

# NH State Rehabilitation Council

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## NH STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

### MEETING MINTUES

January 25, 2024

21 South Fruit Street, Room 100, Concord, NH and

### ZOOM Teleconference Meeting

**Attendees:** Lorrie Ripley Chair, Lisa Gerrard, Vice-Chair, Natalie Fortier, Heidi Duprey, Andrea Kaneb, James Ziegra, John Richards, Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre, alternate for DRC, Scott Lagios, Dawn Breault, Carrie Dudley, Brandy Quinn-Richards

**Members Excused:** Ben Adams

**Staff:** Richard Sala, Sue Roma, Ella McAllister, Chantel Hagan, Joy Sabolevski

The meeting of the SRC was called to order by Chair Ripley at 1:00 pm.

A roll call was made of those present, and the agenda was reviewed.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES:** The minutes of the SRC meeting of October 25, 2023, were approved with the following correction: Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre's name is misspelled under attendees, and she wishes it corrected.

**Introduction of the New VR Director:** Richard Sala introduced himself as the new VR Director. He started on January 17, 2024. Originally from New York, his background includes 21 years of service in the United States Marine Corps. While in the service he attended law school. He retired from the Marines in 2018 and relocated to New Hampshire where he joined the NH Department of Education as legal counsel to Commissioner Edelblut. He taught constitutional law, national security law and legislation and regulation at Vermont Law and Graduate School. While there he was also the Director of Online Programs.

Richard holds a Juris Doctorate and Master of Environmental Law and Policy from Vermont Law School, a Master of Business Administration from the University of Rochester's Simon Business School, and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Colorado at Boulder in International Relations and Political Science. He has also served on the New Hampshire State Board of Education.

Richard is excited to be here. In the coming weeks he plans on visiting all regional offices to meet the staff and listen to their concerns of what works well and what can be improved. He is impressed with the mission of VR and is excited to be part of the work that it does.

**Quality Assurance:** Chantel Hagan is present today to give the Council an overview of VRNH's QA project. In 2023, VRNH created and staffed a unit dedicated to ensuring quality services and improving quality outcomes. During 2023, work began on tools to review quality on eligibility decisions, the IPE, closure and Pre-Ets. These tools will be used during regular case reviews.

During the internal case audits, unit staff are focusing on consensus activities, making sure the offices are all on the same page across the state in their work. Staff also review and make sure requests for permissions or signature authorities are complete when credential levels are reached for signing off on eligibility and plans.

Other work done in 2023 are a policy crosswalk against the LBA audit and a line-by-line audit tracker. Work continues on the QA plan developed with the **Stephen's Group**, including roles and a risk assessment matrix.

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Also, during 2023 a QA Advisory Committee was developed consisting of staff from the different VR offices and roles across the agency ensuring levels of all staff have a voice. This group meeting quarterly.

In 2024 the focus will be on compliance around timeliness on eligibility determinations, IPE development and successful rehabilitations.

Chantel is willing to return to the SRC periodically to give updates on QA and welcomes suggestions from SRC members on areas of concern that the QA unit can examine.

A question was asked regarding what QA efforts have been made for finances of VR dollars? It was mentioned that VR has not been prudent with dollars as evidenced by the agency having to return money to RSA last year. Richard responded that VR has recently hired a new financial administrator, not having one in place for some time.

One thing that he and the financial administrator are planning is taking a hard look at all contracts and making sure that the return on investment is positive to the agency before agreeing to renew them. He will also be working with the financial administrator to monitor the 15% Pre-Ets spending to ensure VR does not fail to meet this requirement as it had which resulted in the return of grant money.

Andrea Kanab brought forth a concern about serving deaf customers equitably across the state. In the past, VR had at least one person in each regional office who had basic ASL skills. That is not so much the case at present. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing committee would like to see more training within the offices around deaf technologies, culture, etc. to change the mindset of the deaf community working with VR. She states that currently the deaf and hard of hearing community does not find VR supportive or helpful.

Director Salas acknowledged this concern and is willing to do what he can to support the deaf community. Lorrie Ripley also volunteered to help where she can. It was suggested to have Beth Keller attend a future SRC meeting to talk about what can be done to recruit VR counselors that have ASL skills to serve customers who are deaf and hard of hearing and their unique challenges to becoming employed.

**CAP UPDATE:** Lorrie Ripley has been very busy with calls, not all specific to VR. She did receive her first call about interpreters. Fall tuition was a hot topic but those calls are slowing down now as we are in the winter months. Lorrie recently participated in the regional CAP call, where issues in NH are being seen in other states as well.

NH ABLE accounts are up and running. Allowable annual contributions are up to \$18,000 before affecting benefits. If you are working, you can contribute an additional \$14,000. The onset of disability is being raised to 46 from 26 beginning in 2026.

The Governor's Commission on Disability is currently recruiting for a part-time ADA Coordinator. SRC members are encouraged to spread the word to anyone who might qualify for this position. This person will be the "go to" person on ADA issues for the State of New Hampshire.

A social media reminder – if you have anything important to share with the disability community, please feel free to push it out through the Governor's Commission's Facebook account. VR's benefit training notice goes out next week.

A reminder that Jeff Dickinson's memorial will be held next week. Regarding the SILC, Carrie Dudley mentioned that there is no one ready to take over as chair of this committee. Although she has termed out of a four-year term, she is working on an extension for her to continue. More training needs to occur on attracting members to these volunteer committees as all face similar challenges around membership.

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## REPORT OUT FROM COMMITTEES:

**Policy:** Ella McAllister sent out an email to the full SRC earlier in the month outlining changes to our policies on **Strategic Direction, Transition Services, Pre-Employment Transition and Policy on Writing, Issuing, and Maintaining Agency Policies**. The updates are effective 1.3.24 and the attachment within the email outlines what has changed. If the SRC has any questions they are welcome to forward them to Ella.

**State Plan:** Ella McAllister updated the Council on activities around VR's State Plan. Every four years the State of NH's Workforce Partners is required to submit a state plan. Our section is just on VR. The NH Workforce system contracted with **Thomas P. Miller & Associates** to complete the plan. A first draft of the VR portion was submitted to them on December 8<sup>th</sup>. Public comments were sought from December 11 through January 5<sup>th</sup> on the first draft. As no public comments were received on the VR part, we submitted the final draft to **TP Miller**. It is scheduled to go to the State Workforce Innovation Board (SWIB) on February 6<sup>th</sup>. Any changes will then be made by the Workforce Opportunity Council before they submit. We expect to hear from RSA by the end of May or early June whether any additional changes need to occur.

**CSNA:** The last Comprehensive State Needs Assessment was completed in 2022. It needs to be done again in 2025. The agency has selected **Market Decisions** as the contracted vendor to help complete the assessment. The timeline for work needed for the CSNA is being updated and will be forwarded to the Council when done.

**Strategic Plan:** We have a final draft completed and got the last print done. Ella will be getting a copy out to Council members this week. Richard is hoping this plan will be a working document and not one that sits on the shelf until the next revision. He is encouraging all Council members to read it and hold us accountable to the goals and key performance indicators within. It was suggested that the Strategic Plan and timelines be a standing SRC agenda item to evaluate where things stand.

**OLD BUSINESS/NEW BUSINESS:** Lorrie Ripley is reminding Council members to complete their 15-A forms with the Secretary of State's office. It can be done on-line. For those filling out the forms, use your work address on the form and not your home address.

There being no further business on the agenda, a motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 3:00 pm.

The next regular meeting of the SRC will be:

**April 25, 2024**

**1:00 pm to 3:00 pm**

**Room 100 Walker Building & ZOOM option**

**21 South Fruit Street, Concord, NH, 03301**