

**Montana State Rehabilitation
Council Virtual & In-Person Meeting
Helena, MT
May 12 & 13, 2025
Meeting Minutes**



Members Present: June Hermanson, Doug McElroy, Heidi Gibson, Tommy Roberts, Gabrielle Broere, Corinne Moore, Joleen Weatherwax, Celina Cline, Chanda Hermanson. **Online:** Jennifer Owen, Mike Lahr (DMR for Eva Belatski)), Brian Tocher, Shandra McDowell, Desiree Johnson, and Lacey Keller.

Staff and Guests: Darell Hannum, Sarah Seltzer, Dorthy Young, Julia Ochoa, Aaron Schultz, Andrew Lowney, and Desiree Dean. **Online:** Anna Gibbs, Lacey Conzelman, Nur McRae, and Brenda (captioner).

5/12 10:00 AM--Welcome, Ground Rules, Mission Statements, and Introductions.

Meeting Minutes:

August 2024 Minutes with corrections--Motion to approve made by: Heidi Gibson, Second by: Tommy Roberts, Approved Unanimously.

February 2025 Minutes—Motion to approve made by: June Hermanson, Second by: Doug McElroy, Approved Unanimously.

Online Meeting March 2025 Minutes—Motion to approve made by: Doug McElroy, Second by: Heidi Gibson, Approved Unanimously.

Announcements and Public Comments:

Heidi Gibson shared that there is an upcoming national conference put on by the National Technical Assistance Center for Transitions.
There were no public comments.

Committee Reports:

- Planning and Review: Reported by Lacey Conzelman—The stories for the Annual Report have been received and scored. The stories that received awards were announced at the Annual All-staff Meeting in late April. Work is being done on the Governor's Report and on track to be done by the end of the year.
- Education and Membership-Bylaw Changes/Edits: Reported by Tommy Roberts—The SRC welcomes its newest member to the council, Aaron Schultz. New Membership Orientation Packets are in the process of being revised and will be sent as soon as they are ready. The Bylaws will be up to date once the latest revision has been made and added. There is currently a position opening on the council for a representative from the Business and Labor Industry.

- **Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment:** Reported by Celina Cline—The contract with the new provider, Marketing Decisions Research is in motion. They will be working with VR leadership on a workplan to decide the content of the information we would like to receive. The next meeting on this will be held on May 29th.
- **Policy, Procedure, & Personal Development:** Reported by Chanda Hermanson in the absence of Allyson Talaska. There is a new process for the youth in foster care receiving VR services. Zip Trip gas cards will be used going forward for transportation instead of the current voucher or P.O. process. There has been some changes to some forms to clarify the terminology and make it more practical. Other line items on the application are being changed or combined to simplify the process and reduce the multiple signatures currently necessary. These changes should make the client and counselor process more efficient.
- **Legislative:** Reported by June Hermanson—It has been approximately one year since this committee was formed. There have been several trainings for council members to better understand the legislative process. It was suggested that going forward, these trainings be recorded for future interest in this committee by new members. Discussion was around how to continue the committee and train both council members and VR clients on testifying before the legislature.

11:00 AM—Open Business: Business topics on the agenda for 5/13 moved here due to open time being available.

- Discussion was had on what constitutes a quorum.
- Some councilmembers' terms expire this Fall. These members will need to reapply if interested in a second term.
- Meeting restructure to move VR reports to the first day for timeliness.
- Fall NCSRC Conference in San Diego.

March Online Meeting: Discussion of the meeting held online in March regarding Order of Selection. See text under Meeting Minutes above for voting results on meeting minutes.

12:00-1:00 PM—Lunch

1:00-2:15 PM—Tour and Presentation at MonTech—Michelle Allen, Presenter

Conference Presentation moved to 5/13.

2:15 PM—Priority 2 & 3 Presentation: Presented by Lacey Conzelman, Andrew Lowney, & Chanda Hermanson

Lacey began with discussion on Priority 3. The Goals, Objectives, and Strategies were broken down into an outline and shared with the council for input and feedback. GOAL 3: COORDINATION. MONTANA'S WORKFORCE SYSTEM IS COORDINATED TO EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR EMPLOYERS.

Andrew continued the presentation speaking about Priority 2. This is for Youth Engagement. The objective is to increase student participation. Andrew listed the tasks under this objective. GOAL 2: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT. MONTANA YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES ARE EFFECTIVELY ENGAGED IN VOCATIONAL EXPLORATION AND WORK READINESS TRAINING.

Chanda spoke on re-branding and outreach and how some recent programs will boost the Pre-ETS services across the state, connect youth to businesses, and expand workplace readiness training for students.

3:30 PM—Community Roundtable Discussion: Missoula VR, Summit Independent Living, and other community rehabilitation partners. Talks centered around opportunities, shortages, and available resources.

5/12 meeting concluded at 5:00 PM

5/13 8:30 AM—Welcome & Ground Rules

Opening topic: While introducing themselves, the Chair requested each person respond to the question, "What do you wish people knew about disability and employment."

Federal & State Reports: Chanda Herman gave her federal and then state reports. She began by sharing that the President's Skinny Budget was published the week prior to the meeting. She stated that VR services were not mentioned in this budget. Other WIOA systems, however, had received funding cuts to programs. Vocational Rehabilitation is a stature program and as such will not be eliminated. With the cuts to the Department of Education, VR services may be shifted, and the consensus is that it would likely go to the Department of Labor under the Office of Disability Employment Policy. Nothing is certain yet and this determination has not yet been made. Last year, VR was flat funded, it did not receive a cost of living allowance (COLA). This year, VR did get a COLA, and it was doubled, which is good news. Reallotment typically comes around in August but may be as early as July this year. As for the state report, she shared that the state legislative session was out of session. House Bill 82 to create a Blind Adjustment Program has been signed by the Governor. This program should be ready to roll out by July 1st. The other bill, House Bill 161 to create a special revenue account to receive the appropriation to spend the commissions drawn off the vending machines on state managed properties not held by a vendor has been transmitted but not yet signed by the Governor. VR has submitted a request for additional money and more FTE employees from the funding acquired through the MTAC. They

have asked for a VR Counselor at the State Hospital. Legislators also passed a provider rate increase. Because of this, the expectations of providers will change with different incentives for employment placement milestones. Lastly, Chanda shared some information about upcoming meetings and trainings including the work that VR will be doing with the Harkin Institute.

Sarah Seltzer shared that name suggestions numbered 83 and were whittled down to 5. She stated the name re-branding of VR services has taken a back seat since the planning for Order of Selection began.

Budget Report: Anna Gibbs reported on the budget with her usual slides and pie charts. She shared that a new Budget Analyst, Nura McCray began a few weeks ago. The '24 Federal Fiscal Year award was \$13.8 million, with a \$2 million Pre-ETS set aside, leaving \$11.8 million for general VR. The required state share is \$3.7 million. This gives general VR a total of \$17.5 million. These funds have been fully expended. Out of the FFY '25 total of \$19.6 million, there is \$7.4 million remaining. This is not enough funds to pay for all the obligations through January. At the current rate, funds are looking to be expended by November 2025. To get through to January, the state will need to be granted permission to go into Order of Selection and close two categories. Providing approval, which can take up to six months, categories two and three could be closed as early as August 1st.

VRBS Report and Rebranding: Chanda Hermanson and Sarah Seltzer reported. Sarah shared that there are still a few vacancies within the agency. The positions they are hiring for are a Rehab Tech in Missoula, an Administrative Support Supervisor in Billings, an Administrative Assistant in Miles City, a Counselor position in Great Falls will be posted in six weeks, and a Tech position in Bozeman. They are working on new recruitment techniques to find qualified candidates for these open positions. Currently the average caseload is 130 clients as applicant numbers have been steadily increasing over the last five years. The average caseload for supervisors is 73, BLV counselors have an average caseload of 60, the Counselor for the Deaf population currently has a caseload of 50, and the Pre-ETS Counselors have a caseload averaging 361 each. Butte is the most challenging area to recruit for VR positions right now.

BLVS Report: Darrel Hannum reported they are getting rules in place for the new program. They are working more closely with MSDB and MSU-Billings. There are several outreach opportunities and meetings scheduled over the summer including the Blind Vendor Program, the Business Services Conference, job fairs, health fairs, and more. Additional connections include local Tribal programs, the Department of Labor, Touro College, the College of Great Falls, and Knife River in Belgrade. Darrel is also working with the Blind Institute of Technology which is a national apprenticeship program that was built for blind people interested in doing online work from home opportunities. Additionally, Allyson is working on developing policies and procedures around self-employment.

Pre-ETS Report: Andrew Lowney reported for Tammy Hogen. He shared that in Missoula, they have partnered with Chaffee workers for transportation services for students. Andrew says he has

been meeting with students where they are and sometimes that means he meets with them in their homes and/or schools. He shared a story of one student who was presented with a Youth Achievement Award. The student began by thinking she wanted to work with animals and soon discovered she was more interested in becoming an OB/GYN. Wanting to make money before going to school, she enrolled in CNA program where she will work for a while before beginning her classes. Andrew is meeting with the school counselors in rural communities to get students signed up for VR services. He is working with area business owners to find work experiences and make new connections. The schools have been receptive to offering work experiences for students to explore career options as well. The goal is of course to find meaningful work experiences and not just another cleaning job. He says the most challenging part is finding transportation for students who do not drive. Chanda added in that moving into next year, school contracts will require the Transition Readiness Toolkits (TRT) for Pre-ETS. If the school refuses, then VR will not be entering into a contract with the school. Andrew is collaborating with schools to sign these contracts.

Extended/Customized Employment: In Lacey's absence this afternoon, Chanda and Darrel presented the report. Chanda reminded the council what Extended Employment is and that it is not a VR program but a special state program that is funded by the state's general fund for people with significant disabilities who need long term support but do not have a Medicaid waiver. Currently, 200 individuals are being served under this program with 16 people on the waiting list. Darrel shared an update on Customized Employment and the work being done with training providers to become certified in Customized Employment services. Work is being done with NEON, to develop a fee schedule for provisions of this service. Their goal is to finalize the working definition for DPHHS and begin building customized employment provider capacity. This is not just a Vocational Rehabilitation concern.

Conference Presentation: Doug McElroy reported on the NCSRC and CSAVR National Conferences held in Bethesda, MD in April. He shared stories and spoke about trainings, networking, and collaboration opportunities with other states. He encouraged other council members to consider going to a national conference for the training and experience. Corinne Moore agreed that a national conference is a wonderful experience for all council members and shared that the next conference is going to be the Fall in San Diego, CA.

Open Business: Corinne asked that we keep in mind that we have bylaws changes that we need to address during the next quarterly meeting.

Planning for next Meeting: Corinne shifted the topic to the next quarterly meeting to be held in Harve in August. The first day will be the joint meeting with the SILC. The meeting dates are August 7-8, 2025.

Meeting adjourned at 11:46 AM Motion made by: Doug McElroy, 2nd made by: Tommy Roberts. Approved Unanimously.