South Carolina Commission for the Blind

1430 Confederate Avenue
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Meeting Minutes
November 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 11:00am. The meeting was conducted via Zoom Meeting software.

# Present

Susan John, Chairperson
Cathy Olker, Secretary
Dan Hanfland, Board Commissioner

Erica James, Board Commissioner

Darline Graham, SCCB Commissioner

# Adoption of Agenda

Dan Hanfland made a motion to accept the November 26, 2024, Agenda. It was seconded by Erica Jenkins. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Public Comment

None

# Approval of Minutes

Dan Hanfland made a motion to accept the September 24, 2024, minutes. It was seconded by Cathy Olker. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

# Commissioner’s Report

## Darline Graham reported:

The Commissioner thanked the leadership team for their work revising and updating all agency position descriptions and planning documents ensuring they are accurate, clear, and measurable. The Program Leads will review the revised planning documents with Regional Directors and their staff to ensure everyone is clear on their tasks and responsibilities.

The leadership team was also thanked for their continued work on all agency policies and procedures. The Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center – Quality Management (VRTAC-QM); was also thanked for their continued guidance regarding fiscal forecasting and updating policies and procedures. As the drafts of the revised policies are completed, they will be shared with the Board of Commissioners for input, and a public meeting for comment will be scheduled.

The Commissioner and members of the leadership team attended the semi-annual Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) conference. Information from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and best practices from other states, and several sessions on the topic of Artificial Intelligence was shared.

Several vendors demonstrated resources and assistive technology, including SaraWorks, a system that integrates with case management systems to enhance scheduling, streamline documentation, and improve communication with consumers. Maggie iVR is a wearable headset designed specifically for individuals with low vision which integrates with an iPhone (and multiple apps) to allow individuals to read books and magazines, watch TV, or carry out activities at home, in school, or at work. The eSight Go resembles a pair of sunglasses assists individuals with macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy to maintain their mobility and independence by using a high-definition camera to display video in the glasses of what the wearer is facing. The video can be magnified, color and/or contract adjusted, brightened, or dimmed.

Patriot Vision Industries showcased a variety of devices for individuals with low vision, including portable readers that convert printed text to speech for completing work-related tasks and other activities, high-definition portable digital magnifiers, transportable high-definition video touch screens that can integrate with computer, and a wearable headset that integrates with Samsung phones. A demo is scheduled to be held at SCCB in January.

Commissioner Graham was reelected to serve on the Executive Team of NCSAB as the Chair of the Employment committee.

The Commissioner and several staff attended the BLAST (Business Leadership and Superior Training) Conference held by the National Association of Blind Merchants, a division of the National Federation of the Blind. A day long training for State Licensing Agencies focused on Randolph Sheppard, leadership practices, the importance of Active Participation with the Elected Committee of Vendors, and the latest in vending equipment.

A demonstration of the Glide, the world’s first self-guided mobility aid was provided. The Glide uses a combination of robotics and artificial intelligence to safely guide an individual where they need to go independently. Although the device is in the prototype phase, pre-orders are being accepted.

The agency’s Assistive Technology team continues to increase the number of jobsite, school, and home assessments. In 2023, ten onsite assessments were completed; as of July 1, 2024, 33 onsite assessments have been completed.

The HVAC project in Buildings B and C were completed. Both residential and day students have returned to the Training Center for in-person training. A total of fourteen students returned, doubling the number since our previous Board meeting. In addition to the new AC and Heating unit, consumers returned to new and more spacious learning stations. New technology, including screens, keyboards, and docking stations that allows consumers to connect their individual laptops, was purchased and distributed to the consumers. To further advance the Training Center, Niki Outen will serve in a Lead position and assisting the new Training Center Director.

Kevin Alberse joined our team as the Training Center Director. Kevin has years of relevant experience, including serving as the former Director of R2I2 at Richland School District 2, where he led a team that designed and delivered innovative learning experiences for students.

New employees Valerie Duncan, Procurement Manager; Robert Aldrich, General Maintenance Technician; Carol Gibson, Employment Consultant; Devonte Benson, Grants/Budget Manager; Chiesorio Okoro, Transition Counselor; Careen Rose, Procurement Specialist; Bradley Rodriquez, Assistant Facility Manager; and John Freeman, General Maintenance Technician were welcomed.

# Finance Update

## Kenneth Burton reported:

State Budget – As of October 31, 2024, the agency was 33% through the state fiscal year, with agency overall spending at 27%. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) has utilized 37% of the budget, the Training Center 18%, Transition Services 23%, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) 35%, Prevention of Blindness 27%, Older Blind 26%, Children’s Services 21%, and Administration 23%.

Federal Grants – The agency is 54% through the total period of performance for the 2024 grant cycle. The agency has utilized 34% of the VR general use portion of the grant, 39% of the portion set-aside for the provision of pre-ETS (pre-employment transition services), 100% of the Older Blind grant, 0% of the Supported Employment, and 0% of the Supported Employment grant (Transition).

VR grant spending is trending in the proper direction, and the agency expects to utilize all VR grant funds by the end of the period of performance. In addition, the agency used all VR grant funds for 2023 and the grant has been closed. Progress with grant management has been made by improving communication to program staff, updating procedures, and providing fiscal training from the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM). This will ensure that the agency meets the period of performance requirements.

The agency is 8% through the total period of performance for the 2025 grant cycle. The agency has utilized 1% of the VR Grant, 0% of pre-ETS, 4% of the Older Blind grant, 0% of the Supported Employment grant, and 0% of the Supported Employment grant (Transition).

Fort Jackson funds were received and disbursed accordingly. Overall, SCCB spending is on target with the budget, and there are no current concerns.

# Human Resources Update

## Luis Mendoza reported:

The agency currently employs 98 full-time employees (FTE). Including temporary and contract employees, the total workforce is 110. The agency turnover rate is 11.67%, which is 2% higher compared to a year ago.

The Annual Affirmative Action Report was submitted to the General Assembly by the end of October. When Commissioner Graham was hired, the agency’s equal opportunity attainment rate was 76%, one of the lowest among state agencies. Based on preliminary feedback from the Human Affairs Commission, the agency’s current attainment rate has reached 95.9%, the highest in the agency’s history. This record-breaking is a testament to the Commissioner’s leadership, the dedication of the Human Resources (HR) team, and the commitment of hiring managers.

HR participated in 11 events across the state since the last Board meeting at locations such as Clemson University, The Citadel, South Carolina State University, Benedict College, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and Winthrop University. These efforts demonstrate the agency’s commitment to reaching a diverse group of applicants through a wide range of recruitment opportunities.

HR is in the final phase of updating and uploading performance documents into the new performance management system. The next step will involve supervisors reviewing the new performance expectations with their staff. Training sessions on the new system will be conducted to ensure staff are fully equipped to meet these expectations.

# Facilities Update

The Columbia Campus HVAC project has reached substantial completion, with all systems functioning normally and all punch list items resolved. A change order was added to install additional emergency lighting in the buildings and connect it to the generator emergency circuit. This will ensure all emergency lighting meets code requirements and provided proper egress lighting in emergencies. The change order will be completed without disrupting services or operations.

Construction on Building A began with demolition in nonstructural areas. Work on the HVAC, electrical, and plumbing systems is underway, including updates to new ADA-compliant restrooms on the lower floor. The project remains on schedule. Additionally, the fire monitoring system has been upgraded with a new fire alarm panel and annunciators in each building.

All open positions in facilities management have been filled. Two maintenance technicians are HVAC/EPA certified. This will enhance the maintenance of agency building systems and grounds and allow for faster service within the vending maintenance program, reducing the need for outside vendors. Facilities is also collaborating with the IT department to update the agency’s camera and badge access systems. The new system will feature updated high-resolution cameras and uniformity across all security systems.

# Information Technology (IT) Update

The IT department has worked with Consumer Services to streamline the assistive technology ordering process, significantly reducing the time it takes to deliver technology to consumers. Previously, it would have taken up to 45 days to process and deliver orders. This this has been reduced to five days for in-stock items.

IT has been laying the groundwork for a new ticketing system designed to enhance response times and communication regarding the status of consumer technology orders. It will enable better inventory management for assistive technology items. Once operational, this system will be used to manage work order requests for vending repairs.

The Case Management System team, which oversees the administration of the AWARE case management system, recently partnered with Consumer Services to complete a significant system upgrade with minimal disruption to operations. IT department has also been working with Segra Communications to prepare for the installation of a fiber optic cable directly to the Columbia campus, allowing the agency to double internet speed while reducing costs and dependency on the Division of Technology Operations (DTO).

# **Consumer Services Update**

## Carol Anderson reported:

The agency is partnering with the San Diego State University Interwork Institute to develop nine VR-101 training modules for staff through the YesLMS training system. This will assist with the onboarding process and continuing education for staff.

The Prevention of Blindness Coordinators continue to provide outreach services in their communities to increase the number of consumers receiving sight saving procedures. The Region II Coordinator is attending meetings at the Hispanic Alliance Network to increase outreach to the underserved population in South Carolina.

The number of consumers served in the Older Blind (OB) program continues to increase. The agency is currently serving 911 consumers in this program. As a result of the agency’s budget request being approved, two additional Older Blind Counselors will be hired to serve Regions III and IV. This will allow the agency to provide more effective and timely services to this rapidly growing population.

The Youth Services Lead hosts monthly check-ins with Children’s Services counselors to provide training on topics related to Children’s Services and is working to update program policy and procedures. The Youth Services Lead also met with a camp leader in Wedgefield, South Carolina, regarding summer camp opportunities.

Planning for spring and summer pre-ETS (pre-employment transition services) programming has started with monthly check-in meetings with the Transition Counselors to provide training on transition topics and areas of increased opportunities. Regular meetings are held with staff from the South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind (SCSDB) to discuss enhancing service delivery and collaboration. SCCB staff attended a Career Fair held at the SCSDB campus. A meeting will be scheduled with SCCB’s Transition Counselors and SCSDB Job Coaches to enhance and improve Work Based Learning Experiences (WBLE) opportunities.

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), celebrating the contributions of America’s workers with disabilities, past and present, and showcasing supportive, inclusive employment policies and practices that benefit employers and employees. This year’s theme was *Access to Good Jobs for All.* Events were planned and coordinated with business and community partners in each region. Employment Consultants (ECs) attended job fairs, including SC Works Trident Disability Expo. SC Legal Services presented on expungement and barriers to employment, and the resources available for individuals who feel discriminated against with housing and education services.

The Assistive Technology (AT) department created a log to track offsite assessments and services. This valuable tool allows Consumer Services to capture the information needed to update the agency’s Statewide Needs Assessment and to identify the various assessments provided (i.e., work or school accommodations, equipment setup/delivery, service location on the job, work from home, school/college campus, etc.). The agency will use this information to monitor service activities, identify gaps, and adjust as necessary to ensure consumers are being served effectively. AT staff is reviewing newly released versions of JAWS, ZoomText, and Fusion to provide the most updated training to consumers. AT staff is also sharing information with other staff on upcoming adaptive equipment, webinars, and new features to existing software and technology.

On October 14, consumers in the Training Center participated in National White Cane Day at the South Carolina State House. They demonstrated their orientation and mobility (O&M) skills to the public by using their white canes to navigate around the state house grounds to locate monuments and other attractions. They also participated in a Benefits workshop held at Able SC to learn of additional resources available in their communities.

Consumers in the Braille instruction class are required to complete a final assignment that showcases the skills they learned in the classroom. One consumer, who eventually wants to provide art therapy to individuals coping with the loss of their sight, created two pieces of inspirational artwork that tells the story of her journey and how her family instilled in her that “broken crayons still color.”

**Business Enterprise Program Update**

Ryan Skinner reported:

The Fort Jackson Federal Arbitration may occur in February 2025. Envision was recognized as the 2024 Employer of the Year by the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Association.

Virginia, the lead state, submitted a direct negotiation/sole source letter to the Marines on behalf of all states that are a part of the East Coast Marine contract. The contract is expected to be sent out in the fall of 2025.

The agency continues to work with the Elected Committee of Blind Vendors to improve the Blind Licensed Vendor program. Several sites were identified and consolidated. The agency is working with the committee on selecting new site opportunities, such as Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Patriots Point Naval and Maritime Museum.

Sam Outen and the Facilities team were thanked for their work to improve stands across the state by installing new awnings and gate systems, providing structural repairs, replacing lightbulbs, and repairing vending machines.

The Wade Hampton micro market is scheduled to be installed on December 16, 2024.

While attending the Business Leadership and Superior Training (BLAST), information was shared from Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), Randolph-Sheppard attorneys, the National Association of Blind Merchants (NABM), and various equipment vendors.

With the progress being made in utilizing micro markets in South Carolina, Mr. Skinner was asked to mentor new state directors and assist existing directors when needed. A success story about one of the agency’s blind vendors will be published within the next few weeks.

**Strategic Plan Update**

Sarah Leonard reported:

SCCB's leadership team met quarterly to develop the 2025 Strategic Plan, incorporating feedback from the Board in the plan that was submitted as a part of the agency's Annual Accountability Report.

* SCCB's Older Blind Program Lead is about halfway through updating the policies and procedures for the Older Blind Program. SCCB considers this performance measure to be 45% complete.
* The Transition and Children's Services Lead has outlined a procedure for Children's Services Counselors to refer consumers to the Vocational Rehabilitation Transition program. SCCB considers this performance measure to be 15% complete.
* SCCB has developed a draft of the supported employment policy for youth and adult consumers. Procedures are in the process of being developed. SCCB considers this performance measure to be 25% complete.
* The BEP Director has developed 75% of this year's Blind Licensed Vendor refresher trainings. Two of the four trainings have been presented to the Elected Committee of Blind Vendors at their quarterly meetings. SCCB is on track to complete this performance measure by June 2025.
* SCCB has successfully increased the number of onsite assistive technology assessments occurring on the job, in educational settings, or in consumer homes. The goal is to complete at least 45 onsite assessments by June 30, 2025. SCCB is on track to exceed that number.
* Program Leads and the Communications Director are working to develop one-page information sheets for the (Vocational Rehabilitation, Transition, Prevention of Blindness, Older Blind, Children's Services programs for distribution at events, conferences, to community partners, etc. SCCB is on target to complete this performance measure.
* Human Resources has developed standardized interview questions for most positions. HR estimates 75% of the agency's positions now have standardized interview questions and anticipates this to be 100% by June 2025.
* HR is about 20% through updating the agency's general onboarding training for all staff. Disability Awareness training (that includes human guide) and a tour of the training center have been added. SCCB anticipates fully updating the onboarding training by June 2025.
* The leadership team has analyzed and revised job duties and performance measures for program and administrative staff. All job duties and performance measures have been updated for program staff. Administrative staff position descriptions are nearing completion. SCCB considers this performance measure to be 65% and anticipates completing it prior to June 2025.
* Quality Assurance now conducts bi-monthly case reviews to ensure compliance with 60- and 90- day eligibility determination. QA is on target to complete 24 by the end of June 2025.
* QA conducts bi-monthly referral reviews to ensure timely follow up and eligibility determination. QA is on target to complete 24 by the end of June 2025.
* QA conducts quarterly reviews of open educational goals and credential attainments to ensure measurable skill gains are accurately documented and captured for federal reporting. QA is on target to complete four by the end of June 2025.
* The leadership team is in the process of reviewing, revising, and implementing program and administrative policies and procedures. SCCB estimates that 65% of program procedures are completed and 50% of administrative policies are completed. SCCB anticipates meeting its goal of reviewing, revising, and implementing all policies by June 2025. SCCB has shared all VR policy drafts with RSA and will begin sharing batches of completed policies with Disability Rights SC. Policies will be sent to the board prior to posting them for public comment.
* IT is working to develop an IT asset management policy/procedure. This is 40% complete. IT is in the process of implementing a new ticketing and asset management system. SCCB anticipates this performance measure to be completed by June 2024.

# Old Business

None

# New Business

None

# Public Comment

None

# Future Board Meeting Schedule

January 28, 2025

11:00 am

# Adjournment

There being no further business, Chairperson Susan John called for a motion to adjourn at 12:44 pm. A motion was made by Dan Hanfland and seconded by Cathy Olker. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.