

Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind Quarterly Meeting Minutes
Hilton University of Florida Conference Center-Gainesville
1714 SW 34th Street Gainesville, FL 32607
May 8, 2025

Council Members Present

- Doug Ingram
- Jorge Hernandez
- Robert Doyle
- Arthur Moody
- Paul Edwards

Council Members attended Virtually

- Patricia Lipovsky
- Donte Mickens
- Denise Valkema

Council Members Absent

- Sead Bekric
- Ciawanda McDonald
- Robert Kelly

Council Staff

- Brandis Hall

Chairperson Jorge Hernandez called the meeting to order with introductions and Pledge of Allegiance led by Doug Ingram.

Adoption of Agenda

Paul Edwards made a motion to adopt the agenda as amended. Doug Ingram seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Approval of January 2025 Meeting Minutes

Paul Edwards made a motion to accept January 2025, meeting minutes. Doug Ingrams seconded the motion. The motion was passed.

Director's Report

Director Doyle presented his report to the Council:

- Staffing Update
 - The Director announced Ed James as the new Bureau Chief for Career, Technology Training Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired
 - Paula Mooney promoted to District Administrator Position in the Orlando office
 - Audrey Turner officially appointed as District Administrator in the Daytona Beach office
 - Mary Grant promoted from Human Service Counselor to Assistant District Administrator in the Daytona Beach office
 - The Director announced the departure of Wayne Jenning from the District 2 Tallahassee office Division of Blind Services (20 years of service) to become the Area 1 Director at the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in Tallahassee, FL.
 - Bill Findley is retiring at the end of the summer. Alan Risk, Compliance Officer for BEP, will transition to the role of Bureau Chief for BEP pending approval
 - Elesha Brown is shifting from Contract Manager Supervisor to External Affairs Bureau Chief at the end of this month
 - Amy Grissom will not return to the Division as the new Contract Manager
 - Mireya Hernandez will serve as an interim supervisor for Contracts temporarily
 - The Division received a resume for a potential candidate for the Contract supervisor position
- FLWINS
 - Common intake/ common reporting system
 - Employment System/portal for client to request services for jobs (One stop shop)
 - An applicant can apply with one application, and the system will send referrals to multiple agencies within workforce sector to process applications
 - W. Jennings & N. Brown attends meetings for FLWINS
- Federal Updates (Washington, D.C. Updates)

- Linda McMahon confirmed as the US Department of Education Secretary
- Diana Diaz, confirmed as the Deputy Assistant Secretary -Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS)
- Several FLDOE employees received nominations for positions within the U.S. Department of Education pending Senate confirmations
- The goal is to reshape the Department of Education and relinquish authority to the states to make decisions on education matters
- Any programs or agencies removed from the department will shift to different areas of the US Federal Government- Any removal of programs requires approval of Congress
- Christopher Pope is the acting chief of RSA
- Randolph-Shepherd Act-Not considered apart of DEI.
- CSAVR
 - Approached by Congress on relocating CSAVR to a different agency.
 - Two agencies for suggestion: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or U.S. Department of Labor
 - The states prefer U.S. Department of Labor
 - Advocate for the integrity of the program and people
 - Protect and Preserve the VR Program
 - Double COLA-does not have budget authority to accept funds
- RSA
 - Reduction in forces-cuts have not impacted RSA
 - Monitoring scheduled for 2025
 - Cleared some areas of Corrective Action Plan
 - Programs not impacted by budget cuts
 - RSA challenging Social Security reporting
- State Updates
 - House-Sale Tax reduction from 6 to 5.25%-funded by vacant positions
 - House recommends 52 positions (18.2%-\$4mil.) but gives the Division budget authority and match (Positions vacant 90 days or more) (Although it takes 120 days to fill position)
 - Senate fulfills the Division budget's request plus a 4% salary increase

- The Senate did not recommend removing vacancies in the Division
- House Budget (\$112.9 Billion) vs. Senate (\$117.3 Billion)
- Legislature did pass HB 1103 but not with
- SB756-Health Insurance People with Disabilities
- Steve Koncar officially appointed Chief of Staff for Division of Blind Services
- Conflict Resolution
 - November 1st-April 30th
 - 121 inquiries
 - 85-resolved with call
 - 31- intermediate
 - 0-Complex (Administrative hearings)
 - 5-Unknown complexities
- Innovative Projects
 - Opportunities to develop
 - Seven Proposal received
 - Four out of the seven recommended for funding
 - Conklin Davis-Digital Content Center (additional tailoring of proposal-\$32K ties into infrastructure)
 - FASB-Workforce Research and Planning \$127,000 cap \$50K (Not recommended for funded) Research funding project is not ideal
 - Miami Lighthouse-Ask for more innovation
 - LVBL-Interested in funding but asking for more innovations
 - Two other projects-LBB 20/20 Vision Store & Grant Writing not recommended for funding

DBS Employment Report

Marian Rezkallah, Program Administrator, presented the report for Quarter 3.

Quarter Performance Outcomes:

- 3953 total number of clients served Q3.
- 402 closed cases of which 189 were successful.
- The rehabilitation rate for closed cases was 59%.
- 131 unsuccessful closures after receiving services.
- The average hourly wage is \$22.79
- The highest wage is \$89.00

- The lowest wage is \$11.00

Ms. Rezkallah informed the Council the overall unsuccessful closure rate was down. Attributing to this, among other things, unable to locate, client refusing services or not needing services.

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Regional Transit

Thomas Idoyaga, Transit Community Specialist, presented.

- The discussion focused on improving website and app accessibility to meet ADA requirements and WCAG 2.2 standards. A website redesign was already underway using a more accessibility-friendly WordPress template after realizing the original design would not meet compliance standards.
- The goal is to ensure the site is usable for all riders, including blind and visually impaired customers.
- Several accessibility overlay tools and plugins are being reviewed to improve features such as contrast, screen reading, language translation, and overall navigation.
- Members of the Citizens Advisory Board, including two blind participants, responded positively to the proposed accessibility tools.
- Council members strongly emphasized that blind and visually impaired users must be involved in testing, not just automated compliance tools. While the website may technically pass legal standards, usability and real-world functionality are equally important.
- The Council recommended working with organizations such as the National Federation of the Blind of Florida, the Florida Council of the Blind, local blind veterans through the VA, UF students, and accessibility professionals like Jorge and Adam's team in Tallahassee for testing and feedback.

Additional local resources were offered, including CTTC apprentices trained in accessibility reviews and blind veterans who could help test the platform. The overall message was clear: accessibility should follow the principle of "nothing about us without us," meaning blind users should be directly involved throughout development to avoid costly redesigns later and ensure meaningful access for all users.

Client Satisfaction Survey (Quarter 1 and 2 CSS Survey Results Overview)

Dr. Minna Jia presented.

- Survey Population: July 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024–308 clients.
- Among 93 respondents, 86 DBS clients received services from both DBS and local providers.
- 60% of the respondents said they came to DBS to obtain employment.
- Accessibility material provided by DBS: 86%
- Job readiness training satisfaction: 97%
- DBS overall satisfaction: 83%.

Dr. Jia highlighted key areas for improvement, including strengthening employment support and job placement services, improving communication throughout the service process, and enhancing case closure and post-case support. There was a strong emphasis on ensuring consistency among local service providers, increasing responsiveness to client needs, and making clients more aware of available post-closure services. Participants also stressed the importance of developing stronger employment pathways and providing better training for service providers to improve overall outcomes

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Employer Recognition

Daniel O'Connor, District Administrator, District 3, recognized Culver's (Ocala).

District 3 Administrator Report

Daniel O'Connor, District Administrator, presented.

- The district has a total of 16 full-time employees, six are blind employees.
- District has a goal of 100 successful closures
- On target to exceed District goal of 100 and potentially exceeding the prior year's total by 40 closures
- Monthly meetings to review cases for both the VR programs and a separate meeting for staff cases of IL clients.
- Dan O'Connor serves on the Mayor's Disability Council (MDC) and on the Duval County Transportation Disadvantaged Coordinating Board.

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Florida School for the Deaf and Blind

Cathy Glass, Regional Coordinator-Parent Infant Program.

- 266 families in 66 counties across 4 regions-West Palm, Jacksonville, Gainesville & Panhandle-no contract in the Miami areas for blind babies
- Provide support to families dealing with children's vision loss
- Organize various events for children-one per month (goal)
- Recruiting Parent Advisors
- Parent Conference for one day in Orlando-child care provided (Caring for the Caregiver themselves)
- Models and Mentor program-adults with visually impairment meet once a month on Zoom to discuss various topics

Florida Center for the Blind Inc.,

Anisa Pieriboni, Chief Executive Officer, presented.

- Serves eight counties
- 15 employees – 9 blind/visually impaired
- 9-18 children program might increase to 22
- 54 (VR) 74 (OB) 2(BB) 95%CSS
- 13K free vision screening for children in Marion County
- Job Readiness program redesigned-two steps programs
 - Incoming VR clients placed into Job Readiness

Florida State College at Jacksonville VERC

Michael Pugh, Program Manager, presented.

- Vision Education & Rehabilitation Center is fully accredited by the Accreditation Council for the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER).
- Reallocation and reclassification of positions in VERC
- Pugh will transfer into a new position (Director)
- VERC serves approximately 350 clients with contracts from Division of Blind Services and serves a total of over 500 individuals per year.
- VERC is an active member of the Florida Agencies Serving the Blind, a collaborative interagency community, to facilitate collaborative training practices.
- Planning Pre-ETS Summer Program

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Elder Care of Alachua County Inc.,

Florida Agencies Serving the Blind (FASB)

Lisa Howard, Interim Chief Executive Officer, presented.

- New CEO's
 - Caleb Stunkford
 - Becky Bennet, New Port Richey
 - Children's Program Contract on renewing the contract
 - 230 children enrolled in Children's program around the state
 - Jacksonville-No CRP available to offer children programs
 - Great collabs with all the CRPs when it comes to the children's program
 - Monthly meeting with Division Director outside of the board meeting
 - Shortage of certified staff on national level

May 9, 2025

Council Members Present

- Doug Ingram
- Jorge Hernandez
- Robert Doyle
- Paul Edwards
- Arthur Moody

Council Members attending Virtually

- Patricia Lipovsky
- Denise Valkema
- Donte Mickens

Council Members Absent

- Ciawanda McDonald
- Sead Bekric
- Robert Kelly
- Misty Porter

Council Staff

- Brandis Hall

Committee Reports

Paul Edwards presented the Tallahassee Day and Blind Service Foundation (BSF) update.

- Tallahassee Day
 - Visited the Capitol in late February-good participation from consumer agencies
 - Gained a lot in making the legislators aware of blind consumers
 - More attention when the Quarterly Meeting and Capitol Day separated
 - Meeting in August at 4pm to plan for another visit to the Capitol
 - Plan to visit Tallahassee in October or November for an exercise
 - Administrative Issue-White Cane Law
 - Chairman Edwards expressed gratitude to the Division, Community Partners and stakeholder groups for their participation in making Tallahassee Day a success
- Blind Service Foundation
 - Administrative and overseeing the SET Program-\$70K of equipment purchased
 - Chairman Edwards commended Mireya for her hard work and reviewing applications
 - Chairman Edwards expressed gratitude to the Division of Blind Services for contributing dollars to the program to award applicants in May meeting
 - Unsure if the program will continue next year
 - Drop involvement in Apprenticeship program due to the Division hiring staff member to oversee the program and conduct outreach activities-reclassifying the position to workforce coordinator
 - The DSO expressed gratitude to the Division overseeing the Vocational Evaluation Tool

Donte Mickens presented a Public Forum update.

- Chairman Mickens expressed gratitude to the staff at the Division for help with promoting the Public Forum
- Chairman Mickens expressed gratitude to the DSO for providing the refreshments at the Public Forum
- Prefers to continue using the community partners for the public forum
- Prefers to ask participants question based on the demographic present

NCSRC Report

Chairman Jorge Hernandez presented a report on NCSRC

- 17 States represented (low attendance compared to years prior)
- Two board members stepping down
- Suggest that Florida become active and present on NCSRC Board
- Joint meeting with the administrator of Vocational Rehab
- Reopening of WIOA-examine 14 CC certificates
- Positive outcomes -Opening lines of communications

Employment Committee

- Patients Advocate Professionals-CRP-areas with large hospitals
- Hire blind people to work as a patient advocate (remote or work at location)
- \$3-\$40 an hour part-time or full time (FT-
- Some websites or portals are not accessible-trying to stay away from hospitals that use epic (low visions versus fully blind)
- Building network to break into large hospitals (Bascom Palmer, Miami)
- Employee of the hospital as a third-party entity (contractor)

Agenda Items for July 2025

- Nominate Chairs for Sub-Committees
- Report from Bureau Chief (CTTC)
- Final Report on DBS Budget (Director Report)
- Report from Conklin Davis Center
- Final Report on Recipients of Gifts and Donations Awards Grant
- Report from Library Bureau Chief
- Tour of the CTTC
- Reappointments
- CSS
- Public Forum hosted at CTTC
- VocTran

May 2026 Meeting

Paul Edwards motioned to have the May 2026 meeting in Pensacola, FL.

Arthur Moody seconded the motion. The motion passed.

Paul Edward motioned to have February 2026 meeting in Miami. Motioned passed. Dates are May 6-8, 2026.

Old Business/Unfinished Business

None discussed.

New Business

Chairman Edwards reads a letter to alert NCSAB and CSAVR to ensure that the current secretary of Education is aware of stakeholders and communities
Doug Ingram motioned to accept letters to send around the state. Arthur Moody seconded. Motion carried.

Discussions

The Council held a brief discussion on travel arrangements to attend the meeting. It was highly encouraged for council members to attend quarterly meetings in person. DBS staff were advised to book flights earlier to ensure members in person participation. Director Doyle reminded the council of the Departments travel policy and staff shortage.

Client Assistance Program Report

Arthur Moody provided a brief report.

- Nine cases from last quarters
- 5- access to services
- 2- communication
- 1- timeliness
- 1- supervised referral
- Breakdown of cases by District: 1 in D1; 4 in D3; 4 in D12

CAP advocates have also been participating in virtual meetings with various DBS offices to strengthen relationships and share information about the Protection and Advocacy Network (P&A) at Disability Rights Florida, which offers additional support for issues such as public accommodations, effective communication, education, and fair housing.

The discussion noted that DBS served 3,953 clients last quarter, with 213 unsuccessful case closures. Of those, 29 were determined not to require services and 20 were closed due to failure to cooperate. Based on these numbers, along with satisfaction surveys and internal conflict resolution reports, it was suggested that CAP could be serving more clients.

A strong recommendation was made for DBS to ensure that information about the Client Assistance Program (CAP) is clearly shared and readily available to clients. Early CAP involvement was emphasized as critical for preventing misunderstandings, reducing disputes, avoiding unnecessary fair hearings, and minimizing avoidable unsuccessful case closures. The overall goal is for clients to be consistently aware of CAP as a resource and to seek support early when issues arise.

Florida Rehabilitation Council

Doug Ingram, Chair presented the report.

- The Council plans to attend the FRC meetings to reestablish partnership
- Quarterly Meeting in Gainesville-March 11th

Arthur Moody moved to adjourn. Doug Ingram seconded. Motion carried.
The meeting was adjourned.