimously. Meeting minutes from November 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024, motion to approve by Chanda Hermanson, second by Joleen Weatherwax, approved unanimously.

**Announcements, & Public Comments:**

- Joleen Weatherwax shared that the Tribal Council will be holding a conference in Browning on March 24<sup>th</sup> in recognition of Disability Awareness.
- Lacey Keller shared that the Independent Living Centers were having a Town Hall meeting on April 29<sup>th</sup>.
- Heidi Gibson shared that the Montana Empowerment Center would be holding several Lunch and Learn webinars on the IEP process on Feb. 20<sup>th</sup>, March 20<sup>th</sup>, and April 17<sup>th</sup> at noon each day.
- June Hermanson shared that the Montana Youth Transitions conference will be held on November 12-14 at the Copper King in Butte, MT.
- June also so shared that Montana has joined the list of states in a lawsuit to eliminate section 504.
  - On this topic, several agencies are seeking to understand why and to share the impact of this action.

## Committee Reports:

- **Planning and Review Committee:** Joleen shared that one thing she appreciates about serving on this committee is working on the Governor's Report. Lacey Keller stated they are evaluating stories from VR, BLV, Older Blind Services, and Pre-ETS to use for the Story of the Year. She says that the ratings are not making sense, and they are looking for ways to make the stories more impactful. So, they have updated the rating scale and hope to have the report complete by April. Lacey C. said that Pre-ETS has their own scoring matrix and individuals with the highest score will be awarded in April.
- **Education/Membership and Bylaws Committee:** Tommy reported that they did not meet this last quarter. He said he and Corinne met to discuss some potential applicants. At this time, one application is being processed, one person is waiting on an application, and there is possibly one more interested candidate. Tommy shared that when he approaches people to talk about the possibility of serving the council, he opens the conversation with disabilities in general and then shares what he does to advocate. Tommy said that he shares his story and how VR helped him. Chanda shared that she has been trying to recruit. One person she reached out to she has had no response from while another is possibly going to apply. It was shared that people can contact Desiree Dean about the application process. According to our bylaws, 51% of the council needs to be advocates or people with a disability. There are currently two Business and Labor positions open on the council. The council discussed updating the bylaws for zoom options for more participation and accessibility. Tommy says he has been reaching out to college leaders with an invitation to some gatherings. He is looking into a \$500 scholarship to set this up.
- **Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee:** Celine reported that we finally have a company after six different proposals to do our survey with clients. The name of the company is Market Decision Research out of Maine. The process was lengthy and included an initial public notice. Companies were scored and this company was the one that was chosen. They have worked with other state VR services with their survey process. From here, we need to decide what information the SRC would like to know through the survey. Celine said we should have a contract in place hopefully by March 1<sup>st</sup>. From there, they will develop, test, and then launch the survey. The survey will be phone based. This company has good experience with VR and the disability community. From here, the process includes educating VR staff on notifying their clients about the survey. The survey will run throughout the clients' VR experience and not just at closure. This tool will be used for the SRC to better direct VR on its services.
- **Policy, Procedure, and Personnel Development Committee:** Allyson reported that they have not had a meeting yet and they will set meeting dates and times. The updates at this time are that there have been no changes but that some processes are in the works including the Exit Procedure. There has been some problems with contacting clients. They are working on clarifying what a successful exit looks like. Are clients in college or

on the job and how does that contribute to the client's success, and how are they counting this and providing accurate reports. Allyson says they are working on how clients are presented with their choice of CRP and if there is an informed choice procedure.

- **Legislation Committee:** June shared there have been three trainings so far: testifying, letters, lobbying vs. advocate stories. June says there have been some legislative hearings that have changed dates. VR partners with DETD on various bills. She said that next week, executive action begins. Otherwise, she says it is time to prepare for the rest of the session. A question was presented about the trainings being recorded for other members to review. The next meeting will be after the transmittal of bills and set for February 17<sup>th</sup>. DPHHS legislation is Program 1 on HB2.

**VRBS Rebranding:** Chanda reported that the words Vocational Rehabilitation does not accurately communicate what the department really does. She said they are looking into renaming the services. The name is confusing as it is and often requires further explanation. Chanda says this has become a nationwide effort to change stigmatism. So far, the VR staff have come up with 85 ideas and they are working on narrowing that down. They want something that will make sense to the public. They want the term “disability” to be in the title. It should reflect the three different bureaus in VR: Pre-ETS, BLV, and General VR services. So they want to find a way to connect these services, have their own identity, and have it emphasize employment. Chanda says there is no timeline on the name revision at the moment. They might present it at the Town Hall meetings and possibly submit the final ideas to the Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Committee for further development.

**Priority 1 & 2:** Lacey C. shared the process for the Strategic Plan. Every three years the Voc Rehab program is mandated to complete a Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment to include surveys from clients, staff, and stakeholders. This information is used to develop the priorities for VR. The current plan is a little over a year old. For the next 3-4 years, there are four goals that have been developed out of the strategic plan. These goals are: Equitable Access and Quality, Youth Engagement, Coordination, and Organizational Sustainability. These goals have been broken into objectives, strategies, and tasks. Lacey covered them with us in further detail.

## **Bylaw Updates**

Corinne suggested some revisions to our current bylaws which were last updated on December 1, 2022. These suggestions were recently sent out for SRC feedback. Listed are the changes and subsequent voting:

1. Correct the grammatical error of capitalizing the word Federal on bottom of page 1.
  - a. Motion made by June H.
  - b. Second by Lacey K.

- c. Vote taken and passed unanimously
- 2. On page 2, line number 6. Correct the spelling of the word “public”.
  - a. Motion made by Doug M.
  - b. Second by Tommy R.
  - c. Vote taken and passed unanimously
- 3. On page 3, number 1, Article 4 A. change to say that a member of the council will attend the NCSRC conferences as long as the budget allows and administration permits out of state travel. Article 4 B. change to say that the SRC Staff Liaison sends VRBS program, staff updates, and NCSRC communications to council members.
  - a. Motion made by June H.
  - b. Second by Lacey K.
  - c. Vote taken and passed unanimously
- 4. After lengthy discussion, the suggested change for item 4 was not voted on. No change made.
- 5. On page 7, Article 7, Number 4. Change to read: A council member designated by the Chair will conduct the meeting in the rare occurrence of the Chair and Vice-Chair being absent.
  - a. Motion made by Tommy R.
  - b. Second by Lacey K.
  - c. Vote taken and passed unanimously
- 6. Page 8, Article 9, Subcommittees Number 3. Change to read: council members shall switch subcommittees if a subcommittee is in need of more members or the needs of the Council call for redistribution.
  - a. Motion made by June H.
  - b. Second by Lacey K.
  - c. Vote taken and passed unanimously
- 7. Page 9, number 6. Change the word “community” to “committee”.
  - a. Motion made by Tommy R.
  - b. Second by June H.
  - c. Vote taken and passed unanimously
- 8. After lengthy discussion, the suggested change for item 8 was not voted on. No change made.
- 9. No vote was needed to change the formatting to font size 14.

There was additional discussion on potential bylaws changes/revisions that will be discussed further at a later date.

The council discussed the guidelines for in-person and virtual attendance. In the event of voting, cameras and microphones should be on. An online voting/survey option may be available as a special circumstance depending on the urgency and need for a quorum.

The council discussed the terms of the Chair and Vice-Chair and how the experience of the past chair has supported the current. The need is to stagger the terms of the two positions to ensure continued success through mentorship.

### **Community Round Table with Helena VR and Ability Montana**

Our guests today were Maria from the Helena Office of Ability Montana, Charles Alvarez from Ability One, Vena Dagnel and Leyetta Way from the Helena VR office.

We discussed caseload numbers, strategic planning, and meetings with providers. A new Supervisor in Helena will be starting on February 24<sup>th</sup> and an Administrative position was just filled.

VR and the Independent Living Centers have a good working relationship. They share and collaborate with each other on events, employment opportunities, and resources.

An upcoming event in Helena is “Let’s Talk Disabilities Helena” will be May16-17.

There are “wellness” groups that help with isolation issues and other workshops and training for advocacy. “Living Well in the Community” is also doing classes in the jail.

Charles runs a men’s group and Ability MT has some podcasts that include Legislative Updates, Get Connected, and Let’s Talk.

We discussed the area’s transportation barriers and how some of this transportation services come from levies. They are looking at how to collaborate with local businesses to help with transportation funding.

Things going well for Helena include there being more access to government jobs. There is also a Summer Jobs Club for Youth in the Helena area.

Today’s meeting concluded at 5:00pm

### **Day 2: February 14, 2025**

**Federal & State Reports:** Chanda H reported that there is currently a vacancy in the Department of Education, which is the department that VRBS is under. She said there was a new nomination who could take office soon. However, there is much uncertainty as there has been

discussion at the federal level to dismantle the department. Chanda emphasized that the departments that are statute will continue to exist and that does include VRBS. The federal budget is still unknown. We did not receive a COLA (Cost of Living Adjustment), and we have received \$7 million of the annual grant and are anticipating \$13.5-14 million. At this point, it is a “wait and see” on what happens with the budget. As of now, VRBS is not recruiting for any open positions in VR services.

At the state level, Chanda reports that the budget was in to the committee on January 29<sup>th</sup>. She shared some of the public comments on the topic and how people have been more inquisitive and curious than in previous years. They are expecting an executive action next week between Wednesday-Friday. There are four new proposals presented. One is to increase the appropriation for telecommunication access through the Accessible Communication Program. This is the one collected by a ten cent tax on our phone bills. The ask is for an another \$1 million in appropriations. The next proposal is to create a new VR counselor provision to be housed at the State Hospital to allow for job readiness training while people are in the hospital to prepare them for discharge. The next proposal is contingent on a tax adjustment from Senate Bill 82 which creates a Blind Adjustment Program for people under 55 that are not seeking employment right now.

The bills that VRBS is watching are SB 82 and HB 161 (which is to create a special revenue account for the Blind Vending Program).

Chanda asked the council to discuss changing certain language on the State VRBS website due to a recent Executive order on DEI. The council took time to review the Value statements on the website and discussed potential changes of wording.

**Budget Report:** Anna Gibbs gave us the current budget report and broke down the current spending versus the usual and expected State and Federal funding match. A breakdown of the budget is available. Of the total FY '24 budget amount of \$17.5 million, \$12.4 million was from the federal grant, \$1.2 million was set aside for Pre-ETS, and from the State General fund was \$3.75 million. For FY '25, so far the federal grant received is \$7 million. Without an additional federal match, funds are anticipated to run out by June of 2025.

**VRBS Report:** Allyson T. reported that the current caseload statewide is 4289 people being served. This count includes the applicants who have not yet been determined eligible. Active participants are 3722. The highest caseload in the state is in Missoula with a 171 client count and the lowest caseload is in Havre with a 96 client count. Caseloads average 199 people statewide. There are 3 posted vacancies in the VR offices.

Some of the projects going on are management training which included the Recovery Friendly Workplaces training. This is a Business Services model that focuses on recruiting and retaining employees with behavioral health disorders. Allyson shared how this supports the Value Proposition that is part of the nationwide focus in VRBS services.

**BLVS Report:** Darrel H. reported this Fall they were primarily focused on statewide access for older , blind individuals. He stated they the BLVS continues to work with their business partners with goals of working closer with the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind. He reports there are currently two students in their program from MSDB. The Blind Adjustment Program is for individuals under 55. MSU-Billings with working with them on a Benefits Planning program. Various policies and procedures for the Blind Vendor program are being set up and revised. They have a new vending machine technician. There will be a Business Services Disability Employment Conference on May 13-15<sup>th</sup> in Missoula. It is currently uncertain is the ABC Clinic will be placed under Job Services. Darrel says they are setting up several upcoming job fairs this next year. The DLI and Antero (Tribal) recently met in Great Falls. He says they are working with the Great Falls College for doing customized training for welding. And they are watching for the outcome of a collaboration with the Blind Institute on a technology grant for training BLVS students.

**Pre-ETS:** Tammy Hogan reported on the Pre-ETS services. She reported on the breakdown of their role in the Strategic Plan. The first goal, Youth Engagement. This begins with Work Place Readiness Training. There are 116 school contracts, 13 of which are new and some are schools without contracts. They rolled out a Transition Readiness Toolkit. They are holding career related competitions and exploring other community agencies for providing Pre-ETS services. They hold Youth Servies Team meetings monthly.

**Extended/Customized Employment:** Lacey C. reported that the EE program is soley funded by the state general fund. Ideally, clients who are on EE will transition to the waiver program for long term employment supports. Currently there are 197 individuals with open cases in Extended Employment. There are 19 on the waitlist and these numbers fluctuate.

In Customized Employment, they are working on a new CET program with Cheri Reed Anderson. They will begin with training five providers in the program. The CRPs will be chosen on the clients who could best be supported by the program. This is a 14-16 week training course. Once this training is complete, there will be another training course.

**Additional Bylaws Updates:** Corinne opened the floor for further discussion for additional bylaws changes regarding Article VI, Meetings.

One change is: In-person attendance is highly encouraged to foster relationships and meaningful connections within the council. However, if in-person participation is not possible due to a disability or other extenuating circumstances, remote online attendance is acceptable, provided that active participation is maintained.

Motion made by June H.

Second by Joleen W.

This change was passed unanimously.

The second change is to add an additional bullet point that reads: When a vote is needed, in order to meet the regulations in statute, the agency should work with the chair to conduct online voting.

Motion made by Joleen W.

Second by Lacey K.

This addition was passed unanimously.

### **Wrap Up and Meeting Adjourned at 12:06pm**

Motion to adjourn made by Doug M.

Second by Lacey K.

Approved unanimously.