

**DIVISION OF SERVICES FOR THE BLIND
BOARD MEETING MINUTES
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2024**

DSB BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT

David Henry, NFB, Board Chair
Theresa Petrey, ACB
Erika Evans, At-Large
Pamela Armstrong, VFP

EX-OFFICIO MEMBERS PRESENT

Keith Clark, At-Large
Terry Sheeler, OIB
Kara Aaron, BVA

DSB BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT

Vacant, Lions Representative
Eric Yarberry, WSB
Tiffany Moore, AER

EX-OFFICIO MEMBERS ABSENT

Vacant, ASBVI
Larry Wayland, FAIRS
Chris Barnes, ASBVI

Attorney General's Office Representative: Aaron Lowery

Governor's Office Representative: None

Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) Board Meeting Support Staff: Dr. Cassandra Williams-Stokes, Theresa Bertram, DiAnnette Finks, Gustavo Manzanales, Amy Jackson, Sherlyn Harris, Deon Harris, LaTasha Mays, Kyle Jones, Gwendolyn Johnson, Megan Lamb, and Brandy Bryant, and all DSB Staff.

Others Present: Cody Waits, DWS Director; Nicole Walsh, ASD

Meeting Agenda Approval-

Chairman David Henry asked for a motion to approve the meeting agenda. Theresa Petrey made a motion to approve the agenda. Erika Evans seconded, and the motion carried.

Board Meeting Minutes Approval-

Chairman Henry asked for approval of the September 13, 2024, minutes. Keith Clark made a motion to approve the minutes. Erika Evans seconded, and the motion carried.

Director's Report – Dr. Cassandra Williams-Stokes:

Dr. Cassandra Williams-Stokes began her report by thanking the DSB Board and staff for their support and dedicated service to DSB. Dr. Stokes stated that the DSB 2024 statewide meeting has been a success and many of the board members were able to attend some of the workshops and training. The DSB team is excited about the approaching new year and has done a lot of work to prepare for the upcoming year. Dr. Stokes stated that she is grateful and thankful to the

staff for their hard work this year and all the energy and efforts tied to making sure DSB consumers receive quality services.

DSB Agency Updates: DSB sponsored leadership and professional development for our team members. The leadership recommended to revise the mission statement to read as: “To provide individualized services to empower blind and severely visually impaired persons to achieve independence through skill and career development.” The new mission statement was voted upon by all DSB staff. Gustavo Manzanales recommended including the word “empowered” to align with the “independence” expectation. Dr. Stokes recognized the DSB leadership and moved forward with the Director’s report.

Shared Services. The goal for DSB’s participation in Shared Services is to ensure compliance with federal regulations. The DSB fiscal staff (two full-time and one part-time positions) moved into Department of Commerce Shared Services positions and are no longer under the supervision authority of the DSB Director. Fiscal Shared Services did allow those employees to attend the training this week and I will continue working to make sure the information regarding DSB fiscal and program operations is available. However, Dr. Stokes recognized the fiscal staff and mentioned that she is optimistic about the partnership going forward with the Department of Commerce Shared Services. A meeting with Fiscal Shared Services is scheduled next week to continue conversations about expectations for DSB fiscal operations. Dr. Stokes asked if any of the board members had questions regarding Shared Services and there were none.

Indirect Cost Proposal. Dr. Stokes stated that federal regulations require a cost allocation plan or indirect cost proposal to implement DSB’s federal awards. DSB’s indirect rate plan expired, and Commerce Fiscal Shared Services is working to get an approved plan in place. The Department of Commerce Fiscal drafted a proposal for an indirect rate for the Department of Commerce and DSB is included in the plan. Dr. Stokes stated that an abbreviated draft of what Commerce plans to submit was received. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) will be notified of the proposed plan to ensure compliance. Dr. Stokes mentioned that it was not known when the plan will be approved but an approximate start date is July 1, 2025.

Recruitment. DSB is authorized 78 positions in the current Appropriation Act. However, DSB has lost four (4) positions due to the two-year legislative hold because of the challenges with recruiting counselors and support positions statewide. DSB has nine GS03 and GS04 positions used as support staff in different locations across the state on hold due to a “no hire” recommendation from the Department of Commerce. DSB requested to hire extra help positions as a strategy to address the gaps. The extra help positions are allowed to work 1500 hours a year opposed to 2080 a year as a full-time employee. DSB will continue to operate as efficiently as it can and continue conversations with the Department of Commerce about filling the vacant positions. Dr. Stokes stated she will provide updates to board members as more information becomes available.

DSB Board Annual Training. Dr. Stokes stated that the DSB board members participated in annual statewide training. Dr. Stokes thanked Aaron Lowrey, Assistant Attorney General, for facilitating the training. Dr. Stokes asked Mr. Lowrey if he had any words to share with the DSB Board. Mr. Lowrey stated” My name is Aaron Lowrey, and as most know, I am the Assistant Attorney General

who has been assigned to the DSB Board. I just want to let everyone know that if the DSB Board has any questions about how things are supposed to proceed procedurally or if you have legal questions that pertain to this Board, I will be happy to answer them for you.” Dr. Stokes thanked Mr. Lowrey and there were no comments from board members. Dr. Megan Lamb was given the floor to provide an update on Program Operations.

DSB Assistant Director’s Report – Dr. Megan Lamb’s Report:

DSB conducted training for Change Teams October 9-10. The teams presented current outcomes-goals. Activities include working on employee recognition, better understanding employee retention, and piloting a process to go paperless.

DSB is now in a fully supported version of AWARE and caught up in adaptations for all federal reports. DSB will work with DIS staff responsible for the AWARE server and database to remain caught up as new updates become available. DSB is in the process of finalizing the RSA 7OB report and the Social Security Cost Formula prior to the end of the year.

DSB Staff participated in the CSAVR, NCSAB, WIOA Partners, and APSE conferences. DSB consumers also spoke for National Disability Employment Awareness Month and at the APSE panel. DSB advertised the position of Field Services Administrator and requested to advertise the vacant Statistician position. DSB is also working to hire the remaining counselor vacancies for the agency. DSB worked with the School for the Blind and Visually Impaired to host monthly speakers for students on campus in support of self-advocacy and workplace readiness training for Pre-ETS Students.

The DSB Assistant Director meets with Disability Rights Arkansas (DRA) quarterly and confirmed two consumers have open cases with DRA. Disability Rights Arkansas (DRA) is working with DSB to resolve both cases. DSB provided information with DRA regarding accommodations to share via webinar on December 18th, 2024. Dr. Lamb finished by expressing that if anyone has questions, she is happy to answer them. This concluded the DSB Assistant Director’s report.

DSB Quality Assurance Update - Sherlyn Harris:

Ms. Harris began her report with highlights from the Consumer Satisfaction Surveys. Ms. Harris emphasized that around this time last year, the DSB Board expressed their concerns about the low response rate for the Consumer Satisfaction Survey. The Quality Assurance (QA) team partnered with Qualtrics to create an accessible version that will be emailed to consumers. The QA Team has also created surveys for DSB staff. The Directors Forum survey provides staff with an opportunity to voice concerns or praise anonymously.

The QA Team is working to create a template to begin fiscal monitoring reviews for caseload and administrative vendor payments and OIB and Pre-ETS reviews. DSB Board Member, Erika Evans, responded by saying, “I am just going to say I am excited that the QA team followed through with that. I am just excited that you guys were able to find a product to follow through and use, and that you are able to use it not only for the consumers but within the agency to do things that you guys need to do.” Erika Evans ended by saying, “I think that is awesome and

that's good progress. Thank you. Hey, I love it.” Ms. Harris thanked the DSB Board and concluded her report.

DSB Technology Lab & Vending Facility Program Update – Gustavo Manzanales:

Mr. Gustavo Manzanales stated that the Vending Facility Program (VFP) has received several requests and interests from potential new VFP manager trainees. Staff are required to adhere to policy and procedures rendered by RSA for the Randolph Sheppard program and the DSB VFP. The current initiatives for VFP are listed below:

VFP Section:

- Renewing Vending Contracts.
- The vending manual was updated, which included a merit-based promotion.
- RSA-15 completed, which is the annual report.
- New Vending ventures like the “freeze-dried” example from one of our vendors Pam Armstrong.

Tech Lab: The final location for the technology lab has been moved to the DSB Counselor’s area at the University Local Workforce Site. The DSB Tech Lab has hired a new DSB Technology Coordinator (Megan Hudgins). Consumer attendance in the lab remains consistent, and DSB Tech staff has made online training options available.

Braille Section:

- Donated Brallier’s are sent for repair through Charlie Cain’s contact.
- Reminder of alternative formats.

AIRS Update – Theresa Bertram:

AIRS Radio focus: Quality of Life and Options

- AIRS averages approximately 1,400 listeners each month. AETN-4 Audio is accessible on television with local channels, and the platform has about 100 listeners weekly. AIRS Plus, which can be reached at (844)-888-0981, has approximately 2,500 listeners. Newslane has approximately 553 listeners signed up with 100 loyal users. The information to join Newslane is on nfb.org. AIRS Radio has 300 active followers on Facebook. AIRS is now on Alexa. The command is “Open AIRS Radio.” Holiday-themed shows filled the programming schedule. Reporting information that is relevant to our listeners (Quality of Life) is a priority.

Working closely with Sandee Pinkstaff with Creative Descriptions. AIRS's agenda is to push audio descriptive services at live events in Arkansas, especially theatre, and great momentum is being gained in this area. Follow AIRS Facebook for opportunities for audio description.

- AIRS Director working to attend multiple events.

- AIRS welcomes Bethany Herrell as a new reader.

Approval to Purchase Three (3) Cashier's Checks for \$100 dollars each:

Chairman Henry asked the DSB Board to make a motion to approve the purchase of three cashier's checks for \$100 each for 3 DSB Employee of the Year awards which also includes three (3) \$2 fees for each cashier's check. Theresa Petrey made a motion to approve 3 cashier's checks and the \$2 fee for each. David Henry seconded, and the motion carried.

Acknowledgements to Employees w/ Several Years of Service – Dr. Cassondra Williams-Stokes:

Dr. Stokes acknowledged the DSB team members who have worked with the DSB agency for many years. Dr. Stokes asked Tina Shores to stand to publicly congratulate her on her retirement after 30-plus years as well as to recognize the many other employees that dedicated to ensuring services are available for DSB consumers statewide.

Old Business Section:

DSB Board Member Appointments Update – Chairman David Henry:

Chairman Henry stated that the Governor appoints voting Board members. Currently, two members Keith Clark and Erica Evans are term-limited as of June 30, 2023, Tyrone Williams has resigned from Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and the position needs a new appointee. Former Board Member William "Bill" Heaston is deceased and needs to be replaced with a new appointment. Mr. Henry stated that contact was made with the Governor's office regarding the vacancies and no new appointments have been made. Currently, there is no further notice that any appointments are being made. So, we continue to talk with the Governor's office so that we can hopefully get more people appointed to the board. Chairman Henry added that current board members are encouraged to continue serving as board members as indicated in the board member guidelines.

DSB Board Annual Training- Dr. Cassondra Williams-Stokes:

The DSB Board had an annual training to educate board members on various topics related to oversight of the Division of Services for the Blind. The training took place from 9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m. on Thursday, December 12, 2024, the day before the Statewide Board meeting. Dr. Stokes stated the Attorney General's Office offered training regarding the Freedom of Information Act. Dr. Stokes said that she thought it was informative for DSB board members, but that she is going to let them speak to that. In addition, the DSB Board had an overview of the fiscal and programmatic regulations for the VR program, and the information was designed to provide board members with relevant information to make informed decisions for DSB operations. Dr. Stokes concluded by stating that the agency wants to make sure they provide the information it can get for the board, and the regulations on how to move as a governing body. Dr. Stokes then turned it over to Chairman Henry to see if he had any comments about the training to make sure that DSB is continuing to operate and moving in the right direction with the training for the board.

Chairman Henry added, “The training was very informative, and knowing more about the parameters in which we work and do the work for the state. The Attorney General's Office and the Fiscal services information were fantastic. So, thank you very much to those individuals who participated in that.” Chairman Henry asked, if any of the other board members would like to say anything about the training that they had received.

Terry Sheeler said, “the training was informative also in moving forward, I hope we continue to have as informative training, and I just encourage all my fellow board members to attend those because it is very helpful and there are always things changing. So, we need to stay on top of it.”

Erika Evans also stated that “when you know better, you do better.” Ms. Evans said that the board training was very informative, and when you have been sitting here in this role for several years and you saw the transition that the agency went through, when we moved from DHS over to the Department of Commerce, all of the issues and all that needed to be done, and other things that were needed. I am proud that Arkansas Blind is being used as a model for other agencies throughout the United States, that really makes you feel good. We have an awesome staff that works for DSB, and I applaud you guys, I really do. I thank Dr. Stokes for her leadership.”

Theresa Petrey stated “I just want to say I enjoyed the training yesterday. I found a lot of useful information. And I hope we have more training like that in the future. So, thank you for encouraging all of the board members to be present and requiring it of us because it really helped, and it was definitely worth my time to be there.”

Keith Clark stated he did not have anything to add at this time, but he enjoyed the different training and the comments.

Employee of the Year (EOY) Announcement - Terry Sheeler:

Mrs. Sheeler began by stating that this year, the EOY committee was made up of herself, Keith Clark, and Theresa Petrey. Mrs. Sheeler said the EOY committee spent several days and long hours working on this project. It was a lot of information, and a lot of employees were nominated. Mrs. Sheeler also pointed out, that going forward the Board will be working on the scoring sheet and getting information to match up so we can make sure that we are talking about the right person. After reviewing that, we made it through this year and that is a work in progress. Mrs. Sheeler shared the nominations selected, the first one is from the clerical category and the EOY committee has selected Marion Asmus. Mrs. Sheeler asked all the recipients to raise their hands to be recognized. Next is DSB’s program category, which includes counselors. The committee selected Jacob Grace. The third category was administration, and for that category, the committee selected Jeffrey Seay. Mrs. Sheeler stated that the EOY Awards announcement concludes.

Consumer of the Year (COY) and Student of the Year (SOY) Announcement – Erika Evans

Erika Evans gave thanks to the COY Committee, which was made up of herself, Eric Yarberry, and Keith Clark. Ms. Evans then proceeded to announce the Consumer of the Year, which was

Jose Perez-Mendoza. Next, the COY Committee selected the Student of the Year, which was Kenya Sibrian. Ms. Evans congratulated both recipients and wrapped up by telling them, “Job well done!” Following the announcement, Dr. Stokes took a moment to recognize Goodwill as well, because they are the employer who works with those DSB consumers.

Report on RSA WIOA Dash Boards/WIOA Update – Dr. Megan Lamb, Asst Director:

WIOA Update – Megan Lamb:

Dr. Megan Lamb stated that the RSA II is compiled by using the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) from October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2025. The report categorizes expenditure by service category. For the same period of October 1, 2024, to December 11, 2024, the expenses by service category were as follows: assessment was \$2,772.49; diagnosis and treatment \$160,793.14; training \$514,993.22; job services \$24,225.00; transportation \$17,843.46; maintenance \$86,626.23; rehabilitation technology \$40,691.96; supported employment \$0; reader services \$1,292.50; personal attendant services \$0; interpreter \$6,541.42; other services \$198,758.16; technical assistance \$0; customized employment \$0. Training category as follows: graduate college was \$41,382.05; four-year college \$175,979.92; junior college \$1,360.71; vocational \$83,888.64; on-the-job \$3,560.00; apprenticeship \$0; disability skills training \$99,507.22; and, miscellaneous (costs that were more specific to the consumer’s individual needs) \$87,337.68; job readiness \$20,977.00. Job services are as follows: job search assistance \$1,000.00; job placement \$9,500.00; on-the-job support – time-limited \$0; on-the-job support - supported employment \$17,843.46.

Dr. Lamb explained that the RSA II not only outlines expenditures but identifies the number of actual participants who received each service. The services provided from October 1, 2024, to the present are listed in the following categories: assessment 14; diagnosis and treatment 96; graduate college 6; four-year college 35; junior college 1; vocational training 11; on-the-job training 2; apprenticeship training 1; disability skills training 16; miscellaneous training 10; job search assistance 2; job placement assistance 9; on-the-job supports time-limited 0; transportation 23; maintenance 20; rehabilitation technology 23; interpreter 1; reader services 1; personal attendant services 0; other services 58; customized employment 0; job readiness training 4; technical assistance 0, and on-the-job supports supported 2.

Performance Measures PY2023 (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025)

- ▶ Measurable Skill Gains
 - ▶ Target Rate of 58.5%
- ▶ Credential Attainment
 - ▶ Cohort of exits from Jan – Dec 2023
 - ▶ Target Rate of 36.5%
- ▶ Employment Rate 2nd Quarter
 - ▶ Cohort of exits from PY2023.
 - ▶ Target Rate of 64.0%
- ▶ Employment Rate 4th Quarter

- ▶ Cohort of exits from Jan – Dec 2023
- ▶ Target Rate 63.0%
- ▶ Retention with the Same Employer
 - ▶ Cohort of exits from Jan - Dec 2023.
- ▶ Median Wages 2nd Quarter After Exit
 - ▶ Cohort of exits from PY2023.
 - ▶ Target Rate \$6,800.00

Program Outcomes

- ▶ VR Program Year 2023 Closures (July 1, 2023 – June 2024)
 - 115 Closed - Rehabilitated
- ▶ VR Program Year 2023 Closures (July 1, 2024 – June 2025)
 - 58 Closed – Rehabilitated
- ▶ OIB Federal Fiscal Year 2023 (October 2023 - September 2024)
 - 239 Closed - Goals Met
- ▶ OIB Federal Fiscal Year 2024 Closures (October 2024 – September 2025)
 - 5 Closed - Goals Met

PY 2023 Accomplishments:

- ▶ **The State of Arkansas:**
 - ▶ 6th in the nation for Median Earnings 2nd Quarter After Exit.
 - ▶ 2nd in the nation for percentage change in participants 2022-2023.
 - ▶ 1st in the nation at 27% of participants receiving a college service in PY23.
 - ▶ 42% of participants in Arkansas are receiving training services.
- ▶ **DSB:**
 - ▶ 5th in the nation for Blind Agencies in 2nd Quarter After Exit Employment Rate
 - ▶ 4th in the nation for Blind Agencies with a 63% employment rate at exit for PY2023.

New Business:

Mission and Value Statement Updates - Dr. Cassondra Williams-Stokes:

Dr. Cassondra Williams-Stokes reported that the part added to the values was the word “innovation.” Dr. Stokes expressed that that was one of the things that DSB felt was missing from the values for DSB was “compassion, respect, honesty, and integrity.” Dr. Stokes believes those are some of the values that truly represent the agency well. As mentioned earlier, DSB also added the word “empower” in the mission statement. Dr. Stokes is hopeful this means that employees are going to use 2025 to focus on “innovation” for consumer services, as well as to the DSB staff.

Financials for the DSB Agency – Dr. Cassondra Williams-Stokes:

Dr. Stokes also wanted to go on record stating that for the report Dr. Megan Lamb provided the financials for the agency, and they are in the DSB Board packet, so everyone should have that. In addition, if any board members need anything e-mailed to them, please contact the agency and Brandy Bryant can provide that per individual request.

Report on Quarterly Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) Advisory Committee Activities-Terry Sheeler or designee.

OIB Report- Terry Sheeler:

Mrs. Terry Sheeler stated that the OIB did not meet this quarter due to the DSB Statewide Meeting and board training conducted. Mrs. Sheeler stated that the OIB committee will continue to work on its agenda and will move forward to the March meeting.

FAIRS Update – Larry Wayland:

Larry Wayland was not present.

Disability Rights Arkansas (DRA) – Mollie Hernandez:

Mollie Hernandez was not present.

Report on Quarterly AR State Independent Living Council (AR-SILC) Activities-. Dr. Sha’ Anderson or the designee

Dr. Fran Sha’ Anderson was not present. A written report was provided to Board Members prior to the meeting.

Report on Vending Facility Program (VFP) – Pamela Armstrong:

Ms. Pam Armstrong reported that the Vending Facility Program has had a good year. The program has updated its policy of procedure to be more precise and be a more accurate representation of how the program operates. VFP continues to add more vendors. Currently, two vendors are completing hands-on training. Two vendor trainees are taking the test to be considered for an onsite position. All vendors have reported an increase in profits. Debra Newton and Cheryl Atkinson continue to travel across the state of Arkansas to check on all the locations and sites. This includes ten locations that are managed by blind vendors. Two locations that extra help is operating, fourteen highway locations, and about thirty locations that are operated by third parties. Ms. Armstrong reported that Gustavo Manzanales, Debra Newton, and Cheryl Atkinson communicate with the VFP Committee regularly to help us “think outside the box and come up with new ideas”. Ms. Armstrong stated that VFP will continue to add vendors and provide the services necessary to ensure the success of the Vending Facility Program.

Consumer Input:**American Council of the Blind (ACB) Arkansas - Theresa Petrey:**

Mrs. Theresa Petrey reported on behalf of the ACB, at both the state and the national level. “First, on the state level, ACB will be holding an in-person convention. In April, April 25-25, 2025, at the Hilton Garden Inn up in Fayetteville. New officers will be elected at the state convention in April because a lot of our officers have served their terms and over-served their terms. Room rates are \$114.00 per night. On the national level, the American Council of the Blind will be holding its annual convention from July 4, 2025, to July 11, 2025, in Dallas, Texas. The room rates at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Dallas are \$99.00 per night and ACB National will partner with Blind Veterans of America. The National Legislative Seminar is scheduled for March 2025 in Washington DC. This concludes the ACB report.

National Federation for the Blind (NFB) Arkansas Chairman David Henry:

Chairman David Henry gave a brief synopsis regarding NFB. Mr. Henry stated the National Washington Seminar is scheduled for the end of January in Washington, DC. NFB Arkansas will send delegates to participate. Also on April 4-5, 2025, NFB Arkansas will host the state convention in Bentonville, Arkansas at La Quinta Inn. The national convention will be held in New Orleans, LA in July. This concludes the NFB Arkansas report.

Arkansas School for the Blind (ASBVI) - Dr. Chris Barnes:

Dr. Chris Barnes was not present.

Schedule of Next Meeting:

DSB Quarterly Board Meeting is scheduled for March 14, 2025, via Zoom.

Motion to Adjourn:

Chairman David Henry asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Erika Evans made a motion to adjourn the meeting and Theresa Petrey seconded. The motion carried.

ADJOURNED at 11:12 a.m.