South Carolina Commission for the Blind

1430 Confederate Avenue
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes
March 26, 2024

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

# Call to Order

Chairperson Susan John called the meeting to order at 11:00 am. The meeting was conducted via Zoom Meeting software.

# Present

Susan John, Chairperson

Ronald Coleman, Vice Chairperson
Cathy Olker, Secretary
Dan Hanfland, Board Commissioner

Mathias Chaplin, Board Commissioner

Erica James, Board Commissioner
Darline Graham, SCCB Commissioner

# Adoption of Agenda

Chairperson Susan John asked if there were any modifications or changes to the Agenda. No comments were made. Agenda stands approved.

# Public Comment

None

# Approval of Minutes

Chairperson Susan John asked if there were any amendments to the January 23, 2024, minutes. No comments were made. Minutes stand approved.

# Commissioner’s Report

## Darline Graham reported:

The House Budget Hearing was held on January 30 and the Senate Finance Budget Hearing was held on March 13. This completed the agency’s budget hearings for this year, but the agency won’t know for several months if the requested recurring funds for Older Blind, State Match, and administrative support will be granted.

The agency completed its portion of the Combined State plan as required under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. The plan was submitted to the Department of Education and the Department of Labor. The next step is to finalize the negotiated levels of performance for 2024 and 2025 with the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). The agency negotiated levels for Employment After Exit for second and fourth quarter, Median Earnings, Credential Attainment, and Measurable Skills Gains by using historical data from prior program years and a Statistical Adjustment Model provided by RSA.

As a part of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind’s Executive Committee, Commissioner Graham is working with other committee members to plan the Spring Conference scheduled for the second week in April, to be held outside of DC. Several staff will attend this informative conference. Through planning for this conference, a meeting was held with NSITE, an organization that provides employment readiness and career skills certificate training. SCCB already has one consumer starting training that will lead to a certification in Human Resources recruitment. Other trainings offered include Communication, Business Basics, and Cybersecurity. This is a great opportunity for our consumers to receive training that leads to measurable skills gains, credential attainment, and employment. The agency is also working with NSITE to explore options to customize the training programs that are offered in the SCCB Training Center.

The residential center will not be accessible beginning in April due to the HVAC replacement. In preparation for this, Carol Anderson and other staff have worked diligently on the alternative learning plan. As part of the plan the instructors will meet consumers in the community to deliver Orientation and Mobility (O&M) instruction, braille training, and home management.

Misty Williams, Certified O&M Lead, will join the agency next month. Misty has worked in the field of O&M for several years.

The Blind Licensed Vendor’s meeting was held on February 2 and 3 at the Embassy Suites in Columbia. Ryan Skinner, Donna Earley, and several BEP staff were thanked for working to help make the event a success.

The Braille Challenge is an opportunity for students to utilize and showcase their braille skills. SCCB partnered with the School for the Deaf and Blind to host another successful Challenge this year. The event was held on February 22, at Segra Park due to the HAVAC project. 24 students participated this year compared to 15 students last year. In addition, more parents were present this year than in years past.

Planning for this year’s Pre-Employment Transition Services activities has begun. Allison Kitler, the new Transition Lead, and the National Federation of the Blind Successful Transitions planned a Spring Break camp to be held April 4 through 7. Due to the HVAC project, Allison worked with the University of South Carolina to secure dormitory space on their Columbia campus for the three-week Summer Teen Program that begins in June. An additional two weeks focusing on college preparation will be offered in July on USC’s campus. Last year, the first week of our summer teen program featured Waterviz, a new program led by Dr. Tina Herzburg, USC-Upstate. The program provided students an innovative way to learn about the water cycle and how to interpret data using sounds, shapes, and music. Information about this program is being presented at the International AER (Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired) Conference in July. AER is a professional membership organization for professionals who provide services to persons with vision loss. Niki Outen, VR Program Lead, has been asked to assist with the presentation of the Waterviz program at the event.

The 24th Annual Vision Summit was held on March 22 at Saluda Shoals Park. Hosted by the SC Vision Education Partnership, event partners included the School for the Deaf and Blind, USC-Upstate, the National Federation of the Blind, Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired, State Library Talking Books, and SCCB. Steve Cook, Derrick Strick, Anastasia Overcash, and Patrick Mack presented information on Living Life as a Blind Person in the 21st century. Nikki Green presented an agency overview and Commissioner Graham delivered the keynote address.

The HVAC replacement and renovation for Building A, is expected to begin in August. Some staff will be relocated to available office space on campus. There is not enough space to accommodate everyone that will be dislocated during this anticipated nine-month period project. Facilities is checking with other state agencies located nearby but has not yet secured the space needed.

New employees Ken Burton, Finance Director; Eric Robinson, Region III Director; and Joanna Roche, Administrative Assistant, were welcomed.

Commission members discussed their interest in receiving information about events for people who are blind or visually impaired (such as trainings, expos, conferences, and other activities) occurring around the state. It was suggested that this type of information could also be shared with consumers. Commissioner Graham replied that the agency would explore options for disseminating this type of information and present at a future Board meeting.

# Finance Update

## Kenneth Burton reported:

State Budget – As of February 29, 2024, agency spending was 75% through the State Fiscal Year. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has utilized 83% of the budget, the Training Center 50%, Transition Services 64%, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) 132%, Prevention of Blindness 54%, Older Blind 53%, Children’s Services 55%, and Administration 75%. The agency has expended 78% of its budget.

Federal Grants – The agency is 71% through the total period of performance for the 2023 grant cycle.  The agency has utilized 53% of the VR general use portion of the grant, and 81% of the portion set-aside for the provision of pre-ETS (pre-employment transition services). 109% of the Older Blind grant has been utilized. 11% of the Supported Employment general use grant was used, and none of the Supported Employment grant for Transition was used. Both grants have been closed out.

The agency is 21% through the total period of performance for the 2024 grant cycle. The agency has utilized 0% of the VR Grant, 0% of the pre-ETS, 187% of the Older Blind grant, 0% of the Supported Employment, and 0% of the Supported Employment (Transition).

The Federal budget is still being allocated based on continuing resolutions. The agency will receive additional grant funds to offset any over-spent funds for Older Blind.

A question was asked about Older Blind Services and Assistive Technology. Commissioner Graham stated that an Assistive Technology demonstration could be presented to the Board as part of a future meeting.

# Project Update

# Sam Outen reported:

* The Columbia campus HVAC project is progressing on schedule. Final connections to the electronic control systems are underway in Buildings B and D. The chiller was placed on Saturday, March 24. Work is scheduled to begin in Building C between April 15 and May 1. Buildings B and D will reopen at that time. The project is projected to be completed by June 30.
* Construction documents for Building A renovations were submitted to the Office of State Engineer for review. Upon approval, a notice for public bid will be submitted and the process of selecting a contractor will begin. The project is scheduled to begin in August and will take approximately nine months to complete.
* Options are being explored to add an ADA compliant accessible ramp between Buildings A and B on the Columbia campus. Once the project is completed, it will ensure entrance to the facility is accessible from all sides.
* The Columbia campus parking lot and Building C plumbing projects are planned for Fiscal Year 2025.
* Contractor bid submissions for the Rembert Dennis Building Canteen are due March 29, 2024, at 2:00 pm. The projected date of completion is July 29, 2024.
* Plans for the Wade Hampton Building Canteen will be submitted to the Joint Bond Review Committee staff for review the week of March 25, 2024. The projected start date for construction is July 29, 2024. The projected completion date is September 13, 2024.

# Human Resources Update

## Luis Mendoza reported:

The agency currently has 97 full-time employees. Including temporary employees and contract employees, the total employees is 108. This represents a decrease of two since the last meeting.

Through the third quarter of this fiscal year, SCCB welcomed 19 new full-time employees. However, 15 staff departed. The current turnover rate is at 15%, an increase from 9% in January. This remains better than last year, which ended with a 22% turnover rate.

The agency is shifting focus towards retention, taking proactive steps to ensure employees feel valued and motivated. Feedback from employee’s self-reflection surveys highlighted a strong desire for more job-specific training. Human Resources (HR) has a new HR Coordinator, who brings a wealth of experience in training and development. This will allow HR to build a strong training and development team comprised of program and support staff.

The agency understands that promotion opportunities are vital for career growth. HR is developing a promotion plan for select positions, mirroring the structured progression seen for counselors.

Another significant development is the move toward a universal performance review cycle. The Department of Administration has extended this initiative for another year, and the agency is looking forward to launching the universal evaluation system by June 2025.

The agency currently has an equal opportunity attainment rate of 91.9%, the highest ever for the agency. This achievement has positioned the agency 23rd out of 79 agencies in terms of affirmative action.

The agency hired a Certified Orientation and Mobility Lead starting in April. The agency has not had an in-house certified instructor since early 2018. The agency is also working with Salus University to host student interns to observe orientation and mobility lessons. A student is currently observing the lessons of an instructor.

Commissioner Ron Coleman asked about availability of O&M training. Commissioner Graham responded by stating that O&M training is provided to consumers statewide. Commissioner Erica James then asked if disability etiquette training was also being offered. Luis Mendoza responded that this training was offered to all staff.

# Quality Assurance (QA) Update

## Michael Daniels reported:

In Quarter 2, a total of 582 open and closed cases were reviewed. Overall, the number of cases in compliance improved or held steady across all programs.

Approximately 60% of new cases during the quarter were for the Older Blind population. This aligns with current statewide trends. The state has experienced a 55% increase in the 65 and older population over the last decade and ranks fifth nationally. South Carolina is also one of the top four states retirees are moving to.

Overall satisfaction rates increased during the first quarter. Survey results were increased by calling non-responders. QA staff made 104 calls, resulting in the completion of an additional 56 surveys across all programs.

* Vocational Rehabilitation: Satisfaction rate was steady at 88% with the response rate increasing from 40% to 63%.
* Older Blind: Satisfaction rate was at 80% with the response rate up from 15% to 59%.
* Children’s Services: Satisfaction rate was 100% with a response rate of 33% (2 out of 6).
* Prevention of Blindness: Satisfaction rate was 75% with a response rate of 60% (6 out of 10).

Eleven consumers entered Competitive Integrated Employment. The average wage was $15.33 per hour with hours worked at 35.

Consumers obtained employment across various sectors, including Registered Nurse, Medical Secretary, Social Worker, Teacher Assistant, and Customer service representative.

Employers included Novant Health Medical Center in Rock Hill, Bon Secours Mercy Health Hospital in Greenville, SOS Health Care facility in Conway, and GLEAMNS Head Start.

# **Consumer Services Update**

## Carol Anderson reported:

Consumer Services identified changes to be made to the AWARE case management system and is in the first phase of testing to ensure the changes do not affect other areas of the system. Once this testing is completed, staff in various positions (Counselors, Administrative Assistants, Employment Consultants, etc.) will further test the system and provide feedback.

Training on the VR application process was completed on March 19, 2024, for counselors and other staff.

In January, Transition Counselors attended Transition 101 training. Monthly meetings are occurring with the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C) for guidance on enhancing the agency’s Transition program. The transition team continues to meet with potential vendors to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to expand the agency’s service delivery statewide.

During the Braille Challenge, SCCB staff presented services and resources to parents, assisted with activities during the morning program and assisted with awards for students during the afternoon program.

Summer Teen application packets are being finalized and will include an outline of day and evening programs. The first session will begin on June 10 and will end on June 28. The extended program begins on July 15 and will end on July 26. This session will focus on a college and employment track for students.

A group of students will attend the National Federation for the Blind’s (NFB) National Convention in Orlando, Florida the week of July 1.

The Prevention of Blindness program is fully staffed with four Prevention Coordinators, one in each region. The Program Lead attended the Foundation Fighting Blindness Seminar in Columbia to network and learn more about resources available in South Carolina.

The Older Blind Program Lead and an Older Blind counselor attended the OIB-TAC conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 28 – 29, 2024. The two-day conference was developed for Older Blind Program Managers and focused on networking, best practices, and innovations in the Older Blind Program.

Employment Consultants (ECs) continue to participate in SC Works Job Fairs/Resource Fair and community events. In February, VR counselors and Employment Consultants began the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Supported Employment online course. The course is designed to provide knowledge and skill development in competitive integrated employment, including supported and customized employment. The 40-hour training is presented in six modules over a twelve-week timeframe. The format includes audio and video presentations, required reading, practical activities, and online discussions.

Staff attending the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) conference in Orlando, Florida, January 25-27, learned valuable information on the latest advancement and adaptive equipment in the assistive technology field. Two SCCB staff currently use Aira, a visual interpreting service, to read serial numbers, computer screens, package labels, and other hard copy material. This accommodation was provided by the agency. Aira utilizes trained Visual Interpreters to provide on-demand visual information for blind and low vision individuals. SCCB AT staff demonstrated accessible apps on the Android and Apple platforms at the Braille Challenge.

The agency is searching for a new Training Center Manager and has identified several candidates. The alternative learning plan has begun on a trial basis. The plan will allow instructors to serve consumers at the Training Center, in regional offices, and other locations such as libraries and homes.

Chairperson Susan John noted that both Carol Anderson and Commissioner Graham attended the 24th Annual Vision Summit. Commissioner Graham was the keynote speaker and Marty McKenzie, NFB President said in his introduction that Commissioner Graham is the best Commissioner at SCCB that he has worked with. She has taken the agency in a positive direction, formed great partnerships, and expressed how much he enjoys working with her.

**Business Enterprise Program Update**

Ryan Skinner reported:

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) has updated the board report to mirror the information included in the BEP federal report (also known as the RSA 15). Federal reporting focuses on the different types of property that vending stands are located on (Federal, State, County and Municipal, and Private) and the average median income of the Blind Licensed Vendors (BLV) in those stands.

Regulations require site surveys to determine if stands are profitable for the Blind Licensed Vendors (BLVs). The agency has been working to ensure site surveys are being done where there are concerns of a site not being profitable. The agency is also working with the Elected Committee of Blind Licensed Vendors (ECBLVs) to receive input on stands where necessary. Quality vs quantity is the goal.

The ECBV recognizes that there is a small pipeline of new vendors who can bid on stands. Through continued active participation with the ECBV, a request was made for the agency to offer refresher training to existing blind vendors to address deficiencies and increase their skills.

BEP is a self-employment pathway that fits into the self-employment assessment that is being developed with VR. This will benefit all consumers interested in BEP and self-employment.

The BLVs and teaming partner have meetings at Fort Jackson that were scheduled for the ten vendors and the teaming partner to finalize their LLC.

The Blind Licensed Vendor annual meeting held Friday, February 2, and Saturday, February 3, 2024, was a huge success. Donna Earley, Lisa Hall, and the team were thanked for making it such a success.

Sam Outen and the maintenance team have been replacing lights, installing new awnings, and installing gates at many vending locations at rest areas.

# Old Business

None.

# New Business

Chairperson Susan John inquired about having an in-person Strategic Planning Meeting to review and discuss the plans that were made last year. Plans will be made to hold the meeting at Saluda Shoals Park. Once a date and time have been confirmed, all Board members will be notified.

# Public Comment

None

# Future Board Meeting Schedule

May 28, 2024 – 11:00 am

# Adjournment

There being no further business, Chairperson Susan John called for a motion to adjourn at 1:13 pm. A motion was made by Cathy Olker and seconded by Erica James. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.