

Oregon Commission for the Blind
Regular Meeting Portland, Oregon – August 4, 2023 - 1:00 pm

Approved Minutes

CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

Chair Scott McCallum called the meeting to order at 1:00 pm for a regular meeting of the Commission of the Blind. Members in attendance were:

Scott McCallum
Michael Babcock
Nadeera Broome
Lillian Goodman
Laurel Hudson
Vivian Carlile-Smith
Alan Labrum, OD

APPROVAL OF MINUTES – June 2, 2023 (Action Item)

Chair McCallum requested a motion to approve the June 2, 2023, meeting minutes. Commissioner Nadeera Broome moved to accept the minutes, and Commissioner Dr. Alan Labrum seconded. The motion passed.

AUDIENCE INTRODUCTION

Each member of the audience was asked to introduce themselves.

PUBLIC COMMENT

No public comment was submitted.

SUMMER WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

Angel Hale reported on Summer Work Experience Programs (SWEP).

Of the three programs:

Salem - Completed July 28

Portland - Completed August 4 (today).

Third Track program: Some of the work experiences are still under way.

Angel introduced four students to commissioners who were here, either in person or virtually, to report to the commissioners on their experiences.

The students were:

Nate Babwah
Eric Gongora-Dominguez
Noah Mayer
Elwin Rivera

Nate Babwah – First year, Salem SWEP.

Nate is 17 years old and will be a senior in high school this Fall. The best highlight was the number of new friends he made over the summer. Another highlight was being able to step up and help others. He was excited to report that he worked, helping in a café, and earned money.

Noah Mayer – First year, Portland SWEP.

Noah worked at OMSI in the exhibit “*Orcas: Our Shared Future.*” They had a lot of fun this summer and they think that SWEP is “a super-meaningful experience for a lot of people.” The relationships one creates and becoming friends with new people is a lot of fun. Noah also enjoyed the Northwest Association for Blind Athletes (NWABA) events such as Tandem Biking and Blind Soccer. Noah also reported that the experiences like this where we can talk about having a disability is vitally important.

Elwin Rivera – Portland, First Year.

Elwin worked at Miles Access Skills Training where they provide people who are experiencing vision loss with the tools and training they need so they may live their best life. Elwin reported that the first week was the most intense with O&M each day with other job-related activities throughout the week. It was quite interesting when they began working together as their coworker and boss were both fully blind. Mainly, it was the people he met during SWEP - staff members, the community that SWEP builds for us and introduces us to is amazing. “There are people I can actually talk to about being blind.”

Elwin was also awarded Portland SWEPpee of the year.

Eric Gongora-Dominguez – Third Year. (including virtual), Portland SWEP.

Eric worked at Oregon Health and Science University’s Center for Diversity and Inclusion where “work was awesome.” His peers went above and beyond, and if he needed support, they were always there. Dorm life was incredible with awesome events. Eric said he really values the community building SWEP provides because “prevalence of blindness is low and when we find people who are (also blind), we can relate more than with sighted individuals.”

Eric’s favorite part of SWEP was Portland because of the community and relationships that he built.

Carolyn Frank and Vincent (Vinnie) Gwzodz, Portland SWEP’s Co-Facilitators, added to the conversation. Carolyn commented that the Commissioners would be really proud of the nine Sweppies in the Portland program. This is the fiftieth year. As we entered the year, we knew we had 50 years of experiences to draw upon, and the nine students who exited met the challenge and then some.

Vinnie acknowledged the commissioners, thanking them, Executive Director Dacia Johnson and the agency, overall, for the all-hands-on-deck responsiveness to the SWEP program. Vinnie personally thanked Commissioner Laurel Hudson who joined Portland and Salem for a NWABA hike at Silver Falls State Park.

Chair Scott McCallum added, for those who like blind soccer, that Washington School for the Blind (Vancouver, WA) is installing a blind soccer pitch and has met with NWABA to establish a league.

Commissioner Carlile-Smith asked Elwin where he worked and what it is he did there. Elwin replied that he worked at Miles Access Skills Training and that he helped clients adapt to vision loss so they can have the technology they need to continue working.

Chair McCallum asked Elwin about the types of technology he taught and if he was considering it as a career path. Elwin described using braille displays, Jaws, Zoom magnifier, Voiceover and other aids and that, yes, it is fun to do.

Carolyn Frank added that Elwin has been offered a job by his employer to continue to work, after school, during the school year. He's considering the balancing of school and work combined with being a high school junior this year.

Vinnie Gwzodz asked Elwin to elaborate on the career exploration element of SWEP. Elwin had been unsure whether assistive technology (AT) was a good fit, but he shared that he learned to enjoy AT because of the variability of adapting to the individual client.

Commissioner Nadeera Broome congratulated Nate and the group, thanking everyone who helped with the program. Nadeera asked Eric what his next plans are. Eric replied that he is already enrolled as a psychology major at Corban University (Salem, OR).

Chair McCallum acknowledged and thanked everyone at OCB for their efforts to provide the SWEP program, and he thanked the SWEP students for all they put into the experience.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT

Executive Director Johnson presented the report.

First, Executive Director Johnson recognized Angel Hale, Dir. , Vocational Rehabilitation Services, for her incredible leadership, passion and commitment that went into producing the SWEP 2023 programs.

Donations and Financial Reports

The Agency's CFIO, Kat Martin, provided the Financial and Donations reports.

Donations Report: Our cash balance in the fund was \$297,263 on June 30, 2023.

As a cost savings measure to reduce our general fund obligation, the legislature directed OCB to use a portion of donations to match the salary expense of one transition counselor. That obligation will be carried forward to the 2023-25 biennium and, with \$50,157 budgeted at present, the unobligated donations balance begins the new biennium with an adjusted balance of \$247,106.

Financial Status Report: The 2021-23 Legislatively Adopted Budget (LAB) was 66.42 FTE, and \$24,349,910 total funds before February 2022 and 2023 session adjustments, \$26,683,768 after.

As of the preliminary close of June 2023, a 5.8% variance to our Legislatively Approved Budget, is projected for the end of the biennium with General Fund fully expended while Other Funds and Federal Funds are under budget. Accounting is working to the state's deadlines for adjusting entries and accruals so these figures are not yet final. I do plan to report out final 2021-23 figures when next we gather.

Looking ahead to 2023-25, which began on July 1st, the Governor has signed the budget bill passed by the Joint Committee on Ways and Means, consisting of \$6,881,100 General, \$1,135,397 Other, and \$18,817,476 Federal Funds for a total of \$26,833,973 total funds and 66 positions. This budget represents a 7.9% increase over the 2021-23 legislatively adopted budget before session adjustments and a 1.7% increase over 2023-25 Current Service Level that factors in costs of living and other adjustments.

The end of session bill, if approved by the Governor, will provide the funding for the position reclassifications needed for the third tier for counselors/teachers, investment in phase two of the case management system, and Department of Administrative Services information technology requirements.

Between the two bills, budget and end of session, OCB will have a total of \$27,820,809 to operate with in biennium 2023-25. This represents a 10.6% increase over the 2021-23 legislatively approved budget as of January 2023 and a 5.2% increase over current service level for 2023-25.

Executive Director Johnson recognized the Accounting team for their efforts to complete the year-end and biennium close.

Federal Update

Dante Allen awaits Congressional confirmation of President Biden's nominee to lead Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in the U.S. Department of Education.

There is an item under Old Business, the RSA Monitoring Corrective Action Plan, which will be addressed later in the agenda.

Pre-ETS 15% Funding Requirement: We are required to spend 15% of our Vocational Rehabilitation federal dollars on pre-employment transition services.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we were forced to deliver SWEP virtually which didn't contain the robust elements that required staffing and wage expenditures. As a result, the cost of pre-transition services dropped, and the RSA cannot grant an exception to the 15% requirement.

In Federal Fiscal Year 2020, we took longer to spend the funds, and in FFY 2022, we fell short, but expended the dollars on other program expenses (but not pre-employment transition services). We are working with RSA to explain why that happened. Thirty-seven other states were in the same position, and they acknowledge it is due to the pandemic but RSA doesn't have the ability to provide the exception. Obviously, we will work to revert to meeting the 15% requirement each year.

2023 Legislative Session/Budget Review

Introduction of MaryMichelle Sosne, Legislative Fiscal Office Analyst

Executive Director Johnson introduced MaryMichelle Sosne, our Legislative Fiscal Office Analyst. Recognizing her for her work, Dacia shared that MaryMichelle asked the agency the challenging questions needed to support strong recommendations around funding the SWEP program (to make up the loss of funds from the Blind and Visually Impaired Students (BVIS) fund). MaryMichelle guided us through the legislative process, and we were able to have the funds restored into the agency budget, going forward.

MaryMichelle addressed the commissioners, sharing that the past legislative session had been difficult due to the risk of a potential recession for Oregon coming off the federal funds we had received over the past couple years. MaryMichelle shared that they're working on plans to strategically fill gaps for additional requests that were unmet in the legislative session.

Executive Director Johnson reminded commissioners that we will begin the budgeting process for 2025-27 to determine the priorities, working with commissioners and stakeholders, and create the Agency Request Budget that typically is due the last day of July or first of August. Budget items that were denied in previous budgets will be reviewed to ascertain whether they are still needed.

OLD BUSINESS

Business Enterprise Program Update

Eric Morris presented the Business Enterprise Program Report.

Self-Service Initiative: The self-service initiative continues. We have worked hard over the past two years to get all the pieces in place.

Strategic Planning: BEP staff and the elected committee (BECC) conducted a strategic planning session June 7-8. Terry Smith facilitated the two-day session which gave everyone the opportunity to step back and really look at what should be on BEP's horizon, especially coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic. Together, we established three priorities:

1. How is the program going to grow? We know that federal and state office building populations are not rebounding with the transition to hybrid workspaces. Tourism was one area suggested as an untapped market for vending.
2. Communication. Establishing rules of conduct as part of the strategic plan and being able to communicate despite occasional tension between staff and BECC members.
3. Training and Learning: What are ways to acquire specialization skills necessary to serve new markets/businesses?

Also, in July, Kathy Ewing met the Portland and Salem SWEP students, NWABA, and support staff at Silver Falls Café to enjoy lunch in the café and hear a presentation about food service from Sal Barazza, operator at the café. Sal's 30 years of experience and Kathy's overview of BEP may generate interest in BEP vending as a potential career.

Eric has taken a position at another State of Oregon agency. This will be his last meeting with the commissioners.

Commissioner Carlile-Smith thanked Eric for the work and effort he has put into the BEP program, wishing him the best of luck in his new adventure.

Introduction of Michael Wolff who will serve as the Interim Business Enterprise Program Director

Executive Director Johnson invited Michael Wolff to speak to the commissioners.

Michael stated that he has been with the agency for about 2 years as the Business Manager following a 20—year career in grocery retail and food service. He is excited to work for BEP and support the agency in different ways.

Review of 2022 RSA Monitoring Corrective Action Plan for the VR Program

Clay France provided a report of the Corrective Action Plan (CAP) from the RSA Monitoring in June 2022. The CAP was finalized recently, and outstanding tasks include revision of some previously submitted federal reports, participating in technical assistance training, and quarterly updates (on the progress of the CAP) to RSA. Our commitment is to complete the CAP by April 1, 2024.

Chair McCallum asked if there was any substantial difference of opinion in the interpretation of allowable expenses under the Pre-ETS funding (one of the reporting items that will be revised). Angel Hale replied that we are in agreement with RSA, so we don't feel the need to disagree with the finding.

EXECUTIVE SESSION – Pursuant to ORS 192.660(2)(f) this meeting or portions thereof may be held in Executive Session to consider information and records exempt from public disclosure.

RESUME PUBLIC MEETING – The meeting was resumed at 2:09 pm.

NEW BUSINESS

Consideration of Final Order on Contested Case-AOH-2022-ABC-0530 (Action Item)

Chair McCallum asked for a motion to approve the Final Order. Vivian Carlile-Smith motioned to approve the Final Order as submitted, Laurel Hudson seconded, and the motion passed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION – Pursuant to ORS 192.660(2)(i) this meeting or portions thereof may be held in Executive Session to review and evaluation the employment-related performance of the Executive Director.

RESUME PUBLIC MEETING – The meeting was resumed at 2:23 pm.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, Chair McCallum adjourned the meeting at 2:23 pm.