

**Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind Quarterly
The Shores Resort and Spa
2637 S. Atlantic Avenue Daytona Beach, FL 32118
July 24, 2025**

Meeting Minutes

Attendance

- **Present:** Doug Ingram, Jorge Hernandez, Robert Doyle, Arthur Moody, Paul Edwards, Misty Porter, Donte Mickens
- **Virtual:** Patricia Lipovsky, Denise Valkema
- **Absent:** Sead Bekric, Ciawanda McDonald
- **Council Staff:** Brandis Hall (Alexandra Diggs / LaToya Mitchell filling in)

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

Adoption of Agenda

Doug Ingram made a motion to adopt the agenda as amended. Paul Edwards seconded the motion. Robert Doyle requested an amendment to the agenda. He requested to move FAU to present after he concludes his presentation. Agenda adopted with amendment.

Approval of May 2025 Meeting Minutes

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

Director's Report

Director Doyle presented his report to the Council.

Staff Updates

- Director Doyle thanked the IT Team for setting up new equipment, thanked Alex, LaToya, and Brandis for coordinating the meeting, and acknowledged recent employment changes in the Division.

- The Director announced the appointment of Paula Roberts as the new Operations and Management Consultant (SES). New staff appointments and a promotion within the Deputy Director section were acknowledged. Charles Triplett was commended for his efforts in managing both old and new responsibilities. Bill Findley will retire on September 30, with Alan Risk succeeding him.

Division Updates & Recognitions

- All districts have achieved their employee goals.
- Employment outcomes rose by over 6%.
- Services for Blind Babies increased from 730 in FY '24 to 894 in FY '25, while Children Programs services also grew from 946 to 1,070.
- The Transition Program saw a decrease from 538 in FY '24 to 500 in FY '25.
- Employment services slightly increased, but college student participation decreased. Efforts are underway to revise policies for better support, allowing part-time college attendance while working.
- The Older Blind program experienced a minor decline in the number of clients being served.
- The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) demonstrated a decade-long growth with average vendor income increasing from \$59K to \$97K.
- District 9 was awarded the Juan Carlos Award for Most Improved.
- Top Employment Placement Specialists are Danielle Byrd and Sharon Jadoo, each with 18 placements, and Patricia Curtis-Paulk with 11 placements.
- A two-year state plan modification is in progress.
- Insurance funds have been secured for repairs at the Tampa office.

State Updates

- The Governor approved the budget in time for the state of the next fiscal year. Budget authority and earmarked funds for vehicles have been secured, along with approval for a double cost-of-living adjustment. The

division must eliminate ten positions. Senate Bill 108 mandates state agencies to create a five-year regulatory plan, justifying each rule.

- **Budget and Financial Planning:** Drafting the budget for the upcoming fiscal year with an anticipated shortfall; enhancing the District Offices budget for more effective direct services.
- **Consumer Protection and Services:** Developing a Consumer Protection Proposal to address protections against pop-up providers offering fee-based services that may be available free from the state and our CRPs; revisiting support strategies for individuals with vision loss.
- **Vocational Rehabilitation (VR):** Amending VR contracts to raise rates for increased job placements; planning to increase VR service rates.
- **Training and Technology:** Implementing a learning management system and training initiatives; purchasing automation tracking technology for state vehicles and equipping field staff with necessary technology.
- **Communication and Outreach:** Allocating additional funds to communication and outreach strategies.

Federal Updates

- **Big Beautiful Bill**
 - **Medicaid:** The bill will affect Medicaid funding which may increase DBS paid services to this population as they seek employment. A Corrective Action Plan has been received, with 65% of issues resolved. Christopher Pope has asked the state to propose ideas for streamlining processes and enhancing flexibility.
- **President's Skinny Budget**
 - The President proposed a budget to Congress for review.
 - The federal VR budget is proposed for funding at 2024 levels.

- The client assistance program would need to be funded by basic VR funds.
- Funding for separate supported employment will also come from basic VR funds.
- Due to limited resources, some states (12 currently) will implement an order of selection to prioritize certain clients based on their disabilities.
- With funding secured in this legislative session, the Division is financially well-positioned to support employment initiatives into the next year.

Other News

- The RSA is launching a "100 Days, 100 News" campaign to highlight positive achievements across the states.
- Updates on FLWINS.
- Internal controls are being added to RSA processes.
- The Employment Rate will be reviewed in October, and a mid-year rate increase for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs is expected in December.

Florida Atlantic University Report

Presented by Ayse Toress, Ph.D., CRC, LHMC.

Dr. Torres started as a counselor at the DBS Sunrise office and later moved to DVR, gaining eight years of experience. She launched AccesTECH, a \$10 million project to help people with disabilities find tech jobs. The program offers free training in Cybersecurity, Cloud Computing, and 3D Printing for Division clients. Funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, participants must finish the training and earn a certification for entry-level roles. The program also pays for the final exam and provides a paid three-month internship in tech, requiring only a high school diploma to join.

DBS Employment Report

Presented by Marian Rezkallah, Program Administrator, for Quarter 4.

Quarterly Performance Outcomes:

- Total clients served: 3,967
- Closed cases: 737, with 462 deemed successful
- Rehabilitation rate for closed cases: 75%
- Unsuccessful closures after receiving services: 156
- Average hourly wage: \$22.33
- Highest wage recorded: \$56.01
- Lowest wage recorded: \$6.29

Ms. Rezkallah reported a rise in the overall unsuccessful closure rate, attributing this trend to challenges in locating clients, clients refusing services, or clients no longer requiring services.

A comprehensive report has been submitted to the Council for further review.

Client Satisfaction Survey

(Data extracted from the 2024 Client Satisfaction Survey Results Overview)

Dr. Minna Jia presented the findings.

- **Survey Population:** From July 1, 2024, to March 31, 2025, 504 clients were surveyed. Of the 151 respondents, 127 clients received services from both DBS and local providers.
- **Employment Motivation:** 44% of the respondents sought DBS services for employment.
- **Overall Satisfaction:** DBS achieved an 83% satisfaction rate, and local service providers garnered rate of 88%.

The Council inquired about the review of survey results and subsequent improvements. Director Doyle informed the Council that a team will analyze the data in the coming weeks to address the concerns raised.

A comprehensive report has been provided to the Council.

Employer Recognition

Audrey Turner, District Administrator for District 5, recognized Stone Soup Community Development.

District 5 Administrator Report

Audrey Turner, District Administrator, provided the following updates:

- District 5 manages its main office in Daytona Beach and a satellite office in Cocoa.
- Audrey Turner has assumed the role following the retirement of the previous District Administrator, with Mary Grant serving as the Assistant District Administrator.
- **Current Staffing:** 10 staff members.
- **Vacancies:** Three positions are currently being filled.
- District 5 serves Volusia, Flagler, Brevard, and Putnam counties.
- **Program Statistics:** VR Program: 332; Independent Living: 169; Children’s Program: 36; Blind Babies Program: 12.

District 5 faces transportation challenges as each of the four counties has independent services that do not cross county lines, hindering rural career advancement. Other issues include misconceptions about DBS as an insurance provider, lack of service awareness, and inappropriate doctor referrals for individuals not qualified for services.

A detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Business Enterprise Program

William Findley, Bureau Chief, presented the report:

The training program is facing staffing turnover, with vacancies in the snack bar manager and compliance officer positions. The snack bar has expanded to a new region, and the training instructor is striving to meet expectations. Currently, there are three military contracts, with expectations to increase to five by October 1 and a sixth next year. Efforts to adhere to the Randolph-Shepherd Act priorities are ongoing. A total of 114 machines has been installed at VA facilities, with more planned. Nineteen Florida State Parks are

involved, nine of which now have laundry services. Financial projections estimate net earnings of \$100,000 and median earnings of \$89,000, though full SFY data is still awaited.

Challenges

Vendor Staffing:

- Two vendors have passed away, two retired, and more resignations are expected.
- One vendor manages five facilities from Jacksonville to Miami.
- A new licensed vendor is expected in July, with more starting in August.
- Several vendors are seeking opportunities statewide, including one with multiple food service facilities.
- Southeast Florida (Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties) faces a significant vendor shortage.

Facilities:

- The Port of Palm Beach is a newly acquired facility.
- The program features 106 vendors, the highest in the nation, but the reported 134 facilities may not be accurate.
- Aging vendors are resigning, necessitating new vendors to fill vacancies.
- Tariffs and hurricanes have hindered machine delivery, resulting in a loss of 22 machines.
- Negotiations with the Department of Transportation (DOT) for surveillance camera installation have been ongoing for a decade.

UF Health Neurodevelopmental Pediatric Center

Jeannie Potthast, MBA, Associate Director, presented the following:

Two grant-funded programs, the Center for Autism and the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System Multidisciplinary Center (Fidler MDC), serve individuals up to age 26 in Jacksonville, FL. These centers accommodate a variety of medical, behavioral, and social backgrounds, providing diagnostic-based services. The CARD Program at the University of Central Florida offers services to Volusia County residents, and there are seven Centers for Autism

and Related Disabilities (CARDs) across Florida, funded by the Florida Department of Education.

Florida Agencies Serving the Blind (FASB)

Lisa Howard, Interim Chief Executive Officer, shared the following updates:

A program in Sarasota is serving 10 children, with plans to expand in Tampa and Jacksonville to accommodate 25 more. The agency has secured full budget approval from the legislature. Additionally, a week-long summer camp for teenagers is being organized, and the Advocacy Council is working with the Tallahassee Day Committee.

Conklin Davis Center

Ronee David, President, presented the report, highlighting:

The center has served over 400 clients, including 226 seniors this year, through its statewide residential program in Florida. The County of Volusia allocated \$200,000 for a generator, and \$550,000 was secured for HVAC repairs. New acquisitions include a water tower, pump, and chillers. Collaboration with 29 local businesses and colleges supports new initiatives like an Art Program and a Digital Content Creator Program, funded by last year's grant. Employment Placement Services placed 27 individuals, and 100 people are enrolled in Vocational Rehabilitation, excluding those in the residential program. Nineteen blind infants were referred by Early Steps in Volusia and Brevard counties. The center assisted 17 students with Daytona Beach officials and facilitated a week-long trip to Tampa for Teen Transition students. Four new vehicles were acquired, totaling 12, and accreditation was completed for five years. The City of Daytona provided funds for greenhouse and deck repairs.

Career, Technology, and Training Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Ed James, Bureau Chief, presented the following updates:

Efforts are underway to boost referrals to the Center through direct outreach to District Administrators. The Assistive Technology training program for new Division of Blind Services (DBS) counselors is being reinstated to enhance client services. A new Assistive Technology instructor training program will begin on January 1st, lasting 6 to 8 months. Two students have completed their CompTIA A+ certification. The Web Accessibility Apprenticeship Program has two apprentices gearing up for the CPAC exam. An Open House is planned for September 5th to highlight the Center's services.

Florida Braille and Talking Book Library

Nicole Sanders, Bureau Chief, presented the following report:

- For FY24-25, there are 210,332 active readers, with 1.4 million titles circulated via USPS.
- The BARD program boasts 300,000 users.
- The Reader Service Department managed:
 - 16,929 calls
 - 54 walk-ins
 - 5,407 emails
 - 5,364 mailings via USPS
 - 980 Talking Book Topic Forms
- A total of twenty-five new books has been added, bringing the overall count to over 145,000 Braille and large print titles.
- Outreach initiatives reached 200,000 individuals through both in-person and virtual events.
- The program served 196 participants during the summer, with an additional 24 call-ins for other offerings.
- Circulation surpassed three million book titles and over 25,000 magazines.
- Recent developments include:
 - The arrival of the DA2 machine, currently being processed for distribution (1,200-1,500 units statewide).

- A waiting list of 132 individuals for the new machine, featuring Wi-Fi and Bluetooth capabilities.
- Ongoing training with NLS for advanced features of BARD 2.0, which includes enhanced search functionality, subscription services, and a wish list feature.
- The Library Ambassador Program is set to launch this year.
- September 1st will celebrate 75 years of the library's operation.

Client Assistance Program Report

Arthur Moody submitted a brief report, detailing the following points:

- Three cases reported to the Client Assistance Program (CAP): D1-1, D3-1, D9-1.
- Recommendation to include CAP in policy reviews.
- Last quarter's sample size focused on training access.
- Virtual meetings held with DBS staff to raise awareness of services.
- No significant trends observed among CAP cases.

Following the report, the chair put forth a motion to adjourn the meeting. Paul Edwards made the motion to adjourn, and Robert Kelly seconded. Doug Ingram raised a question about the motion, proposing that the meeting be treated as a recess until 5 PM. The motion carried, and the meeting was adjourned until 5 PM for the Public Forum.

July 25, 2025

- **Present:** Doug Ingram, Jorge Hernandez, Paul Edwards, Arthur Moody, Robert Kelly, Donte Mickens, Misty Porter
- **Virtual:** Patricia Lipovsky, Denise Valkema
- **Absent:** Sead Bekric, Ciawanda McDonald

Volusia County Transit Services

Bobbie G. King, Transit Services Director, presented.

Volusia County Transit has contracted a new service operator starting August

15th, offering online scheduling, same-day service, and improved customer support while maintaining existing routes. The Eastside will have more routes compared to Westside's micro-transit options. Paratransit services will remain ADA-compliant, and the Transit Disadvantage program is funded 90% by the State and 10% by Volusia County.

Committee Report

Over \$160,000 was allocated to support senior citizens. Dog Guide Posters were distributed, and \$9,000 was contributed to the DBS VR Training Banquet for 2024. Meetings in May and June identified three key initiatives: the SET Program will receive nearly \$80,000 from the DSO, with DBS matching this for a total of \$120,000 to \$130,000; \$16,000 to be provided for the DBS VR Training Banquet; and acquire a license for Zoom.

Agenda Items for October 2025

- Palm Tran Representative
- Host a public forum at CRP
- CRP Report (Invite each CRP)
- Needs Assessment (Division's concerns)
- Review of FAU recommendations as part of the Needs Assessment
- FAU Disability Resource Center (CARD)
- Grant Awards
- Gifts and Donations
- West Palm Beach Blind Rehabilitation Center, VA Medical Center

July 2026 Meeting

Paul Edwards proposed postponing the selection of the meeting location for July 2026 until after discussions with the Director. The decision regarding the location will be made via email in two weeks. Misty Porter seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

The meeting is scheduled for July 22-24, 2026, in Orlando, Florida, with no alternative location announced.

Old Business/Unfinished Business

- Ensure the meeting is adequately noticed on the DBS website in a timely manner.
- Donte Mickens will present for the Public Forum Sub-Committee next month.
- An update on the reappointments for the FRC and Florida Independent Living Council was provided.
- Attendance and participation were also addressed.

New Business

Sub-Committee Chairs

- Paul Edwards nominated himself chair of the Evaluation Committee. Arthur Moody motioned for the nomination, and Robert Kelly seconded. The motion passed.
- Doug Ingram nominated himself chair of the Planning Committee. Donte Mickens motioned, and Paul Edwards seconded the nomination. The motion carried.
- Tallahassee Day report indicated independent group operations.
- FASB, BVA, NFB, and FCB will collaborate on a unified initiative, with a follow-up meeting in August, requiring no financial backing from the Council.
- The Public Forum Committee remains unchanged, with increased participation noted by the chair.
- The Employment Sub-Committee is scheduled to meet in the next few weeks.
- Doug Ingram will attend the NCSRC meeting in San Diego, with Jorge Hernandez as the alternate. Paul Edwards motioned for two council members to attend the NCSRC meeting, and Donte Mickens seconded. The motion passed.

Discussion

- The Council requested updates to the website to include various reports and member information.
- The meeting was adjourned following a motion by Doug Ingram.