

Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind Quarterly Meeting Minutes
Embassy Suites by Hilton Palm Beach Gardens
4350 PGA Blvd., Palm Beach Gardens, FL 32118
October 23, 2025

Council Members Present

- Doug Ingram
- Jorge Hernandez
- Robert Doyle
- Arthur Moody
- Paul Edwards
- Donte Mickens
- Sead Bekric

Council Members attended Virtually

- Misty Porter
- Denise Valkema

Council Members Absent

- Patricia Lipovsky

Council Staff

Latoya Mitchell & Alexandra Diggs

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.

Approval of July 2025 Meeting Minutes

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

Director's Report

Director Doyle presented his report to the Council:

Staff

- Director Doyle expressed gratitude to the IT Team for setting up the new equipment
- Director Doyle expressed gratitude to Alex, LaToya and Brandis for coordinating the meeting
- Director Doyle recognized employment changes within the Division.
- District Staff & Anniversaries
 - October Staff Anniversaries: Adam Gaffney (29yrs.), Margaret Mills (33yrs.) and Pamela Vinson (14 yrs.)
 - District 2: Travis Green named as the new District Administrator and Kelly Simmons ascending into his old role, Assistant District Administrator
 - District 7/S7: Lica Graves hired as the Assistant District Administrator in the Lakeland Office.
 - District 11: Shurelle Smith hired as the Assistant District Administrator in the Sunrise Office.
 - District 6: Vickie Sykes in process of becoming Assistant District Administrator in Orlando.
 - BEP: Alan Risk recognized as Bureau Chief for Business Enterprise
 - BCS: Regina Harris will return to the Division
 - Deputy Director Ofc.: Recognized Katie Hutto as a new member on the team
- Division Updates & Recognitions
 - Kim Richey confirmed by Congress in role for US DOE Office of Civil Rights
 - Dr. Kevin O'Farrell announced as the new Senior Chancellor that oversees Florida College, Blind Services and other Divisions within FDOE.
 - Recognized and thanked Blind Service Foundation for their financial contribution to the VR Training Banquet
 - Recognized Chief Giles and her team for their contributions to the VR Training
 - Recognized the Community Rehabilitation Partners (CRPs) from VR Training

- State Updates
 - CareerSource will review DBS two year modified State Plan
 - CareerSource request data this month prior to State Board meeting next month
 - Exit Strategies-various programs and departments
 - Council will have an opportunity to review
 - Strategic Plan-2026 goes live (Establishing goals before year is over) same goals & examining the strategies (tweaked & some new)
 - Council Member Robert Kelly requested more interaction/collaboration from CareerSource
 - No new projects to name, but focusing on work based opportunities and apprenticeships programs
 - Conflict Resolution
 - 73 client inquires (Miami-14, 8-DB, 7-MCO, 6-Jacksonville & Gainesville)
 - 23% required team discussion
 - 70% Simple
 - 7% undecided
 - Majority from clients, small number from families
 - Quick turnaround-good communication & quick turn around

- Federal Updates
 - The Department is continuing to provide services during the Federal Government Shutdown
 - Rehabilitation Service Administration (RSA) furloughed staff or dismissed under the reduction in force plan during the shutdown.
 - David Steele and three other staff are currently working at RSA during the shutdown
 - Director Christopher Pope employed status listed as Furloughed Status (Director of State Monitoring and Program Improvement Division)
 - The Federal Government will disperse funds to States for routine work duties four weeks after shutdown

- Other Updates
 - Promote 100 stories in a 100 days-collecting stories from different states

- External Affairs is coordinating and overseeing 100 days 100 stories
- FL WINS
- Gifts and Donations: \$10.5million to date-notices sent out to three CRPS who submitted projects-Miami Lighthouse, Conklin Davis and Lighthouse of Vision Education Center
- Renovating Tampa Office-receive funds from insurance and RSA. Project should be completed in four months.
- Contract leasing for Business Enterprise in Palm Beach County

DBS Employment Report

Marian Rezkallah, Program Administrator, presented the report for Quarter 1.

Quarter Performance Outcomes:

- 374 new clients served Q1.
- 408 closed cases of which 111 were successful.
- The rehabilitation rate for closed cases was 39%.
- 297 unsuccessful closures after receiving services.
- The average hourly wage is \$19.58
- The highest wage is \$33.65
- The lowest wage is \$12.00

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Client Satisfaction Survey 2024 – 25 Annual Report

Dr. Minna Jia presented.

- Survey Population: July 1, 2024-June 30, 2025 – 876 clients.
- Successful closures: 535
- Among 230 respondents, 93% DBS clients received services from both DBS and local providers.
- 31% of the respondents said they came to DBS to obtain employment.
- DBS overall satisfaction: 84%.
- Local service providers' overall satisfaction: 84%.

The Council heard letters from clients about people who made an impact during their service experience.

The Council inquired about survey results being reviewed and improvements being made. Director Doyle informed the Council that a team will be reviewing data in the following weeks to discuss and offer solutions to the concerns at hand.

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Palm Tran

Keon Ruks, Operations Manager, presented report.

- Effective April 2025 Connection Plus Program took place.
- ADA: 17,384 eligible riders - 8540 annual riders
- TD: 17,065 eligible riders - 7692 annual riders
- DOSS: 1,173 eligible riders – 330 annual riders
- Peak times of service – 7:00a.m. – 8:00a.m and 2:00p.m. – 3:00p.m.
- 71% on-time performance rate at peak times.
- Key components of the program:
 - Eliminates restrictions on trip negotiation resulting in more efficient grouping.
 - Eliminates restrictions on pick-up or drop off windows.
 - Eliminates time limitations for trip duration
 - Trips do not have to be combatable to the fixed route schedule
 - Eliminates restrictions on fare pricing
 - Allows for trip limits and prioritization
- Expecting to offer in the near future:
 - New mobility on-demand zones
 - Bus rapid transit corridors
 - Expanded coverage routes
 - Increased service frequency and span
 - New express routes
- One-way trip fares will increase from \$3.50 to \$4.00

The Council inquired about applying for Paratransit. The presenter informed the council that application is not online, and individuals must contact Palm Tran directly for service. Assistance will be provided if needed. Paratransit also offers services called U-Serve and Lyft. The Palm Tran Service Board includes 3 visually impaired members who helps to provide input to Palm Tran on service changes.

Council Member Recognition

The Council recognized Bruce Miles for his 40 years of service and dedication

Employer Recognition

Cesar Vigo, District Administrator, District 5, Publix and Blind Braille Club recognized.

District 5 Administrator Report

Cesar Vigo, District Administrator, presented.

- District 10 has one main office in West Palm Beach
- Current Staff:
- Vacancies: Several, currently working to fill positions
- District 10 serves four counties: Okeechobee, Palm Beach, Martin.
- VR Program:

Challenges District 10 faced reaching clients in rural areas and transportation. Improvements made in transportation. Emotional support that the client needs.

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Bruce Miles was recognized for his many years of services.

Lighthouse for the Blind Palm Beaches

Lisa Stella, Executive Director, presented the report.

Presented a music video created by Winston (Assistive Technology Instructor)

- 26 Employees-some that are dual certified.
- 2 CVRT, 3 & 1 part-time OMB
- Offer several clubs such as Golf Club (Newly created)
- 80-year Anniversary for Lighthouse for the Palm Beaches
- Received grant to create new program
- Serves as an at-large member of FASB
- 2026 rebranding campaign

Lisa Stella read aloud the White Cane Proclamation.

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

Some information wasn't recorded due to technical difficulties.

Florida Outreach Center for the Blind (FOCB)

Carolyn Lapp, Executive Director, presented report.

- Center celebrated 22 years of service
- 80% of program instructors are blind
- 50% of Volunteer Board of Directors are required to be blind or a direct family member.
- Established Kid Club that meets several times a year
- Monthly recreational and education field trips provided
- Weekly Peer Support Program and craft classes
- Monthly education workshop and talking book discussion
- One-on-one and small group training provided
- FOCB provided transportation scholarships in collaboration with Palm Tran Connection, granting access to training and support services. Last year 77 clients received 3035 transportation vouchers.

A full detailed report has been provided to the Council.

West Palm Beach VA Medical Center Rehabilitation Center (BRC)

Gabino Lares, Chief, and Caren Lyma, Admission Coordinator presented report.

- Provides service to blind and visually impaired veterans.
- 1 of 13 centers in the country.
- On-site rehabilitation program lasts 2-6 weeks, it can last longer if needed
- Partners with local agencies to best provide rehabilitation to clients.
- Average Older-Blind population is 80 years of age
- 22 staff members
- All training is one-on-one
- Equipment is provided

The Council inquired about services being stopped due to the Nationwide Shutdown. Mr. Lares informed the Council that services have never been impacted by the Government Shutdown.

Client Assistance Program Report

Arthur Moody provided a brief report.

- CAP was established under the Federal Rehabilitation Act 1973 to provide information and assistance to those with disabilities who are involved in Vocation Rehabilitation and Independent Living services.
- Empowers those with disabilities to fully understand and exercise their rights to services.
- Nine active cases reported to CAP this quarter
- Suggested to include CAP in policies reviews
- Several virtual meetings with DBS staff to increase awareness of services provided

October 24, 2025

Council Members Present

- Doug Ingram
- Jorge Hernandez
- Robert Doyle
- Paul Edwards
- Arthur Moody
- Robert Kelly
- Donte Mickens
- Sead Bekric

Council Members attending Virtually

- Denise Valkema
- Misty Porter
- Ciwanda McDonald

Council Members Absent

- Patricia Lipovsky

Council Staff

- Alexandra Diggs
- LaToya Mitchell

Committee Report

Jorge Hernandez presented the Employment Committee Report

- Followed up with Tara at Lowes Hotel

- A client from Miami Lighthouse enrolled in Dr. Torres program at FAU.
- Continue to address hiring issues at Amazon

Paul Edwards presented the Tallahassee Day, Client Satisfaction and Blind Service Foundation reports.

- Tallahassee Day Committee
 - Individual Consumer Groups
 - Meet three or Four times this year
 - Putting together packets
 - Work is separate from the Council and the Division
 - Initiatives: Children Services (Funded by FASB), Shortfall in OIB, Funding-restored the budget for student materials in braille format*
- CSS
 - Meet twice this year
 - Examining individuals surveyed that are clients of DBS
 - Difficult to manage group
 - January 8, 2026 is the next meeting
 - How to measure CSS? Does not make sense to do it after client is accepting into program-identify the folks in survey
 - Survey clients referred six months ago to DBS and sent to Minna for survey inquiry
 - Dealing with individuals that receive services from contracts whom are not CRPs
 - Evaluate individuals with sight restoration*
- Blind Service Foundation
 - Continue with SET Program, allocation \$70K-amount matched by DBS
 - Written testimonials from participants of SET Program
 - Funds allocated to VR Training
 - Success of the Forum and ongoing success involvement for funds spent on Zoom Meeting license

Donte Mickens presented the Public Forum committee report.

- Room for improvement
- Location is an issue-prefer to host public forum at CRP or find hotel close to CRP
- Focus on marketing strategies to increase participation
- Topic to start discussion of forum

- Announcement of refreshments and swag bag

Agenda Items for February 2026

- Public Transit (Paratransit)
- State Plan Supplement (B.Giles)
- CSNA
- Institutions-College & University (Miami-Dade State College)
- CRP Reports
- District Report
- Innovative Projects
- Bascom Palmer (UM-Eye Medical)

October 2026 Meeting

Paul motioned to have meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida. Robert Kelly seconded the motion. Motion carried. Dates for meeting-October 21-23, 2026.

Old Business/Unfinished Business

Doug mentioned the importance of the council participation in NCSRC Fall and Spring. Paul motioned that the council have two attendees attend NCSRC. Robert Kelly seconded. Motion carried. Council inquired the reason for rejecting out of state travel to attend meeting.

New Business

Council requested Lighthouse Works to attend July 2026 meeting.

Rehab Council request that the website be updated with the following: minutes, report and annual reports, members' information.

Doug Ingram motioned to adjourn the meeting. Paul Edwards. Meeting adjourned.

Due to technical difficulties some information was not recorded.