

Statutory Council on Blindness  
Meeting Minutes of December 4-5, 2008  
Doubletree Hotel, Milwaukee City Centre

Present: David Hyde, Chair; Mark Janowiak; Eleanor Loomans; Dennis Nielsen; Bruce Parkinson; Rhonda Staats; Joan Wucherer; and Ed Weiss (Assistants: Kathy Parkinson, Connie Radloff, Ed Staats, and Ed Wucherer)

OBVI Staff: Michael Nelipovich, Mary Gorman, Susan Dachelet & Tom Langham

Guests: Dan Wenzel, Joseph D'Costa, Paulette Monthei, Cheryl Orgas, Marsha Valance

Absent: Carolyn Spain

Chair Hyde opened the meeting, welcomed members and guests, and asked for introductions. This would be the last council meeting that Michael Nelipovich, Director, Office for the Blind and Visually Impaired (OBVI), would attend since he is retiring effective February 2009. Chair Hyde also introduced Wisconsin Regional Librarian Marsha Valance, who is also retiring soon.

#### Election of Officers

The following officers were elected unanimously by the members of the council: Dave Hyde, Chair; Eleanor Loomans, Vice-Chair; Edward Weiss, Recording Secretary; and Bruce Parkinson, Member at Large.

Mark Janowiak was appointed to represent the council on the Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities (contact: Molly Michels, 608-261-7816; Rhonda Staats was asked to represent the council on the Rehabilitation Advisory Council (contact: Linda Vegoe, 608-224-5070).

Office for the Blind and Visually Impaired – Michael Nelipovich, Director

Michael introduced the two OBVI Field Supervisors, Susan Dachelet and Tom Langham. Susan supervises the Rehabilitation Specialists in northern Wisconsin; Tom supervises the Specialists in southern Wisconsin. Until the director's position is filled, Susan will be the council's contact in the OBVI office.

A national search will take place. The director's position is not expected to be filled immediately due to budget cuts.

Since the OBVI funding has been an issue since the office evolved in 1989, Michael would like to see the council request that the OBVI be solidly funded in the near future.

At the September meeting, council members asked for a grounding type of document that would explain how Wisconsin provides services to the adult blind. Michael wrote a document that serves as a snapshot of the service delivery system, distributed at this meeting. At the present time, services are fractionalized among three departments within state government. The Office for the Blind and Visually Impaired lies within the Department of Health Services (DHS); the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired is within the Department of Public Instruction (DPI); and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation is within the Department of Workforce Development (DWD). According to federal law, blindness is the only disability group that is allowed to have a separate state agency.

Over the last 25 years, Michael has seen about six reorganizations of the Office for the Blind and Visually Impaired. He questions whether the current structure is optimum for service delivery since delivery is best with unanimity of services. According to Michael, the future of the OBVI depends on solidifying funding and having qualified, skilled staff. Staff members are being encouraged to earn academic credentials in their specific disciplines. Two staff members are taking classes for instructor certification in Orientation and Mobility (O&M). The OBVI has established service agreements for rehabilitation services with the Badger Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired, Milwaukee; the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired, Madison; and the Northcentral Technical College, Wausau. Michael hopes that there will be heightened involvement with the private agencies.

There are many blindness service organizational structures that exist around the U.S. Giving a historical perspective of the OBVI, Michael said that when he began working for the State of Wisconsin, there were only a few rehabilitation teachers and his position did not provide direct supervision. There was no client management information system. There have been several reorganization structures since that time, including the addition of a client management database. Rehabilitation Specialists for the Blind now have funding. The OBVI serves an adult blind population and has budget authority over the Rehabilitation Specialists.

MOTION: Bruce Parkinson moved; Dennis Nielsen seconded a motion to approve the meeting minutes of September 2008. Motion passed unanimously.

## Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRC)

Eleanor discussed difficulties she had in communicating with Dodge County's ADRC. Last year, Michael had provided blindness in-service training to all ADRC personnel. He encouraged Eleanor to take a pro-active stance and approach the ADRC. Eleanor compiled a roster on services for the blind primarily in her area and distributed to the council members.

Chair Hyde read a draft of a letter that he had written to Secretary Karen Timberlake, Department of Health Services (DHS) and to Secretary Mike Morgan, Department of Administration. The letter requested that an OBVI director be appointed as soon as possible.

MOTION: Bruce Parkinson moved; Ed Weiss seconded that the letter be approved and sent as soon as possible with copy to the council members. The motion passed unanimously.

### Future meeting dates

Tues-Wed, March 24-25, Madison, Inn on the Park Hotel

Thurs-Fri, June 18-19, Manitowoc

Thurs-Fri, September 17-18, Madison

MOTION: Bruce Parkinson moved; Eleanor Loomans seconded a motion to close the meeting at 6:00 p.m. Motion passed.

Following the meeting, members recognized Michael Nelipovich's 25th year anniversary and his retirement, effective February 2009.

December 5, 2008 - Meeting reconvened 8:00 a.m.

Present: Dave Hyde, Chair; Mark Janowiak; Eleanor Loomans; Dennis Nielsen; Bruce Parkinson; Rhonda Staats; Ed Weiss; and Joan Wucherer (Driver Assistants Kathy Parkinson, Connie Radloff, and Ed Weiss)

OBVI STAFF: Michael Nelipovich, Susan Dachelet, Tom Langham, and Mary Gorman

ABSENT: Carolyn Spain

### GUESTS:

Pat Brown, Executive Director, Badger Association of the Blind & VI  
Joseph, D'Costa, DVR Liaison

Cindy Dellegrazio, Proprietor, Adaptive Technology Resources  
 Nona Graves, President, ACB Wisconsin, Badger Association, and Secretary,  
 WCBVI

Michael Huckaby, Adaptive Technology Resources

Karen Majkrzak, Exec Director, Wisconsin Council of the Blind & VI

William Meeker, Vice-President, NFB-Wisconsin

Paulette Monthei, Executive Director, Center for Deaf Blind Persons

Kathy Murphy, Rehabilitation Specialist for the Blind, OBVI

Cheryl Orgas, Director, ABLE

Faith Russell, Analyst, Office of Policy & Budget, DHS

Marsha Valance, Librarian, Wisconsin Regional Library

Dan Wenzel, Director, Wisconsin Center for the Blind & VI

Chuck Young, Guest Speaker, Hadley School for the Blind & VI

Chair Hyde recognized Michael Nelipovich and Marsha Valance for their years of service. He explained that the objective of this meeting was to invite providers who have a stake in blind rehabilitation services to discuss the status of services and how they might be improved. More recently, Vision Services of Wisconsin was formed to improve services. He wants this group to expand on ideas for improvement.

To begin the discussion, he introduced the key speaker, Chuck Young, Executive Director, Hadley School for the Blind. Mr. Young, who has extensive background in the blindness field, discussed the nature of organizations and the structure of services for the blind at the state level. He also gave his background experience and introduced the Hadley School for the Blind services.

### Separate Agencies

Mr. Young said that the literature clearly demonstrates that separate agencies are better, for they are able to serve the specific needs of blindness. These needs differ from the needs of other disability groups because people who are blind need hands on experience.

It is important to note that a separate agency is more effective, providing the administration is competent, the governing board is comprised of members who are blind, and the director has complete control of the budget and staff of the agency, as well as direct access to the governor.

There are other states that are similar to Wisconsin's delivery system with services fragmented among different departments. Funding problems result. Mr. Young believes that agencies will experience funding problems because states will be unable to match all the federal money that is available to them. It is difficult to get matching funds because of the locations of various departments. If the

council advocates a separate agency, it needs to show how restructuring will save money.

Pat Brown, Executive Director, Badger Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired, asked if this was the best time to support a separate agency. Chair Hyde believes there is never a good time and one should not plan to succeed the first time or second time change is proposed.

#### Review of Service Delivery System in Wisconsin

Chair Hyde reviewed the current service delivery system in Wisconsin. In addition to the OBVI, rehabilitation services are offered through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Workforce Development (DWD), Secretary Roberta Gassman; DVR Administrator Charlene Dwyer.

An order of selection exists within the DVR. People who are the most severely disabled are served first. People who have significant disabilities are the second group served. If there are concerns about categorical services for clients who are blind or visually impaired, Michael Greco, DWD, 608-261-4576 should be contacted. D'Costa is available to hear concerns at council meetings.

The draft of the state plan has been completed. Written comments on the plan can be sent to the chair of the Rehabilitation Advisory Council to the attention of Linda Vegoe, DVR central office. Hearings will take place in April and are open to the public.

Joseph D'Costa said there were roughly 415 individuals served from October 1 to December 30, 2008. DVR spent approximately \$784,000 serving blind clients. He said it is more costly to serve this population. Fifty-one blind people obtained jobs at minimum wage or above. Seventy-nine visually impaired individuals obtained jobs at minimum wage or above.

As of November 30, 2008, there were 6,000 people are on the DVR waiting list for services. This list will continue to grow because the cost of doing business is increasing. Joseph D'Costa said that DVR provides all clients with the services specified in their Individual Plan for Employment (IPE).

The employer will be asked to contribute, because the law stipulates that the DVR must maximize comparable benefits and the employer afford reasonable accommodations including buying equipment for disabled employees. However, if meeting the costs creates an unreasonable hardship, the DVR will provide funding assistance.

There may be times when the DVR may not consider comparable benefits. In regard to students, scholarships are not considered a comparable benefit.

Plans can be amended in order to meet the client's needs. Where there are disagreements with the DVR, clients should seek help through the Client Assistance Program (CAP). This appeal process takes less time and has more favorable outcomes than undergoing an impartial hearing process.

The DVR continues to work with high school students and wants to see the IPE in place for a transition to employment at graduation. Counselors may get involved in the students' IPE before DVR services begin. Waukesha, Washington, and Ozaukee counties have transition specialists who work with students and no adults in their caseloads. Many of the transition counselors work on the school premises, rather than in the DVR offices.

### Specialized Counselors for the Blind

A question was raised regarding the status of specialized counselors for the blind. Joseph D'Costa said that the DVR is going to a team-based model, with people who are versed in helping those who are sensory disabled. The team meets monthly to determine what resources and skill levels will be needed to work with this population. Although they have to go to a generalist model, the DVR realizes that counselors must keep up their skill level in order to work with the sensory impaired. There are some highly experienced counselors who have worked with the visually impaired.

Chuck Young stated that it was difficult for counselors to attend IPE meetings due to the number of them. He also stressed the importance of commenting on the state plan, especially in areas of disagreement.

### Rehabilitation Advisory Council

The meetings of the Rehabilitation Advisory Council are open to the public. Someone may serve on a council committee without being a council member.

David asked the guests to give him feedback on whether they thought this type of meeting was of value. He invited guests to write letters requesting that a new director be appointed to the OBVI as soon as possible. If attendees send him an email, he will send a copy of the letter written by this council.

## Summer Program Wisconsin Center

Dan Wenzel, Superintendent, Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired, described the Center's programs, which included both a successful summer program and academic year.

The Adult Summer Program has traditionally been held at the Center in Janesville. Because of construction taking place in the Center, a one-week program was held on the UW-Oshkosh campus in August 2008. OBVI Rehabilitation Specialists taught some of the classes.

The Center also has a successful summer employment program for high school students. An advisory council offers opportunity for public input.

Michael said that the OBVI serves about 2,000 clients each year with a majority seen one on one. The office has an annual budget of \$1.5 million dollars. In addition to the three service agreements with providers, the OBVI also has collaborated with the Wisconsin Center (Adult Summer School). Adaptive equipment is frequently purchased for consumers with financial need. The staff members also provide in-service training and have the opportunity to augment their skill set.

## Next Steps

Because of the current governmental structure, Chair Hyde does not think that a cabinet level independent commission serving the blind in Wisconsin is a realistic expectation. The council agrees with the need for both competency and consistency of service for the blind and will propose that the Office for the Blind and Visually Impaired be moved into DVR. In addition, they would recommend that the counselors be specialists in blindness. It was felt that this was the ideal time to start a dialogue. The consensus of council members present was to have Chair Hyde present and discuss this idea with DVR and DHS Administrators.

The Council Executive Committee will meet in February to set the agenda for its legislative day in March.

Bruce Parkinson moved; Ed Weiss seconded a motion to adjourn. Motion carried. Meeting adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Edward Weiss  
Recording Secretary