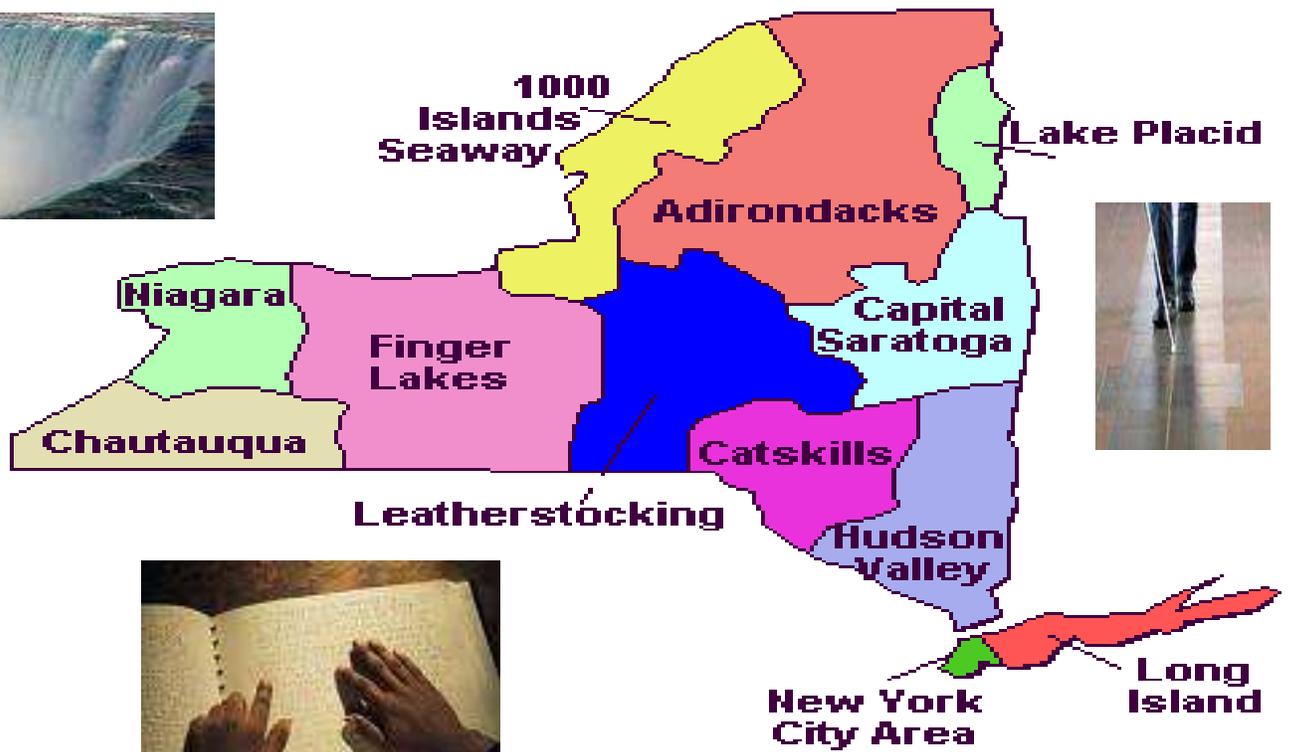




New York State

Office of Children and Family Services
Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped
State Rehabilitation Council



2007 SRC Annual Report

December 31, 2007

Dear Readers:

Once again I am pleased to be able to acknowledge the dedication and focused work of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services' Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped's State Rehabilitation Council as evidenced by the accompanying Annual Report for 2007. Each year the Council appears to be gaining even more momentum and 2007 has marked still another year of unprecedented success.

The high quality of the Council's leadership and creativity has cast this as an extraordinarily successful and thoughtful advisory body; a leader among its counterparts throughout the country. Indeed, the comprehensive and effective services delivered by the Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped is partly inspired by the insightful deliberations and recommendations provided by the Council.

This annual report highlights the varied and meaningful activities of the Council in 2007. I know you will join me in recognizing the outstanding contributions of our proud and dedicated State Rehabilitation Council.

Sincerely,

Brian S. Daniels

Brian Daniels

Associate Commissioner
New York State Office of Children & Family Services
Commission for the Blind & Visually Handicapped

916 Lansing Street
Utica NY 13501
315-790-7567
sharong@cabvi.org
December 31, 2007

The Honorable Eliot Spitzer, Governor
State of New York
Executive Chamber
State Capitol
Albany NY 12224

Dear Governor Spitzer:

As Chairperson of the New York State Rehabilitation Council for the Office for Children and Family Services, Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped, I am pleased to present for your consideration the 2007 State Rehabilitation Council Annual Report.

Each year, the SRC produces this report to inform federal and state officials and the public about the work and the accomplishments of the Commission's State Rehabilitation Council. The report highlights the SRC's activities of 2007 and the goals for 2008.

The SRC works in partnership with all of the key stakeholders responding to the needs of New Yorkers who are blind and visually impaired. Each member and the SRC as a whole, has a well defined purpose, but our influence does not come from just legal or regulatory mandates, our influence comes from the completion of our key work. Each member serves as the voice of the constituencies that they represent and with that voice, they represent the voice of many.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact me at anytime.

Respectfully,

Sharon L. Giovinazzo

Sharon L. Giovinazzo
NYS CBVH SRC Chairperson

cc: Edward Anthony, Acting Commissioner, Rehabilitation Services
Administration
Joseph Pepin, State Liaison, Rehabilitation Services Administration
Todd Eggert, SRC Coordinator/Liaison, NYS Commission for the Blind and
Visually Handicapped

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sharong@cabvi.org
December 31, 2007

Mr. Edward Anthony, Acting Commissioner
Rehabilitation Services Administration
US Department of Education
Mary E. Switzer Building
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington DC 20202

Dear Acting Commissioner Anthony:

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Sharon L. Giovinazzo

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NYS CBVH SRC Chairperson

cc: The Honorable Eliot Spitzer, Governor New York State
Joseph Pepin, State Liaison, Rehabilitation Services Administration
Todd Eggert, SRC Coordinator/Liaison, NYS Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped

New York State
Office of Children & Family Services
Commission for the Blind & Visually Handicapped
State Rehabilitation Council
Annual Report
2007

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) for the New York State Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped (CBVH) is pleased to issue its Annual Report for the Year 2007 to Governor Elliot Spitzer and Acting Commissioner Edward Anthony of the Rehabilitation Services Administration. This report includes a discussion of the Council's activities during 2007 and plans for the upcoming year.

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is an advisory body authorized under Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. The nature and scope of the Council's deliberations and recommendations include CBVH policies, procedures, and operations as they may affect consumers or consumer applicants of agency services statewide. Additionally, the SRC assists in the development of federally required State plans and annual updates to those plans. Much of the Council's business is conducted in committees focusing on the CBVH priority issues of employment, children and transition services, and consumer needs assessment.

The SRC meets once each calendar quarter. The Council is comprised of members representing blind consumers, deaf-blind consumers, parents, educators, business, industry and labor, consumer advocacy groups, the New York State Workforce Investment Board, the New York State Client Assistance Program, and the New York State Independent Living Council. Ex Officio members represent The New York State Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID), the New York State Commission on Quality of Care and Advocacy for People with Disabilities (CQCAPD), the New York State Office for the Aging (SOFA), and various representatives from CBVH who provide information and assistance as requested by the Council. Meetings are open to the public and always include a public comment segment on the meeting agenda for individuals to provide input or bring issues of concern to the Council.

MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

At each quarterly meeting, SRC members were provided with informational updates on key issues that could impact on CBVH programs, services, and initiatives. This year, the key issues included:

Office for the Blind Legislation - Governor Spitzer's proposed Executive Budget contained an Article 7 Program Bill, which proposed to create an independent public agency, the Office for the Blind. Language in the bill included moving the Equipment Loan Fund out from under CBVH, establishing a residential rehabilitation center in the state, establishing a home for needy and aged persons who are blind, and a review of programs connected to VR including education. Associate Commissioner Brian Daniels informed the Council that the Office of Children and Family Services remained supportive of this Governors' initiative. Although the full proposal was not adopted by the Legislature, a new advisory body, the Executive Board, was established as of October, 2007. Many questions have been raised regarding the respective roles of the SRC and the new Executive Board. However, at the time of this writing, the Executive Board has not met, thus leaving much of the ambiguity surrounding the roles of both bodies in place. An effort to establish cross-representation between the Executive Board and the SRC is scheduled to be discussed at the Board's first meeting in 2008.

Comprehensive Case Management System – In January, 2007, CBVH launched the development of a new comprehensive case management system. Throughout the course of the year, the SRC has been kept informed of the progress being made towards the implementation of the system. It promises to be much more user friendly and enable immediate access to forms, records, and data reports statewide. It also appears that this system will aid the Council in obtaining service-related data with a high degree of specificity and timeliness. Implementation is expected in the spring of 2008.

Licensure of Rehabilitation Professionals – As stated elsewhere in this report, a legislative initiative requiring the licensure of rehabilitation professionals such as Orientation & Mobility (O&M) instructors and Vision Rehabilitation Therapists (formerly known as Rehabilitation Teachers) is under consideration by the New York State Legislature. At the June meeting in Syracuse, a vote was taken to determine the level of support for this concept amongst the Council members. The vote was affirmative: 8 in favor, 2 opposed, and 1 abstention. At the December meeting in Albany, it was decided to provide a letter indicating the SRC support of licensure to both the New York Vision Rehabilitation Association (NYVRA) and the New York State Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Visually Impaired (NYSAER) for posting on their respective websites.

Membership Consolidation and Appointments – With a new SRC Coordinator/Liaison in place at CBVH as of January, 2007, priority was given to getting candidates in place for appointment to the SRC to fill all statutorily required membership categories. An analysis of the current membership and the membership patterns in recent years indicated that an increased emphasis needed to be placed on achieving greater ethnic diversity and ensuring that the majority of voting members be visually impaired. Further, it was determined that the SRC membership should avoid duplicative representation of various constituency groups as a means of making the best use of resources. With a newly elected governor in office in January, 2007 and all of the new appointments that go with that, the appointment process for SRC members did not get underway until June. Throughout the course of the year, however, the Council was kept informed of the status of SRC appointments, and to aid in the process, the SRC decided to relegate the issue of membership and membership appointments to the Executive Committee. It is expected that the SRC will achieve full membership and full compliance with Section 105 requirements in 2008.

In addition to the foregoing, this year's meetings included more presentations from related programs and affiliated service providers including:

- A review team from the Rehabilitation Services Administration consisting of Bill Bethel, Joe Pepin, Brian Miller, and Malaika Nji attended the March meeting in New York City and spoke with the Council regarding the monitoring process that RSA conducted in the spring of both CBVH and VESID. Additional discussion focused on better marketing of CBVH services and outreach activities throughout the State; the need for increased emphasis on employment services; more immediate access to assistive technology; and increased involvement of blind consumers with the State's network of Independent Living Centers.
- Also at the March meeting, SRC members heard from a visually impaired 7th grade student, Paul Nichols, from rural Malone, New York, and his Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI). Paul was previously home schooled and has been blind since he was 4 months old. Paul talked about how his experience is different from students who are not blind. He focused on the high level of preparation in advance of the start of classes which needs to be done each year including knowing his schedule, the layout of his school, ordering books, and meeting with teachers to discuss his needs. Paul and his TVI also do presentations to his classmates when he gets new equipment, allowing his classmates to try the equipment so that they better understand its purpose. Together with his TVI, Susan Vought, he is developing a campaign to recruit students to prepare to work in the fields of vision rehabilitation (TVI, Rehabilitation Teaching, Orientation and Mobility Instruction).

He is also starting a group for 11-16 year old youth which will incorporate fun activities such as field trips and recreational activities, with opportunities for mentorship by older individuals who are blind.

- SRC Vice-Chair, Nancy Belowich-Negron, showed a video of the State University of New York (SUNY) at Albany Pre-College Program at the June meeting in Syracuse. The program, which runs for a week, was originally started for students who are blind, but has been expanded to include students with other disabilities. Two sessions were held this summer, with 25 students in each session. Rather than take college courses, students learn how to be responsible to each other, clarify their values, understand their rights and responsibilities, ask for accommodations and connect to the disabled student services offices on their campuses. This is a one-of-a-kind program in the country and SRC members were very impressed with the work being done by Nancy and her staff in this regard.
- Grace Ambrose Zaken, a professor from Hunter College, provided information at the June meeting in Syracuse concerning New York State legislation that would require Licensure for Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Specialists and Vision Rehabilitation Therapists (formerly known as Rehabilitation Teachers, RT). Licensure would require that professionals conform to a set of written standards, providing protection for consumers. She also informed the group about a Low Vision Pilot Project funded through Medicare demonstration funds. O&M and RT are eligible to be paid, but they must be licensed. A doctor must write a prescription for the “therapies”.
- Two presentations were made to the SRC at the September meeting in Albany - Dick Healy, CEO of the Industries for the Blind of New York State (IBNYS), and Tamra Foley, the new Employment Specialist from the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI) in Utica. Mr. Healy spoke about the IBNYS’s 61 year history of providing quality products and services for New York State by hiring blind and other disabled employees. These employees’ salaries range from minimum wage to management positions paying up to \$17/hour, as well as health insurance benefits, vacation, and retirement packages for those employees. Ms. Foley, a native Californian, spoke about her personal experience in looking for a job as a blind person. She was extremely impressed with opportunities on the East Coast, especially New York State and Washington DC.
- The December meeting offered an opportunity for the SRC to receive an overview report of the CBVH needs assessment study recently completed by Dr. David Vandergoot of the Center for Essential Management

Services located at Hunter College in New York City. The study, which consisted of interviews of 25 “key informants” and seven focus group meetings, is intended to improve outreach and service delivery by CBVH.

COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

For the past several years the SRC has maintained three standing committees to parallel the CBVH strategic plan priorities of employment services, children and transition services, and needs assessment. With the aforementioned Office for the Blind legislation as impetus, the SRC has recognized and discussed on a number of occasions the need to track both State and Federal legislative initiatives to determine their impact on CBVH and individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Although a Legislative Committee has not been established as yet, the consensus is clearly in favor of doing so prior to the start of the 2008 state Legislative session.

The primary issues discussed by the three standing committees in 2007 were:

Employment Services Committee – At each quarterly meeting, the committee reviewed the employment related activities being conducted by CBVH including staff training, employer partnerships, tool development, and looking at how services are obtained. The group discussed how an on-line job data base is used not only to identify available positions, but to help consumers choose realistic goals. CBVH has assisted in the formation of two placement groups, one upstate and one downstate. The downstate group has discussed job readiness, referrals for Disability Mentoring Day, challenges to working with individuals with criminal history and other topics. The upstate group recently learned about veteran’s issues and will be discussing tax credits and accessing state and federal employment programs. The SRC also heard encouraging news about a customer service employer who is proactively recruiting employees with legal blindness. Six individuals began working there in September and additional employees will begin when accessibility issues for one account are worked out.

Children & Transition Services - The committee received briefings on a new initiative CBVH is undertaking: the establishment of a statewide mentoring program for transition aged youth. They have discussed the underlying concepts of a statewide program and provided specific suggestions to CBVH, and are exploring other ways the SRC can assist with the development and launching of this program. The committee also discussed the importance of reading skills on a number of occasions. The continuing problem of poor reading skills for high school students and college graduates has impeded their ability to obtain and keep a job. The committee will research appropriate levels of reading for students at various ages. Once this information is obtained, the committee may recommend that CBVH work closely with the New York State Education

Department to ensure that standards are met. Two additional recommendations were made by the committee:

1. As most teachers of the visually impaired (TVI's) have a difficult time keeping abreast of changes in the field, CBVH should sponsor a statewide conference for interested TVI's to provide an overview of the newest technology in the field of blindness.
2. CBVH should find ways to encourage active teachers of the visually impaired to work with university career centers to recruit more college students into the field of visual impairment to help ameliorate the shortage of specialized instructors.

Needs Assessment - The committee worked together to develop five survey instruments to determine consumer satisfaction with services received from CBVH and private agency contractors. The five surveys address O & M skills training, rehabilitation skills teaching, communication skills, placement services and satisfaction with CBVH staff. Also, three additional surveys are being considered to address services provided to young children, services provided to independent living consumers, and services provided to senior citizens. Each of the survey instruments is designed to focus on two areas: skills and consumer satisfaction. The committee expects to do a mass mailing to all consumers with specific emphasis targeted toward individuals as they complete specific stages of their rehabilitation/training. The committee is considering alternate ways of conducting the survey, including contracting the process to an outside entity.

2008 GOALS AND PLANNED ACTIVITIES

The SRC is scheduled to meet quarterly in 2008 with the September meeting incorporating an orientation and retreat-type activity in addition to the normal committee and full Council meetings. It is anticipated that most, if not all, of the membership requirements will be in place by mid-year, making these activities both necessary and timely. During the December, 2007 meeting, several topics of interest were identified for presentations and/or discussion at the SRC meetings in 2008. The identified topics are:

- The Interagency Council on people who are deaf, deaf-blind, or hard of hearing
- The RSA monitoring report and CBVH's response to it
- Services for prisoners upon release
- Information on the private agencies for the blind in New York State

- Client Assistance Program services, structure, and effectiveness
- A panel presentation of blind people who grew up in different environments – urban, suburban, rural
- How Independent Living Centers are serving blind and visually impaired consumers
- A comparative analysis of placement/employment data
- The impact of the Braille Bill – how do we benchmark it?
- Highlight specific programs that CBVH sponsors
- Substance abuse issues in the blind community and service sectors

Although time, logistics, and the normal course of SRC business may not allow for all of these topics to be examined, plans are underway to ensure that each scheduled meeting agenda includes at least one of the identified topics.

CONCLUSION

It is with pride that the SRC acknowledges the role of its Chair, Sharon Giovinazzo, in the national arena. While attending the Spring Conference of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) in Bethesda, MD in April, Ms. Giovinazzo volunteered to serve on the national steering committee for the development of the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC). In Addition, Ms. Giovinazzo is working with an ad hoc group of SRC's for state agencies for the blind. Although brief thus far, her interactions with SRC chairs and staff from around the country has served to further her understanding of the SRC role and function which is being applied to the CBVH SRC. Clearly, this has strengthened our functioning, as well as our sense of purpose, process, and pay-off. The SRC is working to create greater value to consumers by focusing on key work, building partnerships, and listening and responding to issues brought before the Council.