South Carolina Commission for the Blind

1430 Confederate Avenue
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes
June 28, 2022

Notifications of all regular, called, or special meetings are compliant with FOIA requirements, Section 90-4-80.

# Call to Order

Chairperson Johnson called the meeting to order at 11:00 am. The meeting was conducted in person and via Zoom Meeting software.

# Present

Dr. Judy Johnson, Chairperson
Peter Smith, Vice Chairperson
Mary Sonksen, Secretary
Susan John
Cathy Olker
Darline Graham, Commissioner

# Adoption of Agenda

Mary Sonksen made a motion to accept the June 28, 2022, Agenda. It was seconded by Cathy Olker. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Public Comment

Christina Parker said that she had some concerns to address with the Board regarding the Summer Teen program. When asked by Chairperson Johnson if she would like to discuss it publicly or privately, Ms. Parker said that she would like to speak privately with the Board and commissioner. Chairperson Johnson and Commissioner Graham each provided their contact information for Ms. Parker.

# Approval of Minutes

Mary Sonksen made a motion to approve the May 24, 2022, minutes. It was seconded by Susan John. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Commissioner’s Report

## Darline Graham reported:

State Budget – The final budget includes a three percent increase for state employees and a one-time $1,500 bonus for all Full Time Equivalent positions, except agency heads.

Strategic Plan – The senior management team has been working on the Strategic Plan, which must be submitted with the Accountability Report by September 15. A draft of the report will be available for Board review in August.

Attorney – A final candidate has been selected and the agency is working with the Attorney General’s Office to complete this hiring process.

Summer Teen – Beginning June 6, Dr. Thomas Madura, a physics and astronomy professor from San Jose State University, Dr. Carol Christian, an astrophysicist at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, and Noreen Grice, an astronomer and author, led a week-long STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) career exploration lab that uses 3D printing to teach blind and visually impaired students about astronomy and science. The following week, additional students joined the camp for fun and educational activities. Students on the Independence Track participated in self advocacy, independence, and teamwork activities. Students on the Worker Track participated in work-based learning experiences in the Columbia area. Out of an abundance of caution and safety, week three shifted to virtual activities because several students were experiencing Covid-like symptoms. The National Federation of the Blind’s Successful Transitions hosted virtual sessions, including business etiquette, finance and budgeting, post-secondary exploration, living a healthy lifestyle, and others. Students returned for week four in-person. On Monday evening they visited EdVenture Museum. The closing session on Friday, July 1, will feature author and high-impact motivational speaker Chad Foster. Mr. Foster, who lost his sight in his 20s, is a graduate of the University of Tennessee and the Harvard Business School Leadership Program. He wrote a customer management software solution that created job opportunities for hundreds of millions of people, and currently serves as the Senior Director of Worldwide Deal Management at Red Hat, the world’s only multi-billion-dollar open-source software company. Commissioner Graham thanked the staff, interns, and Successful Transitions for their hard work in making the Summer Teen program a success.

Website – Mark Gamble has identified a website design firm that will assist the agency with the development of a new website. It is planned to have a basic design implemented by September.

New Employees – New employees Erica Jenkins, Counselor in Greenville; Theresa Strayhorn, Administrative Assistant in Charleston; Chandler McIntosh, Communications Intern; Kelli McAlhany, Consumer Services Intern; and Naya Battle, Consumer Services Intern; were welcomed to the agency.

# Finance Report

## Matt Daugherty reported:

State Budget - The agency is 92% through the State Fiscal Year. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has utilized 73% of the budget, the Training Center 91%, Transition Services 66%, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) 117%, Prevention of Blindness 39%, Older Blind 100%, Children’s Services 99%, and Administration 73%. Agency spending is on track at 83%. As a result of end-of-the year cleanup, this will change. Dr. Johnson asked when the books would be closed, and Mr. Daugherty replied June 30, adding that cleanup would continue until July 15, or another date specified by the Department of Administration. Susan John asked for clarification regarding the funds budgeted in the Unallocated category. Mr. Daugherty explained that, as part of the cleanup, funds in this area would be moved into other areas as needed. He added that some of the funds in this category were from the carry forward from the previous year.

Federal Grants – The agency is currently working on closing out the 2021 grant, which will happen on September 30; however, spending will continue to be attributed to that grant as appropriate. The Randolph-Sheppard Financial Restoration and Relief Plan was a one-time dollar amount that was fully expended for Blind Licensed Vendors. The VR grant is 60% expended, the Pre-Employment Transition Services portion of the grant is 101% expended (funds over 100% will be applied to the 2022 grant), the Older Blind grant is 88% expended, and the Supported Employment grants are 2% expended. For the 2022 Federal Fiscal Year grant, Supported Employment is 14% expended and Older Blind 50% expended. The agency is working to meet requirements to carry the 2022 grant over to a second year. Cathy Olker asked for clarification on why the Supported Employment (transition) grant was always at zero. Mr. Daugherty explained that both Supported Employment grants have strict rules on how they can be utilized which makes it difficult to expend the grants. Ms. Olker also asked how the Low Vision Clinic fit into the budget. Mr. Daugherty said that because the Low Vision Clinic is an internal service provider—not a separate program—that serves VR and Older Blind, its expenses are reflected in the VR and Older Blind budgets. Commissioner Graham added that the cost is attributed to the program from which a referral is made.

Capital Improvement Projects – Most projects remain in the same phase as last month (primarily the design phase).

General Services/Maintenance Projects – The Wade Hampton Canteen is a Business Enterprise Program vending stand renovation which is under $100,000. The Building D door removal project will replace the exterior door that leads to the parking lot with one more appropriate for its location. Flooring replacement will occur in Buildings B and C. The fountain at the Columbia Campus will be refurbished and additional lighting added around the campus for safety. Cathy Olker asked if the flooring would have to be checked for asbestos. Mr. Daugherty replied that testing had already been done as part of other projects.

Commissioner Graham added that there were also many BEP stands in need of refurbishment and that this would require coordination with the Department of Transportation since many of those stands are at rest stops.

# Human Resources Report

## Luis Mendoza reported:

Out of 16 management/program manager positions, two vacancies remain, the Attorney and the VR Training Center Director. A selection for the attorney has been made and the agency is working with the Attorney General’s (AG) office to complete the process. Once the agency receives approval from the AG’s office, the offer for the attorney would become official. Although the agency does background checks on all employees, there are additional checks that the AG’s office conducts for attorneys, including a Department of Revenue tax check covering three years and a Commission on Lawyer Conduct Status Report. These requests must be made in writing to the AG and the agency is currently awaiting this information. The position classification level and proposed salary were also submitted to the AG’s office for approval. Mr. Mendoza added that the agency was on track to fill the attorney position.

Dr. Johnson asked if the one offer on the report reflected the attorney position and Mr. Mendoza replied that the offer was for the position of Training Center Director. An offer was extended for the Training Center Director position, but the candidate declined as they received an offer to stay where they were currently located.

A Children’s Services counselor position was filled by Erica Jenkins in Greenville.

Dr. Johnson emphasized that the Board wanted the agency to focus on counselor vacancies and asked what was being done to address this. Mr. Mendoza replied that the current sign-on bonus had remained at $1,000 for some time and that after reviewing offers other agencies make, he recommended the sign-on bonus be increased for employees new to state government. Dr. Johnson asked how the sign-on bonus would be disbursed and Mr. Mendoza said that the agency currently pays half after 30 days, and remainder after one year. He added that with an increase to the bonus, this would be reviewed and could change. Mr. Mendoza also said that with an increase in out-of-state candidates applying for positions, the agency wants to offer relocation expenses as incentive.

Commissioner Graham added that as the agency seems to be losing candidates to telework opportunities, they were also discussing implementing a telework pilot program. Mr. Mendoza said that a telework policy had been approved by State Human Resources. It was not a blanket policy but would apply only to individuals and positions that would be a good fit for telework.

Susan John noted that at her place of employment they had targeted the positions hardest to fill with sign-on bonuses and higher salaries and that it resulted in improvements. Commissioner Graham responded that agency has discussed another salary adjustment for the counselor position as well as creating different position levels. Mr. Mendoza added that with the start of the new State Fiscal Year, HR would conduct a new comparative analysis with other state agencies to ensure salaries are within a competitive range.

Ms. Olker asked if the telework would include both in-person work and remote work for counselors. Commissioner Graham replied that some positions were easier to perform remotely, while others, like the counselor position, in which most services are provided face-to-face, may only be able to work remotely one day per week.

Mr. Mendoza also said that the agency is considering whether to relocate the Columbia counselor position to Orangeburg. Commissioner Graham added that the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) emphasizes partnerships and recommends having a presence in the SC Works centers. Not only would this help achieve that goal, but it would also help the agency provide better coverage across the state by colocating within SC Works centers.

The individual who initially accepted the Oconee-Pickens counselor position declined the offer the day before starting in order remain at their current job. A second candidate was selected and is going through the approval process for that position. Applications are still being accepted for the Charleston and Rock Hill counselor positions.

A candidate was selected for the Charleston Older Blind position and is going through the approval process. Dr. Johnson asked how long the approval process takes and Mr. Mendoza responded that it typically takes five business days. Commissioner Graham added that Mr. Mendoza had sped up the approval process significantly compared to a year ago.

The agency has been invited to Louisiana Tech University to meet with their Orientation and Mobility program in addition to visiting the Center for the Blind, also located there.

Susan John asked for clarification on the Vocational Trainer position that has remained open. Mr. Mendoza explained that position used to be the Woodshop Instructor and was being reclassified and updated to incorporate more hands-on training and work experiences, and the salary increased to help attract more qualified candidates. Commissioner Graham added that two staff are currently filling the needs of that position. The goal for this position is to provide opportunities in the Training Center that prepare people for careers.

Susan John enquired about job-sharing possibilities that could include retired individuals who want to work part-time paired with another employee, and Commissioner Graham replied this was being considered and added that hybrid positions have already been very useful. Mr. Mendoza added that the Woodshop Instructor had retired but returned as a part-time employee. He also added that the agency may offer retention increases when employees receive offers from other agencies.

Dr. Johnson asked for clarification about the number of interns hired and Mr. Mendoza replied that two interns had been hired and a third would begin next week.

# **Program Services Update**

## Karma Marshall reported:

In response to Cathy Olker’s prior question regarding the Supported Employment grant, Ms. Marshall said that money can only be accessed after someone is employed, such as if they needed a job coach. Ms. Olker enquired what other services could be offered and Ms. Marshall replied that services could include assistive technology or providing an interpreter for a deafblind consumer during a training period. Ms. Olker asked if providing a driver would qualify and Ms. Marshall responded that it may be possible for a short term.

Summer Teen – Beginning June 6, nine consumers participated in STEM Week. They built 3D printers, which they used in projects throughout the week. STEM Week was led by Dr. Madura and Dr. Christian. In addition, Dr. Tina Herzberg, from USC Upstate, and two TVIs (teachers of students with visual impairments), Mary Robbins and Lauren Beckham (who received training at Washington State University for this program), assisted Dr. Madura and Dr. Christian throughout the week. The students also enjoyed speakers and presentations from Nephron Pharmaceuticals and Boeing who discussed opportunities available through apprenticeships for consumers with visual impairments. Evening presentations were provided by Successful Transitions and included opportunities for the students to fly a drone and to learn about fingerprinting through a tactile presentation from the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division.

On June 13, the traditional Summer Teen program began, with 12 consumers participating in the Independence Track, which involved home management, technology, and accessible recreation. The latter class was facilitated by a SCCB staff member who is also a blind athlete. This was an opportunity for the consumers to learn team building skills and experience accessible sports.

Eight students participated in work-based learning experiences through the Worker Tract at locations such as Legislative Services, Able SC, the National Federation for the Blind, and South Carolina Talking Books. From an abundance of caution, students returned home on the 16th after several displayed Covid-like symptoms. Successful Transitions provided virtual sessions throughout the following week to continue services and trainings.

Sixteen consumers returned the final week. There would be several guest speakers and presenters throughout the week, culminating in a closing session featuring Chad Foster. Ms. Marshall thanked SCCB staff and Successful Transitions for their hard work throughout the program.

Residential Program – Adult consumers are scheduled to return on July 11.

Vacancies – Regional directors, program leads, and staff continue to review candidates for vacancies and participate in interviews. Ms. Marshall commended the staff involved for hard work throughout this process.

# Old Business

None

# New Business

None

# Public Comment

None

# Vote for New Officers

# Chairperson Johnson noted that every two years the Board elects new officers for a period beginning on July 1. Susan John nominated Dr. Judy Johnson for the position of Chairperson. Mary Sonksen seconded. There were no further nominations. The motion was passed unanimously. Cathy Olker nominated Susan John for the position of Vice Chairperson. Peter Smith seconded. There were no further nominations. The motion was passed unanimously. Mary Sonksen nominated Cathy Olker for the position of Secretary. Peter Smith seconded. There were no further nominations. The motion was passed unanimously.

# Executive Session

Chairperson Johnson called for a motion to go into Executive Session to discuss a personnel matter (Commissioner Darline Graham’s Performance Evaluation). A motion was made by Peter Smith and seconded by Susan John. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Chairperson Johnson stated that the members were out of Executive Session. No votes were taken during Executive Session.

# Future Board Meeting Schedule

July 26, 2022

The meeting will be held in-person and via Zoom Meeting Software at 11:00 am in the Building D conference room.

# Adjournment

There being no further business, Chairperson Johnson called for a motion to adjourn at 12:31 pm. A motion was made by Susan John and seconded by Mary Sonksen. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Signatures

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Dr. Judy Johnson, Chairperson

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Catherine Olker, Secretary

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