New Mexico Commission for the Blind

State Rehabilitation Council

Minutes (FINAL)

August 10, 2021 - 9:00 AM

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:04 AM.

2. Roll Call and Introduction of New Members

Present were Jim Babb, Katharine Chavez, Craig Cooper, Deborah Dominguez-Clark, Peggy Hayes, Mario Hooee, Coby Livingstone, Paul Luttrell, Daphne Mitchell, and Greg Trapp. Lila Mae Martinez joined at 9:27 AM, Bernadine Chavez joined at 9:29 AM, Paula Seanez joined at 9:33 AM, and Yolanda Montoya-Cordova joined at 9:49 AM.

Mr. Trapp introduced Ms. Dominguez-Clark as a member of the SRC, saying she is the director of Special Education for New Mexico. Ms. Dominguez-Clark stated that she was very excited to be here and advocate for her students. Mr. Trapp thanked her for joining the SRC.

3. Introduction of Guests and Staff

Guests present were Jim Salas, Deputy Director for Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living; Lucy Mallahan, Orientation Center Director; Kevin Romero, Deputy Director for Finance and Administration; Kelly Burma, Skills Center Coordinator; and Audrey Trujillo, IT Manager. Also present was Commissioner Urja Lansing.

4. Approval of possible changes to the order of the agenda and deletion of agenda items.

Mr. Trapp said there were no changes to the agenda.

5. Approval of Minutes of Regular Meeting of June 22, 2021

Vice-Chair Babb made a motion to approve the minutes as presented. Mario Hooee seconded the motion. The Chair asked for a roll call vote. The minutes were approved unanimously, with Jim Babb, Katharine Chavez, Craig Cooper, Deborah Dominguez-Clark, Kaity Ellis, Peggy Hayes, Mario Hooee, Coby Livingstone (who the secretary said signed yes), and Paul Luttrell all voting yes. Bernadine Chavez, Lila Mae Martinez, Paula Seanez and Yolanda Montoya Cordova were absent for this vote. Daphne Mitchell and Greg Trapp are ex officio and did not vote. Executive Director Trapp explained that absent members do not need to be called on for a voice vote. Mr. Trapp said he clarified that question with John Kreienkamp from the Attorney General's office. Mr. Trapp also said that they would need to monitor when absent members join the meeting.

6. Client Assistance Program Report, Bernadine Chavez

This item was taken later in the meeting.

7. Statewide Independent Living Council Report, Coby Livingstone

Miss Livingstone reported that the Statewide Independent Living Council is still waiting for the governor's office to make appointments to the SILK and that the Coordinator is trying as best she can to move things along. She stated there is nothing else to report.

8. Section 121 Project Report, Paula Seanez

This item was taken later in the meeting.

9. Workforce Board Report, Yolanda Montoya-Cordova

This item was taken later in the meeting.

10. Chair Report, Peggy Hayes

Chairwoman Hayes stated that she had a few things she would like to talk about. The Chair's first item she brought to the council's attention was a bill to make medical devices accessible to those in the blind community. She stated the bill is in partnership with the National Federation of the Blind. The secretary asked if it was in the United States Congress or the State Legislature, and the Chair indicated it was in the U.S. Congress. The Chair explained that more information about this bill could be found at the National Federation of the Blind website, nfb.org. The Chair then explained how she was excited to see the new Commission for The Blind website, and that she thought it worked quite well. Mr. Trapp said that Real Time Solutions designed the website and explained he believes the website is up-to-date with relevant information.

11. Director's Report, Greg Trapp

a. Major Trends and Developments, Greg Trapp, Executive Director

Mr. Trapp thanked the newest Council member, Deborah Dominguez Clark, for joining the council, saying it was great to have her on board. He highlighted the work between the Commission for The Blind and the New Mexico Public Education Department, saying how the two agencies need to coordinate services; adding that Kaity Ellis serves on the IDEA State Advisory Panel.

Mr. Trapp discussed COVID-19, saying that he was concerned about the Delta variant and that things would be getting worse before they got better. He said he would go into a more detailed discussion when the Commission's response to the COVID-19 agenda item is presented.

Mr. Trapp stated that he had heard that the White House had received three names for the Rehabilitation Services Administration Commissioner position. He said that he was sure that they were being vetted, and that the vetting was a long process.

Mr. Trapp said that the State of New Mexico has ended the mandatory telework requirement, and that Commission employees began to report physically to work on July 26, adding that some essential employees had been reporting to their offices all along.

Mr. Trapp gave an update on the NFB-Newsline system and local Newsline, describing how the two systems work. Mr. Trapp said the NFB-Newsline system includes the Albuquerque Journal, the Deming Headlight, the Farmington Daily Times, the Las Cruces Sun News, and the Roswell Daily Record. He said he is still pushing to get the Navajo Times placed on NFB-Newsline. He said he thought the NFB-Newsline system provides good geographic coverage of the state. Mr. Trapp said the local Newsline system has the Gallup Independent and the Alamogordo paper, and that the local system reads more of the Albuquerque Journal including grocery and drug store ads.

Mr. Trapp discussed the Commission for The Blind's potential to be monitored by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, saying that announcements as to what agencies will be monitored will likely be made in the fall. Mr. Trapp said that the DVR monitoring report has been released, and that it can inform the agency as to what to expect when the Commission is monitored. Mr. Trapp said that the monitoring is focused, meaning that it does not cover all of the possible areas listed in the Monitoring Technical Assistance Guide. Mr. Trapp said the DVR report focused on non-delegable responsibilities, the quality of employment placements, cooperative agreements, contracts, and internal controls. Mr. Trapp said that the Commission was very diligent in making sure the agency is compliant, and that the agency has brought its fiscal expert, Mr. Seymour Levy, who was a former fiscal specialist at the Rehabilitation Services Administration, to perform a mock monitoring of the Commission. He said that Mr. Levy will be looking to the DVR monitoring report to focus his mock monitoring of the Commission. Mr. Trapp said that the Commission has a cooperative agreement in place with the Public Education Department. Mr. Trapp said that he is waiting for a signature from the New Mexico Department of health on a memorandum of understanding, and that he is hoping to get the signature before the start of the federal fiscal year.

Mr. Trapp said that there are a couple of bills in Congress that redefined competitive integrated employment. He stated it was very controversial and that he would keep the council apprised of any developments. He said that current regulations require that Commission placements be in competitive settings, which exclude many placements in community rehabilitation programs.

Ms. Burma noted that Paula Seanez and Lila Mae Martinez had joined the meeting, and Ms. Ellis noted that Bernadine Chavez had also joined the meeting. Mr. Trapp asked Ms. Chavez and Ms. Seanez to give their reports.

Ms. Bernadine Chavez said that she had a brief report. She said that during the last quarter the Client Assistance program received three calls from commission consumers. Two were informational calls. The other call was from a client wanting assistance addressing miscommunication issues.

Ms. Paula Seanez said she was with the Navajo Nation, and she reported that the Section 121 programs are still waiting to receive notification of their grant allotment. She also reported that the Pueblo communities remain closed to the public but serve their clients remotely. Ms. Seanez reported that the Navajo Nation is open at this time. The Navajo Nation office is screening clients and applicants for COVID-19 symptoms when they schedule an appointment, and staff are discouraged from traveling.

b. Administration and Finance, Kevin Romero

Mr. Romero reported that the new website went live as of June 30, and he encouraged members to check it out and provide any feedback that they may have.

Mr. Romero said that as of August 9 they began working with the Commission’s fiscal expert to perform a mock monitoring of the Commission as if RSA was doing the monitoring. He said this mock monitoring is reviewing the Commission’s federal reporting including to make sure it is timely and accurate. He said another area of review is the Commission’s contracts and agreements, including contract monitoring and internal controls.

Mr. Trapp said that the mock monitoring is not an easy process, and that he appreciates Mr. Romero and Ms. Gonzales and their team for being willing to take this on. He said that the Commission has done this mock monitoring over the years, and that it has helped the agency to be in better compliance with what are very strict federal fiscal rules. Mr. Romero said it was useful to get that outside look to see if there was something that the agency did not think of or had not planned for.

Mr. Romero said that the agency is doing final analysis on its Federal Fiscal Year 21 grant funds, looking at the availability of carryover and reallotment. Mr. Romero said the Commission has reached out to DVR to see if it would be able to use Federal Fiscal Year 21 funds that the Commission might not be able to use. He said that the purpose was to maximize the use of the funds in the state prior to offering them up to the federal government. Mr. Romero said that spending went down due to COVID and the lockdowns. He said he thought other states would be in the same situation.

Mr. Romero reported on the closing of the state fiscal year, saying that for State Fiscal Year 21 the Commission spent $12,256,583 out of the $13,640,800 budget or 89.9 percent of the budget, leaving a remaining balance of $1.7 million. Mr. Romero said that the Commission has begun work on the SFY21 audit, saying that the entrance conference was held with the Office of the State Auditor on August 2. He said the audit would be conducted mostly remotely.

Mr. Romero reported on human resources, saying that the Commission currently has 21 vacant positions. He said that 12 of the vacant positions are exempt other, and that nine are classified, giving the Commission a 23.2 percent vacancy rate. He said that the agency is actively working on filling five of these positions, which would give the Commission a vacancy rate of 17.7 percent. Mr. Romero said that overall the Commission is in a good position, and is financially stable and secure.

Ms. Hayes congratulated Mr. Romero, saying she worked in the federal government for 32 years, and that she knows how difficult it can be to keep all of the records and make everything happen on time. Mr. Romero said that he had the advantage of having a stellar staff and great leadership from the Commission and Executive Director Trapp and having great members on his team.

Mr. Romero concluded by saying that he was working on how to conduct per diem payments, and that he wanted to reduce the time from the meeting to payment.

c. Independent Living and Vocational Rehabilitation, Jim Salas

Mr. Salas reported on staffing issues, saying he had a counselor vacancy in the Las Vegas office, and an assistive technology vacancy in the Las Cruces office. He said that he would be conducting interviews for the Las Cruces position. Mr. Salas said that the Commission also has a vacancy for a business consultant in the Business Enterprise Program, and that the Commission has conducted interviews but not found any appropriate candidates. He said that the Commission has a vacant independent living teacher position in Albuquerque, and that he is reviewing a list from the State Personnel Office. Mr. Salas said that he has had a very difficult time filling reader/driver positions, saying that two reader/drivers retired this year and that he is emphasizing benefits in the advertisements. Mr. Salas said that the Commission yesterday hired a new reader/driver, but is still looking for another reader/driver.

Mr. Salas reported on the BEP program, saying that Financial Relief and Restoration Act payments were in process of being made to the BEP venders. He said that $20 million was appropriated, and that $215,297 came to the New Mexico Commission for the Blind. He said that the Commission has received the funding, and is now gathering the required documentation from the venders to document their losses and any offsetting compensation they might have received from other sources. Mr. Salas reported on the Kirtland facility, saying that the contract was being reviewed

Mr. Salas reported on the independent living program, saying that staff was in the office and phasing in moving from a remote program to being back in the office. He said that the Commission has in place protocol for protecting staff and consumers for any in-person contact. He said it is really difficult to deliver independent living services remotely.

Mr. Salas reported on the employment numbers, saying that for Federal Fiscal Year 21, the agency so far has placed 16 consumers in competitive and integrated employment and 2 persons in self-employment, for a total of 18, with an average wage of $27.90 per hour. Mr. Salas reported on the state fiscal year numbers, saying that the agency had placed 19 consumers in competitive and integrated employment and 2 in self-employment, for a total of 21, with an average wage of $28.23 an hour. Mr. Salas proceeded to describe the types of high-wage placements that have pulled up the average hourly salary, including a lawyer making $72 an hour, a management analyst making $57 an hour, and a special education teacher making $50 an hour. He said that an average wage of $15 to 17 per hour is more typical. Mr. Salas said that 18 consumers were currently in employment status, and that he is projecting that a couple of additional individuals will be in employment status by the end of September. Mr. Salas described the various categories of employment that have been filled during the year, and the different types of employers.

Ms. Hayes asked how many of the persons closed were employed at the time that they came to the Commission, and Mr. Salas said that this used to be an item that was captured in the Standards and Indicators data prior to the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014. He said that usually about 70 to 80 persons are unemployed when they come to the Commission for services. Ms. Mitchell added that 4 or 5 of the 21 consumers were employed when they came to the Commission for services.

Mr. Babb said that the pandemic has hammered BEP programs across the nation, and asked when it might get back to normal in New Mexico. Mr. Salas said that the agency was worried about the traditional system of vending routs and food service systems in government buildings and how many employees might return to those buildings because of telework. Mr. Salas discussed the situation at Sandia where there are 157 vending machines but hardly anyone in the buildings, adding that he was not sure where that would be heading in the future.

Ms. Hayes asked if the BEP program has looked at using portable food carts, and Mr. Salas said that it has been considered as a part of the regular vocational rehabilitation program.

Mr. Trapp said that Yolanda Montoya-Cordova had joined the meeting, and he suggested that she give her Workforce Board report, noting that during the last partners meeting she had highlighted the Commission’s placement wages.

Ms. Montoya-Cordova apologized for being late. She said that the partners had met on Friday, and that meet as a part of the Combined State Plan. She said that they are currently taking stock of the contributions of the partners towards meeting the goals and activities of the Combined State Plan. She described the required partners including vocational rehabilitation, and the other programs that make up the Combined State Plan such as TANF and Aging and Long Term Services. She said she highlighted the work of the Commission during the partner’s meeting and the wages the Commission helps consumers obtain, saying it is not typical and quite commendable. Ms. Montoya-Cordova discussed the importance of finding quality jobs for people with disabilities and said the partner’s group would be working on how to accomplish the goal of finding quality jobs and how to find metrics related to demographics and quality employment. She said that the partners and the Workforce Board were in the process of doing community input sessions around a proposal of the State Workforce Development board to establish two local area workforce systems instead of the current four local workforce systems which are currently defined as North, Central, Southwest, and East. She said that one scenario is called the Rio Grande corridor with the counties from Santa Fe down to Dona Anna considered the Rio Grande corridor, with the balance being the rural communities. She said the other scenario is called the split state, which splits the state based on the 17 counties in the north and the 16 counties in the south. Ms. Montoya-Cordova said that the Commission’s Farmington vocational rehabilitation counselor participated in the first session in the north. She said that the second session is set for the 18th, and that additional sessions are planned for September but that they may need to go virtual given the Delta variant. Ms. Montoya-Cordova said Workforce was creating a journey mapping system looking at the experiences of the job-seeker and businesses and how they are engaging with the workforce system across the state. She said that New Mexico is the recipient of a Workforce Quality Initiative WDQI grant that is intended to look at data that cuts across the workforce system and that makes the data accessible. She talked about unemployment applications and saying that about 40,000 persons were on extended benefits. She concluded by talking about Ready New Mexico that connects callers with career advisors. She said Ready New Mexico could be accessed at ReadyNM.gov or at 800303-3599.

Mr. Trapp thanked Ms. Montoya-Cordova for mentioning the Commission and its quality employment outcomes saying that the Commission really focuses on quality employment and measurable skills gain, and she thanked Mr. Trapp and said that she would need to be st3epping away for another meeting but that she would try to rejoin the meeting later.

Mr. Luttrell said that he called the Ready New Mexico 800 number and that he was very impressed with how it was set up, and Ms. Montoya-Cordova thanked Mr. Luttrell and said that they have had some really great feedback on the program and she talked about their marketing program.

d. Orientation Center, Lucy Mallahan

Ms. Mallahan said that the Orientation Center was back in session with in-person classes and has been since Monday, June 28. She said that the Center currently has four students. She said that all of the students were living in the dorm. She said that they were expecting two more students, and that dorm occupancy was limited to six students. She said that having six students allows each student to have a private bathroom.

Ms. Mallahan reported that Leisa Sek has been hired as the new Center secretary. Ms. Mallahan reported that Jessica Bartenbach has taken a position as the supervisor of the orientation center in Nebraska. She said that her last day in New Mexico was July 30 and that she is sad for New Mexico but that she knows she will do great in Nebraska.

Ms. Mallahan reported that the Center has an open Blindness Skills Instructor for the industrial arts position. Ms. Mallahan encouraged members to help recruit for the position.

e. Skills Center, Kelly Burma

Ms. Burma reported that the Skills Center began phasing from telework to in-person work on July 26. She said that the Skills Center is transitioning from STEP to regular students, but that some of the STEP students continued to receive services for an additional week beyond the close of the STEP program. She said that they are gearing up for the school year. She said the Technology for Children program is continuing to support remote instruction.

Mr. Trapp asked Ms. Dominguez-Clark if she had any comments she wanted to add as the Special Education Director, and Ms. Dominguez-Clark said that schools on and bells are ringing, and that many schools started last week and that APS will start tomorrow. She said that there was a guidance document on re-entry and that they are getting many questions about masks. She said that there was an exemption for students with disabilities. She said that they were trying to get as many students back in school as possible and to start back up in this new reality. She said that most schools were in person, and that some of the larger schools have created an option for remote instruction.

Ms. Burma asked about the shortage of special education teachers and how that was effecting special education, and Ms. Dominguez-Clark said that there is certainly a shortage of special education teachers and she described activities designed to increase the number of special education teachers in the state.

Ms. Ellis asked about the re-entry guidance, and Ms. Dominguez-Clark said it was on the Public Education Department web page.

12. Unfinished Business

a. Update on Pre-Employment Transition Services, Jim Salas and Daphne Mitchell

Mr. Trapp began by describing Pre-Employment Transition Services for the new members, saying it is the mandate to reserve and spend 15 percent of our vocational rehabilitation grant on students. Mr. Trapp briefly described rules around required and authorized Pre-ETS services and the definition of student. He said that during the next meeting the Commission would forecast its ability to provide all of the required Pre-ETS services.

Mr. Salas said that the STEP program is part of Pre-ETS, and that we would be discussing STEP as our next agenda item. Mr. Salas asked Ms. Mitchell to report on the REC 5 and NMSBVI contracts.

Ms. Mitchell said the Commission has contracts with the Regional Educational Cooperative and with the New Mexico School for the Blind and visually Impaired. She said that she is having meetings with NMSBVI to talk about services later in the week. She said that REC 5 continues to provide services to students who are not also NMSBVI students. She said that services are being provided virtually. Ms. Mitchell said that the VR counselors are also providing Pre-ETS services to eligible students. Ms. Mitchell talked about other Pre-ETS activities.

Mr. Trapp said that the Pre-ETS reserve amount is about $750,000 annually. He said that the Commission and other blind agencies find it difficult to spend the entire Pre-ETS reserve. Mr. Trapp said that the Commission was on track to spend the reserve, but that the pandemic impacted on the ability of the Commission to meet the reserve requirement. Mr. Trapp said that the Commission is looking at relinquishing funds as a part of the reallotment process, noting that it is not possible to relinquish only Pre-ETS funds. Mr. Trapp said that the Pre-ETS requirement is inordinately complex.

b. Report on the 2021 Students in Transition to Employment Program, Jim Salas,

Mr. Salas began by describing the STEP program for the new members, saying STEP consisted of a residential program at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo, a program at the Skills Center in Albuquerque, and a community program in the rest of the state. Mr. Salas said that it was predominately work, and that it mostly took place in June and July. Mr. Salas said that STEP 2020 was predominately a virtual program with three students who had summer jobs. Mr. Salas described the current STEP program, saying that the vaccine has allowed for more of a return to normal, and that there were 25 students who were working and 5 who were receiving virtual training. Mr. Salas said that finding job coaches was very difficult this year.

Ms. Mitchell reported that a total of 30 students participated in STEP. She said that of the 25 students who had work placements, two placements were virtual. She said that 23 students were in a physical workplace and that they were able to navigate the COVID protocols. Ms. Mitchell reported on the types of jobs held by students, including a student who worked virtually for the Library for the Blind and Print Disabled.

Mr. Salas added that the Commission pays the Santa Fe living wage across the state for all students, which this summer was $12.32 per hour.

Ms. Kathrine Chavez thanked the Commission for providing the STEP program and that she had worked at the UNM Child Care Center saying she was a STEP student and that it helped pave her way.

Ms. Hayes asked how many STEP students had job coaches, and Ms. Mitchell said that eight students utilized a job coach. Ms. Mallahan said she thought this number might have been increased because the Orientation Center did not have STEP students, and that Center staff would normally provide such assistance.

Ms. Burma said that her staff also visited jobsites to help out with technology and Orientation and Mobility support. She also talked about addressing family safety concerns during the pandemic.

Ms. Hayes asked about job coaches for adults, and Mr. Trapp said that job coaches could also be complicated because of the Supported Employment rules and that he is working with the Department of Health to revise the Memorandum of Understanding between the Commission and Department of Health. Mr. Trapp asked Ms. Mitchell to comment further, and Ms. Mitchell said that the Commission has always provided job coaches for all consumers, including those who were not Supported Employment consumers. She said that the Commission has used the Community Rehabilitation Programs to obtain job coaches, and she discussed how job coaches are paid and recruited.

c. Update on Provision of Services during the Pandemic, Greg Trapp, Jim Salas, Lucy Mallahan, Daphne Mitchell, and Kelly Burma

Mr. Trapp talked about how the Commission is following public health orders around vaccine, testing, and mask wearing requirements. He said that he and Ms. Burma are still participating in the Disability Access and Functional Needs Group, and that the DAFN Group is meeting more often after having ramped down its meeting schedule

Mr. Salas talked about how building visitors are being screened, and how contact information is maintained in case contract tracing is necessary. He said that the Commission is now conducting more in-person services, and that the Commission has procedures in place for how those visits are handled.

Mr. Trapp talked about the seriousness of the Coronavirus, saying he strongly disagreed with those persons who think it is no more dangerous than the seasonal flu. Mr. Trapp said one BEP vender has died from COVID, one BEP contractor has died, a close family member of an employee has died, and that a former RSA liaison to the Commission has died from. Mr. Trapp said that in his entire life he has never known a person who has died from the seasonal flu.

Ms. Burma talked about how the Skills Center is screening visitors. She talked about how building doors are locked, and how the agency is looking at installing an intercom system to help with screening. She also talked about Creating Options, saying they would be meeting in-person and that she described the safety procedures that are in place.

Mr. Trapp added that the Albuquerque office has just installed door chimes with proximity sensors at each of the building entrances. He said that the building is locked because of the difficulty of screening homeless persons who might want to come into the building. He said that the proximity chimes allow blind persons who come up to the door to not have to search for a door bell, and to be responded to quickly.

Ms. Mitchell said that the VR counselors are also using the COVID screening form. She said that it is being emphasized to consumers that they need to have scheduled appointments. She said that in-person meetings are also being held outside of the office.

Ms. Mallahan said the Orientation Center is limited to six students at the dorm and an additional two students, which is about half of the Center’s normal capacity. She said that surfaces are being sanitized between classes, and that hand washing is required. She said that masks are also required except when instruction is taking place outside. Ms. Mallahan said that all students are vaccinated. Ms. Mallahan said that the Center has a large supply of PPE, and that UV lights were installed in the ventilation system in March. She said that screening of staff and students is taking place daily and that the Center will continue to follow all applicable public health orders.

Ms. Ellis asked what the Commission is doing to make sure that consumers have accessible information about the virus and vaccine and access to transportation, and Mr. Trapp said that the Commission continues to have a COVID category on Newsline. He said that Newsline posts stories that are new or have critical information, and that he tries to find stories that also offer good news or allow for some proactive action. Mr. Trapp said that he also passes on information to the NFB Secretary for distribution to the NFB list. Mr. Trapp said he is also aware that there is an information overload and that he does not want to provide so much information that it is ignored. Regarding transportation, Mr. Trapp talked about the GoGoGrandparent contract saying that there were no takers. He said that he thought people have been creative in finding access to the vaccine. He said that the vaccine is now available at local pharmacies on a walk-in basis and that he does not see any need for additional special transportation assistance. Mr. Trapp said that the agency is continuing to monitor web pages for accessibility.

Ms. Ellis asked what the Commission was doing to enable blind employees to access the vaccine, and Mr. Trapp said that the Commission worked to obtain 1A priority status. Mr. Trapp said that the agency allowed employees to get the vaccine on work time and that the rationale was that the vaccine was very scarce and that there was no option for when the vaccine could be obtained. Mr. Trapp said that the situation is now different and that the vaccine is available whenever a person might want. He said that the Commission would work with any employee who was having difficulty accessing the vaccine because of geographic reasons.

Mr. Romero added that the agency would work with an employee if it was not possible for that employee to get the vaccine outside of work hours. Mr. Romero said he thought the Commission had one of the lowest rates of unvaccinated employees of any state agency.

Mr. Salas said that the agency is providing reasonable accommodations to assist employees who are not vaccinated to receive the required weekly testing.

Mr. Salas talked about Vault, how it was accessible, and how the Vault testing process worked.

d. Report on Comprehensive Statewide Assessment, Greg Trapp, Jim Salas, and Kelly Burma

Mr. Trapp said that the Comprehensive Statewide Assessment process was ongoing and that information is still being gathered. He said that some of the stakeholders meetings are still needing to take place. Mr. Trapp said that it is the Delta variant that is driving things. He said that the medical literature includes scientists who are questioning whether herd immunity can ever be achieved because of how rapidly the virus is mutating, and that we may be dealing with this for years to come. Mr. Trapp said that in terms of the state plan that the agency will certainly be dealing with the virus for the next couple of years, which is the time frame of the plan. He said the agency will need to provide mitigation for the loss of Braille instruction and for the loss of Orientation & Mobility instruction, and especially for school students. He said that the agency has been providing needed in-person instruction for consumers because there may be a limited window.

Mr. Trapp said that he thought that the agency would see increased telework opportunities which is good, but that it might also mean decreased opportunities for BEP venders. He said telework could also open more opportunities for blind persons in rural areas.

Mr. Trapp said that the medical literature has also shown that 14 percent of persons hospitalized with COVID have new cases of diabetes, and that some persons who are not hospitalized will also sustain new cases of diabetes as a result of the virus. Mr. Trapp said this will result in additional persons who are blind due to diabetic retinopathy and need Commission services. Mr. Trapp talked about long haul COVID, saying it will mean that the Commission will see more consumers with additional disabilities who need more complicated services. Mr. Trapp said that studies are showing that about one out of every three individuals have symptoms that last more than three months, and that about one out of every five have symptoms that last more than six months. Mr. Trapp said that for the regular flue only about ten percent of persons have symptoms that last more than two weeks.

Mr. Trapp also talked about a study that looked at why persons with disabilities were electing to not work. He said that in 2016 only 26 percent of persons with disabilities were employed compared to 72 percent of persons without a disability who were employed. Mr. Trapp said that these numbers are often confused and that persons often say that there is a 70 percent unemployment rate for persons who are blind. Mr. Trapp said that this is not correct, and that this 70 percent number is actually the workforce participation rate. He said that the unemployment rate for persons who are blind is actually around 15 percent, which he said is still too high, but for persons who are blind and actually looking for work the actual unemployment number is about 15 percent. Mr. Trapp said that the challenge is to try to find ways to encourage more persons with disabilities to become employed.

Ms. Burma talked about the public meeting that would be held in conjunction with the National Federation of the Blind state convention. Ms. Burma said that they would be scheduling meetings with key stake holders, and Mr. Trapp said that he was planning to place an item about the need to establish community rehabilitation programs on the agenda of the September 1 meeting of the New Mexico Council for Purchasing from Persons with Disabilities. Mr. Trapp said the public meeting during the National Federation of the Blind state convention would be on August 27. He said there was a poor turnout for the prior four public meetings, but that he thought the August 27 public meeting held in conjunction with the National Federation of the Blind state convention would satisfy the public meeting requirement.

Mr. Cooper asked about the study about why persons with disabilities were not seeking employment, and Mr. Trapp said he would email a report on the study to the Council. Mr. Trapp said it was an important question, and that the Commission should encourage more persons who are blind to work. Mr. Trapp said that there are two very odd trends with persons who are younger not becoming employed until later in life which is called the failure to launch syndrome, and on the other side of the equation we are seeing persons who are older who are working longer.

The council broke for lunch at 12:10 and returned at 12:32. Mr. Trapp asked Ms. Burma to post on the screen share that the Council was on lunch break and would return at 12:32.

e. Update on Apartment Construction at the Orientation Center, Lucy Mallahan

Ms. Mallahan said the apartment construction was beginning this week. She said that rock has been brought in to build the property above the flood plain and that the rock is being compacted. She said that the apartment should be turnkey ready by the end of February. Ms. Mallahan said that the Orientation Center is also getting a key fob for building access, and that the apartment will also have key fob access.

Ms. Ellis asked about the wheelchair accessibility of the apartment, and Ms. Mallahan said the Governor’s Commission on Disability conducted an accessibility survey of the existing building and looked at the plans for the apartment. She said they recommended only some minor changes. She said that one apartment will be completely wheelchair accessible with a roll-in shower and accessible kitchen, but that all of the apartments are wheelchair accessible, along with the common area. She said that the 3-foot elevation of the property required a ramp that is 36 feet long.

Ms. Ellis also asked about accessibility for persons who are Deaf or hard of hearing, and Ms. Mallahan said that the smoke alarms have both strobe lights and sound.

13. New Business

a. Report on Community Rehabilitation Program Response to Needs Assessment Survey, Paul Luttrell

Mr. Luttrell said he was unable to spend as much time as he would have liked due to a family commitment. Mr. Luttrell said he was able to reach out to several different CRPs and other entities about the survey. He said he reached out to Goodwill, Adelante, ARCA, and Tresco and that he would have more to report in September.

b. Approval of Goals and Priorities, Greg Trapp and Kelly Burma

Mr. Trapp said that one of the most significant areas of partnership between the Commission and the Council is the development and adoption of the goals and priorities. He said that the discussion was started in the March meeting when Ms. Burma read over all of the goals and priorities, and that the discussion was continued during the June 22 meeting, and that he developed proposed goals and priorities based on the discussion during the June meeting.

Ms. Burma read proposed goal and priority “h” as follows:

h. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by using the Orientation Center to provide training for adults and transition students that is designed to remediate or mitigate any deficiencies in skills that may be related to the Pandemic and take advantage of new telework opportunities.

Ms. Bernadine Chavez said she thinks it sounds good but makes it look like it will only be addressed through the Orientation Center and Mr. Trapp said that there was a similar goal and priority for the Skills Center and for special education students. Ms. Katharine Chavez said she thought it looked good.

Ms. Burma read proposed goal and priority “j” as follows:

j. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes of transition consumers by providing enhanced Pre-Employment Transition Services, including assistive technology where appropriate as a part of an Individualized Plan for Employment, by providing assistive technology through the Technology for Children Program, by conducting increased outreach activities, by conducting educational activities to meet the specific needs of transition students, by increasing proficient use of Braille and Braille math, and by providing services designed to remediate or mitigate any deficiencies in these areas that may be related to the Pandemic.

Ms. Burma asked if family choice and the trend towards placement in non-traditional needed to be included in the goal and priority, and Mr. Trapp said he did not think it needed to be included because the Commission would work to address those concerns. Mr. Trapp described the issue, saying that more families are placing blind students in charter schools, and that such schools are less able to meet the Braille and Orientation & Mobility needs of students who are blind. He said that blind children are also being placed in private schools, which are even less able to meet the educational needs of students who are blind.

Ms. Hayes asked how much training students receive, and Ms. Burma said it depends on the particular piece of equipment. She said that the Technology for Children program tries to provide the same equipment that the student is using in the school. She said that in the Skills Center they are able to provide training as a Pre-ETS service, and that they train the teacher along with the student whenever possible.

Mr. Cooper said he was glad the goal and priority included an emphasis on Braille, and that reading and writing are so critical to employment and that sentence structure, punctuation, and capitalization are not learned with an audio book.

Ms. Ellis asked about transition services, and Mr. Trapp said that this goal and priority does address the provision of transition services, and that transition services is probably the top priority of the agency. Mr. Trapp said that transition has always been a crucial issue and that the Commission works to transition students from high school to college seamlessly. Mr. Trapp described how the Commission provides technology to high school juniors and seniors so that they can be proficient with it when they start college. Mr. Trapp said that Ms. Burma provides technology to even younger students and that they want to complement what the school is doing.

Ms. Katharine Chavez asked about conducting increased outreach activities. Mr. Trapp said that the Commission does have a goal and priority on outreach. Mr. Trapp asked Ms. Mitchell to talk about REC 5, and Ms. Mitchell talked about how REC 5 has contacts with different school systems and is very good about referring students who may not be on the Commission’s radar. Mr. Trapp said that outreach is not allowable under Pre-ETS, but that the agreement does have an item for administrative costs. Ms. Burma also talked about how the Technology for Children program helps with outreach, saying that the program gives the teachers a reason to work with the Commission. Mr. Trapp said that the Technology for Children has been an important part of the Commission’s outreach for about 17 years, and that the Commission has distributed about $1.4 million in assistive technology to children who are blind over those years, and that the technology is focused on literacy. Ms. Mitchell added that the REC 5 activities also focus on the category of potentially eligible students under Pre-ETS.

m. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers and potential vocational rehabilitation consumers, including using it for the provision of services to transition students.

Ms. Burma read proposed goal and priority “p” as follows:

p. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes through the provision of increased telework employment opportunities, including opportunities in rural portions of the state.

Mr. Trapp said that this was a significant opportunity for the employment of consumers that did not exist prior to the pandemic, and that it also goes back to the issue of persons who are blind and elect to not work.

Mr. Trapp said he would like a motion to approve the recommended goals and priorities just in case the Council did not have a quorum at its September 14 meeting.

Mr. Babb made a motion to approve the goals and priorities as read, and Miss Catherine Chavez seconded the motion. The Chair asked for a roll call vote, and the goals and priorities were approved unanimously, with Jim Babb, Bernadine Chavez, Katharine Chavez, Craig Cooper, Kaity Ellis, Peggy Hayes, Mario Hooee, Coby Livingstone, Paul Luttrell, Paula Seanez all voting yes. Deborah Dominguez-Clark and Yolanda Montoya Cordova were absent for this vote. Lila Mae Martinez was absent for this vote but rejoined the meeting later. Daphne Mitchell and Greg Trapp are ex officio and did not vote.

There was additional discussion of whether to create a goal and priority that would encourage the involvement of the family in the vocational rehabilitation process, and Mr. Trapp said that he would not support adding such a goal and priority. He said that the family was an important resource and that there was an Institute on Rehabilitation Issues document on how families were a resource in the vocational rehabilitation process, and he said that the family is a natural support and can be very valuable. Mr. Trapp said that the family can also be a barrier and that the Commission must sometimes provide social worker services to help with family issues. Ms. Hayes said she did not support adding a goal and priority involving the family, and Ms. Bernadine Chavez said she also did not support adding such a goal and priority. Ms. Bernadine Chavez said that the services were delivered to the individual consumer, and that it is up to the consumer to decide whether or not to involve the family.

c. Approval of Council Input to Combined State Plan, Greg Trapp and Jim Salas

Mr. Trapp said that an important contribution of the Council is the Council’s input on the state plan. He said that sometimes the agency and SRC disagree on things, and that in such circumstances the Council can articulate that disagreement, such as might be the case if the agency was under an order of selection and the Council was in disagreement. Mr. Trapp suggested another area of input might be input such as the Council wishing to make some aspect of providing services as the agency comes out of the pandemic a priority. Mr. Trapp suggested that the current Council input be sent to the SRC members.

There was no action taken on this item, and the item was moved to the September 14, 2021 meeting.

d. Discussion of Agency Strategic Plan, Greg Trapp

Mr. Trapp said that the strategic plan is a very important document that is submitted each September as a part of the Request Budget. Mr. Trapp said that the current strategic plan is valid until October of next year, but that we were in a whole new world and that it does not make sense to continue with a strategic plan that has been outdated by the pandemic. Mr. Trapp said that his plan is to have a revised strategic plan approved by the Commission on August 26. Mr. Trapp asked the Council if members had any ideas as to how the strategic plan should be revised. Mr. Trapp summarized the current strategic plan and asked the Council what we as the agency should be thinking about over the next 3 to 5 years. He asked how services should be provided and what should be anticipated.

Ms. Hayes said that Mr. Trapp did a lot of work to keep blind persons informed and to help them to get the vaccine, and whether that work should be included.

Mr. Trapp said that was a good question, and he highlighted some of the Commission's work in partnership with other agencies related to information access and accessible software. He said that could be included in the strategic plan. Mr. Trapp said that there is a changed work world and that the agency can anticipate consumers with more complex disabilities and more individuals who are blind as a result of the pandemic. He said he thought those pandemic-related items should be a part of the strategic plan.

Ms. Livingstone said that Lisa McNiven has some good ideas for local and state communications and emergency preparedness. Mr. Trapp said that the agency could look at the after-action report which Ms. Burma helped write. He said that the disaster recovery portion of the strategic plan is focused on the agency itself, but that he would take a look at the report.

Ms. Katharine Chavez talked about the portion of the strategic plan that mentioned the increasing number of persons with Optic Nerve Hypoplasia, and she suggested that it would be a place where information could be added about increasing disabilities as a result of the pandemic, and Mr. Trapp agreed.

Mr. Babb asked how many years the plan covered, and Mr. Trapp said most strategic plans were 3 to 5 years. Mr. Trapp said that he is proposing to renew the strategic plan and that the agency has had in the past public meetings on the plan. Mr. Trapp said he thought a three-year extension would be good. Mr. Trapp said that this plan has been used as a model for other agencies by DFA. He said he thought the strategic plan was good, and that it only needed to be enhanced.

Ms. Hayes said a lot could happen in the next three years, and Mr. Trapp said that none of us anticipated the pandemic and how it would change the whole world. Mr. Trapp said he thought the Commission could be in the same position in another year due to the Delta variant, comparing the current pandemic to the 1918 Flu.

Ms. Burma said she thought the goals and priorities adopted by the Council would be a good guide for the strategic plan, and Mr. Trapp said that the Goals and priorities were actually a part of the strategic plan and that it would include the goals and priorities just adopted by the Council.

14. Council Open Discussion

Ms. Hayes asked for open discussion.

Mr. Trapp said how much he appreciated the Council’s work and that the Council has great and valuable ideas.

Ms. Ellis said she thought that under the current climate it would be a good idea for the Council to get an update on the cultural competency and sensitivity training received by the Commission staff, especially given the cultural diversity of the state.

Mr. Trapp agreed with the importance of cultural competency, pointing out the earlier discussion on the importance of the family. Mr. Trapp said that the counselors and managers have attended cultural sensitivity training along with the staff at the Orientation Center.

Mr. Salas and Ms. Mitchell described in detail the cultural competency training that their employees receive, and Mr. Salas and Mr. Trapp said they thought that the independent living teachers could benefit from additional cultural competency training. Mr. Trapp said he thought the cultural competency discussion was valuable.

Ms. Hayes asked where a statement about inclusion and racial equity could be included, and Ms. Burma suggested that it could be place in goal and priority “a,” and Mr. Trapp said he thought that was a good idea.

15. Audience and Public Comments

Commissioner Urja Lansing said that based on all of the discussion it is clear that the Commission does such great work and is in compliance and that she is grateful to all of the SRC members for their work, and she thanked the members for their time and commitment and service to the blind of New Mexico.

16. Date and Location of Next Meeting

The next meetings will be on September 14, 2021, and December 9, 2021. Both of these meetings are scheduled to start at 9 AM and will be virtual.

17. Adjourn

The August 10, 2021 meeting of the SRC was adjourned at 2:48 PM.

Approved and Electronically Signed this 14th Day of September, 2021

Peggy Hayes, Chair

State Rehabilitation Council

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

Minutes respectfully submitted by Secretary Kaity Ellis, edited, and information added by Executive Director Greg Trap