**State of Connecticut**

**Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS)**

**Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)**

**State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) to BESB**

# DRAFT MINUTESDecember 21, 2022

 **Members Present: Mr. Phillip Magalnick, Mr. Gary Allen, Mr. Scott Baecker, Ms. Enaida Mendoza, Mr. John McNickle, Ms. Deborah Reed, Mr. Dennis Regan, Mr. Frank Losquadro,

Others Present: Director Carol Jenkins, Mr. Andrew Norton, Ms. Mary Burgard, Ms. Rayah Martin, Ms. Rebecca Anderson

Members Absent: Ms. Kendra Valente, Mr. Jay Brown, Mr. William DeMaio, Ms. Brandy Altergott, Mr. Frank Buonomo, Ms. Nicole Rico-Serrano, Ms. Jennifer Jenkins, Ms. Lucretia Jones, Ms. Beth Reel, Mr. John Carnemolla

Welcome and Introductions:

Call to Order: At 10:05 a.m. Chair Phillip Magalnick called the meeting to order, introduced himself and asked that during roll call everyone introduce themselves, state who they represent and what they feel the job of the Council is.

Chair Magalnick took a moment to remember and acknowledge the passing of Steve Famiglietti, who was killed in a car accident last month and will be deeply missed.

Deb Reed stated her perception is the Council’s duties are to work with Vocational Rehabilitation in providing the best services we can for the blind in CT. She represents the National Federation of the Blind.

Dennis Regan stated the Council’s priorities lie in maximizing Vocational Rehabilitation and other services for the blind community. He is a BESB client.

Frank Losquadro stated the Council helps partner with BESB and Vocational Rehabilitation to advance opportunities for blind people. He represents the employer category, and works for Goodwill.

Gary Allen, Vice-Chair of the SRC, stated our role is informing people of what’s going on, so people can understand and make things better. He represents State Independent Living Council.

John McNickle, a BESB client and retired small business owner, stated his purpose on the Council is figuring out how to give back and take care of people who are struggling.

Enaida Mendoza is a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at BESB. Provides insight and perspective of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors.

Scott Baecker, Operations Director at CRIS Radio. Here to help the agency in whatever way we can to enhance and advance services.

Marty Watts from AIRA, today’s presenter

Chair Magalnick asked if there was a quorum of members present. It was determined that there was not a quorum present. The meeting would continue, but no votes would be held.
Introduction of BESB’s new Director Carol Jenkins

Ms. Jenkins gave her educational background, with undergrad studies in math and science, then early childhood education, and then deafblind rehabilitation and rehabilitation counseling. She started as a client receiving services, and then was hired as a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor in Nebraska by the Commission for the Blind there. She became Deputy Director, overseeing all services in Nebraska, including Children’s services, the Independent Living Program, Business Enterprise Program, and Supported Employment. After 13 years there she is now in CT. Goals are to improve the wonderful foundation we have in CT and make what we have even better. She is a forward-thinking person who likes to try new things and is always looking ahead.

Goal for the SRC is to build the partnership and relationship, and it will take all of us working together to grow what we have.

Chair Magalnick welcomed her and stated he looks forward to working with her.

Public Comment: None

Old Business

Review and Approval of Minutes from the September 21, 2022 Meeting:
Approval of minutes is tabled due to not having a quorum, but minutes have been distributed to members.
Workgroup Reports

Membership: There have been vacancies on the Labor side, and we have some new appointees for the Governor to approve, so there should be some new members soon.

Finance: Only one item and that is $150 for the Council Chair to attend a virtual conference.

Consumer Satisfaction: Deb Reed is chair of the subcommittee. Ms. Reed reported that they met 3 times since the last SRC meeting. The consumer satisfaction survey was sent to a small number of clients. Director Jenkins had told them how it was done in Nebraska, and we know we need a better representation of clients, as well as maybe a different vendor. She is concerned about the cost of $25,000 to survey a small number of clients. Survey is coming up soon.

Chair Magalnick says the SRC can hold a special meeting to vote on some items. The Council is mandated to meet quarterly but can hold additional meetings.

New Business

VR Success Story: Ms. Mendoza introduced Rebecca Anderson, who has been a client of BESB since she was a toddler. She is currently working as Director of Pastoral Care and Community Connection. She is working remotely from Danbury for The Julian Way in Texas.

Rebecca, who goes by Becca (she/her), shared that her first TVI showed up with a box of books and toys and promised her parents she could have a good future. BESB has made good on that promise. She has learned from her TVIs, O&M instructors, and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors. She is an avid reader and prolific writer, and it couldn’t have happened without BESB. She has learned confidence, persistence, self-advocacy and compassion.

She admits she argued with teachers as a student and turned down some services. Then she met her Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Mike Cordero. With BESB’s help, she has since attended her first-choice college. Experienced a call to ministry and discovered disability activism and disability justice. She then started preaching and writing about making the church a more accessible place. Counselors worked with her to provide her with advocacy, Braille technology, O&M, and she was able to attend seminary in NYC.

She continued to achieve high grades and started getting speaking and workshop jobs. There are not many regularly paying jobs in Disability ministry, so she had to create that for herself.

She is now working at The Julian Way as the Director of Pastoral Care and Community Connection, providing spiritual care and emotional support for people with disabilities. She also works part time at Columbia University Disability Services and accepts church preaching jobs.

She lives independently and has great potential for a career in her field. But she was a success before this. She started this work on breaks and outside of paying work. The work was just as vital even when she was not compensated for it. We still live in a world where employers discriminate against people with disabilities. We should remember to see success in clients before their cases are closed. She would not be where she is today without BESB. A confident, accomplished, blind woman who gets paid for what she does. BESB promised her parents a future more than 20 years ago and has made good on that promise

Ms. Reed from NFB Connecticut commented that she is very happy for Ms. Anderson’s experience and the important work she does every day and is thrilled for her.

Mr. McNickle commented on Ms. Anderson’s powerful testimony and says she has been gifted with innate skills and intellect. He asked how we can make more people understand and see their gifts.

Ms. Anderson said she had incredibly supportive family and staff at BESB and hopes everyone can have that.

Mr. Allen asked Becca where she does her work with her ministry.

Becca explained that The Julian Way is non-traditional, not a church per se, but has clients referred by churches or other connections. They meet over the phone, video conference, or one-on-one for spiritual counseling. They may utilize text conversation. Her ministry is everywhere. She works from her home, but she reaches out everywhere across the country. She also does guest preaching and goes to churches. She generally does not travel more than an hour away from home for this. She uses a Braille notetaker and does word processing and email directly from that. She also uses voice over on Apple devices and a Braille display.

Chair Magalnick commented that her story is one of the most impactful that he’s heard. He thanked her for telling her story and wishes her continued success.

Ms. Anderson said if any clients are inclined towards church or ministry or a desire for spiritual support to reach out to The Julian Way. She’s happy to make the case for BESB and that our work matters.

Mr. Allen commented that it was one of the most positive success stories he’s heard and it was well-told.

AIRA Presentation:
Chair Magalnick stated he had been made aware of a pilot program for AIRA in Connecticut. It had 25 users out of 5500 people on the blind register. After the NFB convention it was raised to 55 users.

Marty Watts stated he wishes all students and young people could tap into Ms. Anderson’s tenacity. He has been Vice President of Sales at AIRA since 2017. He loves working for the company and talks with people who are blind or low vision about how AIRA can enhance independence.

AIRA helps to make the world a more accessible place. It uses an app on a smartphone. An AIRA agent answers your call, uses live streaming through the phone to make things accessible through audio description. AIRA asks what you are trying to accomplish, and the agent makes that task accessible.

The app launched October 15, 2021. Leveraged to be an additional tool for anyone who may need access to more information. It can be used for navigation, public transit, and other public services in-person or online. It is to provide access to essential services. There is an 18-month pilot where anyone in CT can use AIRA free of charge. One year into the pilot they have had 55 people use AIRA in CT. Beyond public transit, it is useful for to access other essential services as well. It isn’t just for riding the bus or trains. It’s for labels at the pharmacy, scheduling doctor’s appointments online, or for example, using Instacart and the screen reader is not working right. All of those things can be considered essential.

He is concerned about increasing usage, so they can continue to receive federal grant funding. There is concern that it may not present enough of a need if more people don’t learn about it and use it. The Federal Transit Administration and UCONN are heading up the research study.

Ms. Reed says she is still coming across members who don’t have a subscription to AIRA and are forgetting to apply for the pilot program once they sign into the app. It appears as though you must scroll through to find the CT pilot program on the app to apply it and then make the call.

Mr. Watts said that once you apply the offer it makes it free. There is a way to simplify the process for users that would require help from BESB. Alabama, for example, offers AIRA to all blind users, and accounts are set up for them. If BESB could approve users, AIRA could create the accounts. It would require coordination between AIRA and BESB.

Chair Magalnick asked how the council and Bureau can help get the word out.

Mr. Watts said they’ve tried to rely on email and social media, attending virtual meetings, and he was on CRIS radio. One avenue not explored yet is getting every O&M instructor while the pilot is running and free to help clients install the app and make the call. If the first call is with someone you trust it could go a long way.

Mr. Allen said the best way is word of mouth and making AIRA easy to use. That would be most important. Thinks if they work with BESB to make it easier to use, the word will go out.

Mr. McNickle stated he was an early adopter of the service when it was $80/ month and it used glasses and wires and a separate phone was cumbersome, and he eventually dropped it for technical reasons and just didn’t find enough reason to use it. Asked if it has changes and now can be used with an iPhone.

Mr. Watts stated it now runs on Apple and Android devices and they’re working with a company for AI glasses. It also can be used as support on your computer, if say the screen reader is not working right. Now on the phone, it can be used for free.

Mr. Baecker from CRIS Radio asked if there was a sense of the minimum number of users needed to maintain the service.

Mr. Watts stated there was never a hard number discussed but thinks 100 people would be the minimum he wants to see in order to assess how it works in the long term. With the pilot, they have gone from 22 to 55 users in CT. This is a passion project of his. The first of its kind.

There is a biweekly call between members DOT, BESB, and the UCONN research team. Their current focus is on additional marketing campaigns and getting feedback. They are creating a list of “50 Ways to Use AIRA.” This can be shared with the SRC.

They are getting information out on social media via the AIRA Facebook page. Info could also be sent to NFB and BESB to share the content with their constituents.

Mr. Baecker from CRIS Radio offered to work up some PSAs. Mr. Allen offered to help put information on the NFB Facebook page that he moderates.

SRC Annual Report: Ms. Burgard is submitting a draft report to Commissioner Amy Porter and the governor. One point remained blank and that was the goal for 2023. Chair Magalnick asked if anyone has suggestions.

Director Jenkins suggested that we need to work a comprehensive questionnaire and stated goals for the SRC starting in 2023. This would be for the state plan that is due in 2024. She’s hoping to start working with the SRC on that in January.

Report from BESB Representative

Program Update: Director Jenkins and Mary Burgard did not have anything to add other than what has already been discussed.

Legislation Update: Mr. Norton ADS is not proposing any agency legislation this upcoming session which begins January 3rd.**

**We have previously worked with Rep. Kathy Abercrombie on the Human Services Committee, and she retired. Someone will replace her as Chair, and we’ll build from there.
There was a bill to change the definition of Guide Dogs redefined as Service Animals but wasn’t passed. He’ll continue to monitor any bills that come up. He’ll be sure to share any that affect Vocational work.
In February the Governor will give the budget address and we’ll learn then exactly how much money will be put forward for the next two years and whether there are any changes.

Chair Magalnick asked what our capacity is to get approval to utilize state media to promote the AIRA program.

Mr. Norton stated that as an agency we’d need to go through the Governor’s press office. Anyone acting as private citizens or entities don’t need the Governor’s permission.

Report from Chair:
Chair Magalnick acknowledged and thanked Interim BESB Director Cheryl Cepalak, Zach Moore and Mary Burgard. He extended another warm welcome to Director Carol Jenkins and encouraged anyone to reach out to him with any ideas.

He stated the SRC has relevance to the Vocational Rehabilitation program and feels it is underutilized. Ideas and constructive criticism are also instructive for moving forward.

Would like to get more reminders out about upcoming meetings.

Adjournment
The meeting was adjourned by Chair Magalnick at 11:25 a.m.

Next Meeting: March 22, 2023**