

**DIVISION OF SERVICES FOR THE BLIND  
BOARD MEETING MINUTES  
FRIDAY, MARCH 14, 2025**

**DSB BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT**

David Henry, NFB, Board Chair  
Theresa Petrey, ACB  
Erika Evans, At-Large  
Tiffany Moore, AER  
Keith Clark, At-Large

**EX-OFFICIO MEMBERS PRESENT**

Eric Yarberry, WSB  
Terry Sheeler, OIB  
Kara Aaron, BVA  
Pam Armstrong, VFP  
Larry Wayland, FAIRS  
Chris Barnes, ASBVI

**DSB BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT**

Vacant, Lions Representative

**EX-OFFICIO MEMBERS ABSENT**

Vacant, 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: Joseph Baxter, ARS; Nathan Winter-ARS, DWS staff

**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 December 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. Stokes began her Director’s report thanking the DSB Board members for their support and for their volunteer service as board members. Dr. Stokes thanked the staff for their efforts to serve consumers to ensure DSB continue to receive state and federal dollars. She reported that current efforts are focused on ensuring the fiscal and program operations align with the state plan

and to close out the SFY 25. DSB has had three emergency-called board meetings since December to address the proposed merger bill.

### **Federal Updates**

**Potential Government Shutdown** could impact DSB if federal funds are not available to draw down. DSB is usually able to draw down federal funds or shift to state general revenue depending on the time of year of a possible shutdown and to avoid issues with the Maintenance of Effort (MOE). Use of additional State General Revenue is not a good option for DSB during the last quarter of SFY 2025. Drawdown of sufficient federal dollars would be the best option to continue operations.

The Department of Education (DOE) at the federal level initiated a reduction in force (RIF) impacting nearly 50% of the DOE workforce. The announcement indicated DOE staff will be placed on administrative leave beginning Friday, March 21st. Nikki Jeffords, RSA OIB Liaison notified DSB that she was placed on administrative leave on February 1, 2025. No interruption of the Older Individuals Who Are Blind (OIB) grant funds is expected. Carol Dobak, RSA Deputy Commissioner, will retire at the end of March. Commissioner Dobak served in the Rehabilitation Services Administration for many years and is currently serving as the Deputy Commissioner. Ms. Dobak announced that her retirement date will be at the end of March.

### **State Updates**

**The Indirect Rate Cost Proposal was submitted to the Department of Labor.** No updates have been received regarding whether the plan has been approved or not. Dr. Stokes mentioned she will continue to communicate with Shared Services Fiscal Liaison for information.

**Shared Services** is provided by the Department of Commerce (DOC) Fiscal, Legal, IT and Human Resources departments. Dr. Stokes stated that she attended several meetings to discuss Shared Services and how the process will impact DSB. She indicated the focus is to ensure compliance with federal and state requirements. DOC moved all fiscal related positions under the Fiscal Shared Services Department which was a compliance concern for DSB. The independent commission status of the DSB Board and legal statute that requires direct oversight from the DSB Director. DOC agreed to move the DSB fiscal positions to authorized DOC full time positions to address the compliance issue. The agreement was to release the positions back to DSB to use in other capacities. However, DSB was informed that the two full-time positions, the Fiscal Support Specialist, which was a GSO4, and the Fiscal Support Supervisor, which was a GSO6 the positions were relinquished at DOC Fiscal Shared Services discretion. Dr. Stokes indicated that she was not aware of the relinquish decision until DSB tried to fill those positions. DSB has lost 6 authorized positions of the 78 authorized. DSB's status includes 72 authorized positions available to recruit and continue statewide operations. In addition, DSB has 30 extra help positions, 16 to recruit interns in a Certified Vocational Rehab Counselor Master's Degree program. 14 of the 30 positions were created just for the normal operations of the Division of Services for the Blind. DSB relinquished use of 5 extra help positions in DOC efforts to reduce state government which leaves 9 extra help positions for DSB operations. A great example of how the extra help positions are used is the Jumps Start Summer Program that requires staffing 24 hours a day for 2 weeks to operate the program. DSB has worked to fill vacant positions as quickly as possible to ensure the positions are filled in a timely manner.

**State of Arkansas New Pay Plan** Proposal bill is available for review. A copy was emailed to the DSB Board. The bill may not be accessible due to the strikethrough language, but the proposed pay increase is favorable for rehab counselors and difficult to recruit positions. Dr. Stokes mentioned that she is optimistic that the proposed changes will allow DSB an opportunity to be more competitive with private sector organizations and give the agency an opportunity also to retain staff. Dr. Stokes concluded her report and moved to the Assistant Director's report.

**DSB Assistant Director's Report – Dr. Megan Lamb's Report:**

DSB is in the process of hiring multiple positions to include the Field Services Administrator, Statistician, Northwest Area Manager, Tech Lab Manager, an Administrative Assistant for Northeast, Rehab Assistants for Fayetteville, Little Rock, El Dorado, and Business & Technology, and Vocational Rehabilitation counselors for West Memphis and Little Rock.

Since December 2024, DSB has received \$62,508.23 in Cost Reimbursement funds. These funds are paid to DSB by the Social Security Administration as repayment for expenses in cases that resulted in consumers achieving earnings that allowed them to stop receiving Social Security benefits. These funds will go towards case service under Older Individual who are Blind (OIB) to provide additional services.

DSB Field Services staff are working to expend the remaining state general revenue to ensure that DSB meets match and Maintenance of Efforts (MOE) requirements for Federal Fiscal Year 2025. Meeting match and MOE ensure DSB receives the full grant award and remain eligible to carry over any remaining funds into the next year.

DSB began training with the VRTAC for Quality Employment in March on Business Engagement. This training provides additional support to DSB counselors to help them build their pitch deck and elevator speech for dealing with business. This will allow DSB staff to have more effective communication with businesses about how DSB can assist employers. The training began with a webinar, and the first follow-up Zoom training was on March 11th. Additional training will be held in April and May to complete the series.

DSB's Vending Facility Program recently attended the 2025 Sagebrush Conference and are preparing to attend the upcoming Blast and NAMWA conferences in May. Staff have also been able to attend the recent AER conference and the OIB Manager's Conference. DSB will also have staff attending both NCSAB and CSAVR April 6-11, 2025. Also in April, DSB Field Supervisors and staff will attend the state conventions for NFB and ACB. In May, several staff will attend the Rehab Professionals Conference in Hot Springs. DSB Field Services will be holding their annual training on July 21-24, 2025.

On April 10, DSB will host a transition fair in Little Rock for Pre-ETS Students and their families. DSB's Jump Start program is scheduled for June 16-27, 2025 at the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Field Supervisors will address agency goals and performance measures in the next several Area Manager meetings to ensure performance measures are accurately reported and entered prior to the end of the program year. Supervisors are also working to complete Performance, Goals and

Compensation System (PGCS) ratings for staff as part of DSB's Leadership meetings and state plan goals.

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

Mr. Gustavo Manzanales stated that the Vending Facility Program (VFP) team visited the Sagebrush conference and is in the process of opening new locations for the Attorney General's office, the Bankruptcy building, and a request to have the Air Control tower in Fort Smith for vending. Mr. Manzanales continued with updates on the VFP, Tech Lab and Braille Sections:

**VFP Section:**

Finalizing the renewal of Vending Contracts.

- Visited Sagebrush in late February for the Randolph Sheppard Training/updates.
- Planning to open the Attorney General's location in early April
- Performing interviews for new positions

**Tech Lab:**

- Continues to receive referrals
- Received new equipment and software
- Hiring for a new Rehab Program Coordinator

**Braille Section:**

- Charlie Cain, Braille Transcriptionist, retired at the end of February.
- Braille will still be provided as needed.
- Hiring positions are in the process.

**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. Newslines has approximately 553 listeners signed up, with 100 loyal users. The information to join Newslines 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 on creative descriptions for movies, plays and other live performances. 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 is scheduled to attend multiple events to include the Transition Fair in April and the speaking engagement at the ACB State Conference in April.

### **DSB Quality Assurance Update - Sherlyn Harris:**

The Quality Assurance (QA) Team will begin auditing Pre-ETS and OIB cases in April. QA would like to implement new ways to support the field staff. The QA team plans to distribute an anonymous survey to pair with each region to customize specific resources to assist the counselors and administrative staff. The goal is to use that information to set up a “Lunch and Learn” session to address the concerns shared in the survey. QA is also exploring other tools to support the consumers with self-advocacy and avenues for integrated employment.

Next week, Scott Seay and Ms. Harris are traveling to Salt Lake City, UT, for the annual X4 Summit hosted by Qualtrics. DSB looks forward to advancing its skills to provide better customer service to our consumers and improve the case management process in addition to learning more about the products offered. Scott Seay and Jaime Davis, DSB Auditors, have used the platform in various ways to support the DSB staff. As always, Ms. Harris wanted to thank the QA Team for their hard work and dedication to the agency.

Dr. Stokes took an opportunity to acknowledge Ms. Harris. Ms. Sherlyn Harris earned her Ph.D. recently and expressed congratulations on her accomplishment. Ms. Theresa Petrey took the floor to congratulate Ms. Sherlyn Harris and said, “That is an accomplishment and not to be taken lightly.”

### **Staff Development Update: DiAnnette Finks:**

For the 2025 Spring semester enrollment, DSB currently has Stephanie Moten at the University of North Texas. DSB also has Caletha Stewart, who is currently enrolled at Southern Arkansas University, and both are in the master’s degree program. Mrs. Finks also congratulated Heather Grigsby and Marion Asmus, both graduated from the VR Leadership Pathways, which is a program through UA CURRENTS.

Also, congratulations to Dianette Finks, who graduated from the UA CURRENTS Lead VR Leadership program just this week on Wednesday. Dr. Sherlyn Harris completed a doctoral degree. Dr. Stokes announced that the DSB Leadership Team had the first meeting of the year on January 31st. The Leadership Team will have monthly meetings to discuss strategies to implement the State Plan and DSB overall operations. The DSB Leadership Retreat is scheduled for May 2025 in West Memphis. The purpose is for the DSB Leadership Team to get together and continue to strategize on how the agency can improve its outcomes and delivery of consumer services. Dr. Stokes stated the DSB Budget Report is included in the board packet and asked board members to contact her directly with questions about the budget. The DSB Director’s report is concluded.

### **Old Business Section:**

#### **DSB Board Member Appointments Update – Chairman David Henry:**

Chairman Henry thanked Director Stokes and expressed congratulations to all of those who have completed their certifications with advanced education. Mr. Henry stated he knows it is a lot of hard work getting those done while working and achieving better results for all DSB’s clients. Chairman Henry stated the Governor has not made any new appointments to the DSB Board to

fill the vacant or term expired positions. Chairman Henry also extended appreciation to board members who continue serve under expired appointments. Communication with the Governor’s office will continue with new members 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.

**New Business Section:**

**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 March 14, 2025, the expenses by service category were as follows: assessment was \$7,463.66; diagnosis and treatment \$344,309.97; training \$1,006,431.35; job services \$53,743.47; transportation \$33,669.33; maintenance \$172,541.39; rehabilitation technology \$75,319.33; supported employment \$0; reader services \$1,446.50; personal attendant services \$0; interpreter \$7,341.42; other services \$588,820.65; technical assistance \$0; customized employment \$0. Training category as follows: graduate college was \$68,563.47; four-year college \$335,012.68; junior college \$7,556.59; vocational \$142,448.45; on-the-job \$3,560.00; apprenticeship \$0; disability skills training \$170,691.48; and, miscellaneous (costs that were more specific to the consumer’s individual needs) \$188,416.68; job readiness \$90,172.00. Job services are as follows: job search assistance \$1,975.00; job placement \$26,418.47; on-the-job support – time-limited \$1,500.00; on-the-job support - supported employment \$23,850.00.

Dr. Lamb explained that the RSA II not only outlines expenditures, but also 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 29; diagnosis and treatment 152; graduate college 11; four-year college 47; junior college 4; vocational training 13; on-the-job training 2; apprenticeship training 0; disability skills training 23; miscellaneous training 15; job search assistance 5; job placement assistance 17; on-the-job supports time-limited 1; transportation 29; maintenance 27; rehabilitation technology 46; interpreter 2; reader services 1; personal attendant services 0; other services 66; customized employment 0; job readiness training 16; technical assistance 0, and on-the-job supports supported 2.

**Performance Measures PY2024 (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025)**

- ▶ Measurable Skill Gains
  - ▶ Target Rate of 58.5%
- ▶ Credential Attainment
  - ▶ Cohort of exits from Jan – Dec 2024
  - ▶ Target Rate of 36.5%
- ▶ Employment Rate 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter
  - ▶ Cohort of exits from PY2024.

- ▶ Target Rate of 64.0%
- ▶ Employment Rate 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter
  - ▶ Cohort of exits from Jan – Dec 2024
  - ▶ Target Rate 64.0%
- ▶ Retention with the Same Employer
  - ▶ Cohort of exits from Jan - Dec 2024.
- ▶ Median Wages 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter After Exit
  - ▶ Cohort of exits from PY2024.
  - ▶ Target Rate \$6,800.00

### **Performance Measures**

- ▶ PY 2024 Measurable Skill Gains
  - 1 Skill Gain (1 Participant)
- ▶ 1 Secondary Diploma or Equivalent
- ▶ Rate 1/205 0.49%
- ▶ Target 55.6%

### **PY 2023 MSG Comparison**

- ▶ 52 Skill Gains (47 Participants)
  - ▶ 1 Educational Functional level
  - ▶ 4 Secondary Diploma or Equivalent
  - ▶ 45 Secondary Report Cards/Post Secondary Transcripts
  - ▶ 1 Skill Progression
- ▶ Rate 47/209 22.5%
- ▶ Target 55.6%

### **Credentials Earned PY 2024**

- ▶ Credentials Earned During PY2024
  - 1 Bachelor's Degree
- ▶ Reported Credential Rate is 1/10 10%

### **2023 Credential Comparison**

#### **Credentials Earned During PY2023**

- ▶ 2 Associate's Degree
  - 5 Bachelor's Degree
  - 1 Attained Degree Above a Master's (e.g., PH.D., Ed.D., J.D., M.D.)
  - High School Equivalency (GED)
- ▶ Reported Credential Rate is 3/10 30%

### **2024 Employment Rate**

- ▶ 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter After Exit – 50 participants
  - Employment Rate (50/173) is 28.9%
  - Target Rate of 64.0%
- ▶ 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter After Exit – 16 participants
  - Employment Rate (16/180) is 8.89%
  - Target Rate 63.0%
- ▶ Retention PY2024 (15/75) is 20.0%

### **2023 Employment Rate Comparison**

- ▶ 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter After Exit – 103 participants
  - Employment Rate (103/198) is 52.0%
  - Target Rate is 61.5%
- ▶ 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter After Exit – 78 participants
  - Employment Rate (78/169) is 46.2%
  - Target Rate is 57.9%
- ▶ Retention PY2023 (57/94) is 60.6%

### **2024 Employment Rate**

- ▶ Median Wages PY 2024
  - At Exit - \$16.00/hour
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter After Exit - \$8,236.32
    - ▶ Target is \$6,800

### **2023 Employment Rate**

- ▶ Median Wages PY2023
  - ▶ At Exit - \$16/hour
  - ▶ 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter After Exit - \$8,551.45
    - Target is \$5,787.00

### **Program Outcomes**

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

**Proposed DSB & ARS Merger – Chairman David Henry:**

Chairman Henry stated the proposed merger with ARS and Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) is under review by the Bureau of Legislative Research. The Commerce legal team will send a final copy to DSB and ARS which will be distributed to stakeholders to review. Chairman Henry stated that an accessible copy of the final draft has been requested to ensure individuals who are blind or visually impaired are able to read the language. The Department of Commerce has not released who will sponsor the merger bill, but the DSB Board will watch for an announcement. The plan is for the DSB Board members to have an opportunity to speak for or against the bill once it arrives at the legislative committee for a vote. Board members are required to sign up to speak at the legislative hearing. Chairman Henry stated that he is not sure when the bill will be submitted but will continue to follow the process. Chairman Henry asked Dr. Stokes to speak about possible percentages of the Vocational Rehabilitation grant award if the merger were to be approved. Chairman Henry asked Dr. Stokes to provide an overview of the possible grant award funding with a combined agency model. The figures are estimates of the total federal awards to the State of Arkansas for Vocational Rehabilitation.

Dr. Stokes presented the following:

**Prior Years Grant Award Information**

Grant Year	Grant Award Number	Agency	Amount Received	Amount Relinquished	Re-Allotment Received	Total Amount	DSB Actual Percentage
2020	H126A200097	AR Rehabilitation Services	\$35,607,361.00	\$0.00	\$4,838,542.00	\$40,445,903.00	
2020	H126A200098	AR Division of Services for the Blind	\$4,855,549.00	\$0.00	\$1,729,062.00	\$6,584,611.00	
						\$47,030,514.00	14%

Grant Year	Grant Award Number	Agency	Amount Received	Amount Relinquished	Re-Allotment Received	Total Amount	DSB Actual Percentage
2021	H126A210097	AR Rehabilitation Services	\$36,180,399.00	\$0.00	\$1,939,306.00	\$38,119,705.00	
2021	H126A210098	AR Division of Services for the Blind	\$4,933,691.00	\$0.00	\$1,663,460.00	\$6,597,151.00	
						\$44,716,856.00	15%

Grant Year	Grant Award Number	Agency	Amount Received	Amount Relinquished	Re-Allotment Received	Total Amount	DSB Actual Percentage
2022	H126A210097	AR Rehabilitation Services	\$36,935,405	\$20,935,408.00	0	\$16,000,000.00	
2022	H126A210098	AR Division of Services for the Blind	\$5,036,646	\$0	\$1,547,965.00	\$6,584,611.00	
						\$22,584,611.00	29%

2025 Estimated award is \$47,946,227- The total Vocational Rehabilitation Award to the State of Arkansas. The Estimated amounts are what the blind agency could receive under a combined agency.

Blind Agency Estimated 10%	\$4,794,623
Blind Agency Estimated 15%	\$7,191,934
Blind Agency Estimated 20%	\$9,589,246

Dr. Stokes addressed questions from the board members and thanked Chairman Henry for the opportunity to review the information. (The recorded meeting is available upon request)

**Public Comments & Concerns – DSB Board Members & Stakeholders:**

Chairman Henry asked for public comment from board members or stakeholders to voice concerns or provide feedback regarding the proposed merger bill. Chairman Henry stated that he is not in favor of the proposed merger bill and is open to discuss to ensure the outcome is best for individuals who are blind or visually impaired, consumers and the agency. Chairman Henry indicated that his concerns include the unknown changes that would occur and not being able to know exactly what the future entails under a new agency structure and administration.

**The transcriptions below are transcribed as spoken as referenced in public comments:**

**Gustavo Manzanales:**

Mr. Gustavo Manzanales said, “I can go ahead and open it up. People get a little shy sometimes. Yeah, the major thing to me is obviously the specifics of like not having the data behind it. I think the people who are making the decisions do not have the guarantee of how it's going to come out. So, it doesn't give a very safe movement, and that's kind of what I feel. The number sounds nice as far as, if there's a guaranteed 20% of something like that. That would obviously be a big advantage. To be able to provide that much more money to services. But then again, the biggest concern to me is that historically, I read that Mississippi state data on mergers, combined versus separate agencies, and the literature does not really support combining agencies. The most disadvantaged people historically, will get left out, which means the blind and the severely visually impaired. So overall, the influx of services might get diluted. So that's one of my main concerns right now, we are all here, but what happens in 15 or 20 years, where we are in this position, whereas, in a general Rehab Program, the expertise is specific.”

Mr. Manzanales added, “Historically, other agencies' successful outcomes are obtained by keeping it separate. This has benefited better for the more disadvantaged clients. And it kind of says that they have better end results in the long run. Long story short, I think maybe legislators are kind of rushing this a little too much without having the data to support it. One big thing that they bring up a lot is the Kentucky merger and the Texas merger. Right now, there's no real data because they're so new, having been established in 2016 and 2018. Currently, there is no data out there to support outcomes or whether this system works regarding getting people who are blind employed. That's kind of one of those things I am more concerned about. There's no guarantee concerning the loss of special services and the expertise in this field. Quick story. I'm just going to utilize this quick story that happened to me on yesterday.” Mr. Manzanales stated, “Okay, okay. Just a quick story. It's a funny thing, what happened to me yesterday, right here at this building. We have a new machine, and a lot of the ARS departments came here, to be housed in

this building So they're combining a lot of the agencies together. So, they emailed everybody to announce there's a new water machine here, whatever, whatever. It was nice. I was kind of excited to go get my water. I get to the ice maker and everything. The ice maker worked. I go to the water, and it's all touchscreen. So, it took me about seven minutes just to get a glass of water with Ira. You know, I can write you an Excel form and everything, but I can't get your water. And this was bought for or on behalf of an accessibility rehab agency. Some of those little things that just make sense have that expertise. I think the proposed merger could have an issue regarding emphasis on blindness, so just a funny story that happened to me yesterday.”

Dr. Stokes wanted to go on record stating that, “Mr. Chairman, just a moment. I'd just like to say also that Gustavo is speaking on behalf of a consumer who is blind or visually impaired and not the agency.”

**Larry Wayland:**

Mr. Larry Wayland began his public comment by saying, “This is Larry. And we better be speaking up. Can you hear me? Okay. First, I would like to state that I am completely against the merger. I hate going for something like this, going into all the uncertainties and even if DSB was promised the stuff that they've been talking about, such as the money. In addition to keeping the counselors for the Division of Services for the blind, and all of this. Further down the road, it would be very easy to completely integrate the Division of Services for the Blind into Rehab Services. That's what happened to the deaf program in Arkansas, and it would be very easy to just go ahead and merge. DSB would lose the specialty counselors and all that it has right now. And I am glad Gustavo spoke up about that because that kind of stuff happens all the time. I mean everywhere. And there's just not anything that is certain about what's going to happen. If we're going to merge, and if this is going to happen, DSB needs more promises and more protection, and the only way to really keep that protection is to keep our DSB Board. We could, as Gustavo mentioned, use the paper from the Mississippi State Research Center down there. I think all we must do really is just contact some of the consumers from these states, who have agencies that have merged with the general rehab agencies and let them tell us what they are experiencing. And I think you would find that not very many people at all are very happy with the situation. I do not know why we cannot say so. I do not know why people who want to do these mergers cannot do a little bit of research and find out what the people who are affected the most have to say about it.

**Terry Sheeler:**

Mrs. Terry Sheeler stated, “Yes, hello. I again would like to say that I think I have already made my comments and voiced my opinion publicly at the last special board meeting. But I just want to reiterate that I am not for this merger. And a lot of the reasons have already been stated, so I am not going to go over them again. However, the quickness of forcing this through, I would just add that that is not a way to proceed with this, either. Thank you.”

**Theresa Petrey:**

Mrs. Theresa Petrey stated, “I echo what everyone else has said. I'm not for this merger. I think it would put the blind individuals at a disadvantage, and I have already shared this in other times and places. But I came from a state where there was this one state rehab center, and there were

blind individuals, but we were in a small minority. And it is funny that Gustavo should mention something that may seem insignificant to some. As you know, trying to get water. When I was at this particular rehab center, there was a drink machine in the laundry room. And I remember enlisting the assistance of one of our instructors in the blind personal adjustment unit to help me label the buttons on the drink machine, you know, Pepsi, Dr. Pepper, whatnot, just so I would know if I wanted to get something to drink late at night, I could do it all by myself. And so those little things like that are so highly important to us. Thank you.”

**Eric Yarberry:**

Mr. Yarberry said, “Okay, I am not going to repeat what's already been said because I think it is fair that most people know, it is crucial that the state understand that the cost of technology for the blind is exorbitant. Just one of the latest pieces of technology is a full-page braille display, which makes textbooks and these kinds of things more accessible. And it is just one page at a time that it displays, and it has a retail value of \$17,000 for one device. And costs are not far off if you look at other braille displays and devices like that. In addition, screen reading technology ranges from \$1,500, \$2,000, \$2,500, somewhere in there. And that's just to buy a license outright. And then there's an annual subscription that you can get, but that's recurring. And then, as far as the cost of specialized training. We know, especially in Arkansas, not being one of the top states that it has the best training and education. Once we train someone in the field and they get the expertise, we cannot afford to keep them. And we lose them to other states or other agencies. So, we have to be able to pay those prices to keep that high level of expertise. So, I just want to add that we have got to look at and raise awareness of the fact that costs just to support blind and visually impaired individuals are exponentially higher than the cost of someone who is sighted and just needs workforce rehabilitation. So that's all I want to add. Thanks, guys.”

Dr. Stokes stated that Chris Barnes, Interim Superintendent for School for the Blind was present and may have some insight regarding how the merger process was implemented for School for the Blind and Visually Impaired and Arkansas School for the Deaf.

**Chris Barnes:**

Dr. Chris Barnes stated, “I can mention a few things. First, I want to say I appreciate everyone's comments about the merger. And I can tell you on our end, we are going to have a bill that's going to come out that's going to be very similar to what you all are experiencing now regarding the School for the Blind and the Deaf. Our process has been in the works for a while.

We were looking at services provided to our children, both deaf and blind. Those programs are at the highest caliber. And I'll speak about something that we have seen more recently because of the merging that we have done, because what we've tried to do is really, first, open up our personnel to understanding who the other personnel are. We have had people who have been on the canvas of the School for the Blind or the School for the Deaf, in some cases, their entire lives. They came to the schools when they were in elementary school. They graduated. They came back to work in those schools. And I have spent 20 years working in those schools and have never seen the other side of the campus. Had never even visited.”

Dr. Barnes added, “When Ms. Walsh and I decided to pull the leadership together. Of the schools, both schools together are in the same room. The first thing we did was introduce ourselves. Because no one knew who the personnel were. The principals did not know the other principals. And these were people who had been on their respective campuses for over a decade. It was interesting to see because we share the same 133 acres of space. But we did not know one another, and that's how separate the systems were. But what we have seen as we have come together in joining forces and building collaboration between the leadership and between staff. We've been able to rely on each other for services that we may not have had on the other campuses. And we have been able to share those services so that those students can get support. What we have also seen is that we, at one time within our history, had a very vibrant deaf blind program. That has since not been true. Our deafblind program had pretty much died. And what we noticed this year; we went from three students being identified as deafblind to 23 students being identified as deafblind. And that is really the ongoing trend that we are seeing more in our infants and our toddlers, and our young people. Coming up, is that as infant mortality rates have dropped. We are seeing infants survive in times that they otherwise would not.”

Dr Barnes said, “And as we all know, the things to last form in many respects, in utero, our eyes and ears. And so those optic nerves, the auditory nerves, are many times the last to develop. And so, as our children who are being born are living instead of suffering death. We are now having to see more children who are found to be more deaf and blind. And we have to find ways to better support that. We have found this year to be a crucial element because we had students on both sides of the campus who were either deaf or blind. And we noticed that they had things that they were missing, and that our work together to try to provide support for our students helped us to identify those crucial needs. And that helps them to be able to get the things that they need, so we can serve them better. Has this been an easy process? No, it has not been easy. Has it been met with resistance? Yes, it has been met with resistance by some people.”

Dr Barnes wrapped up by saying, “But what we've tried to do is take what our governor's vision has been, take what our board's vision has been, and we've tried to implement that in the best way that we can. And I know in our plans concerning the same process. Whenever Ms. Walsh was hired, it was under the understanding that she would eventually become superintendent of both schools, with an understanding that she would serve in both capacities. And her background in both blind and deaf education, I think, gives her the ability to do that. And I think that she has a vision to support our students, both blind and deaf, to provide the best care and the best preparation. And we continue to work with our partners like World Services for the Blind and work with DSB, to continue providing services and support to our students. And that to me is never going to change. We have worked very hard to try to expand services, to try to expand preparation for our children, to be able to give them the avenues they need to be productive citizens, to live a life that they want to live with independence. And so, we are continuing to move down that path. So, I hope that answers at least on our perspective, some of the things that we have had to grapple with, some of the challenges that we have had, but some of the rewards that we otherwise would not have had had we been separate silos.”

Chairman Henry wrapped up the public comments and concerns by saying, “Thank you, Mr. Barnes, for those comments. I think they were very informative, coming from a stakeholder, and working with the Division of Services for the Blind. Was there anyone else? All right. Hearing none. Like I said, some of our concerns are just the fact that many times, as we have heard before, some of the services in different administrations do go by the wayside, eventually! And

so, the biggest part of this merger is that we deregulate the DSB Board, and that is a big concern. Since we are a regulatory board, being able to have our discussions a little bit more freely and with the people who have the lived experiences of being blind and visually impaired is crucial". We will go ahead with our consumer reports if there are no other comments."

### **DSB Board Committee Reports:**

#### **FAIRS Update – Larry Wayland:**

The FAIRS board is still meeting quarterly and has been working on some new ideas. Mr. Larry Wayland mentioned that in the last meeting, a lady colleague described the Christmas parade in Little Rock. In which she did a very good job. It was recorded. You may listen to it over on AIRS. Also, it is on the website, and you could go to and listen to it anytime you want to. FAIRS is also talking to the representative about some other things, too, that might be interesting, such as museums. Mr. Wayland said FAIRS has even talked to the representative about maybe describing some other things, like air shows such as the old Confederate Air Force. Other ideas are things like going through some airplanes and describing the airplanes and what's going on during their show, and everything. So, with that, FAIRS is looking at some new things. In addition, FAIRS has been hiring some authors to read their books in the past, and the organization is going to continue trying to do something like that in the future as well.

If anybody wants to know anything about AIRS Radio, feel free to call the Division of Services for the Blind. The technology department there would be happy to explain it to anybody, or you can get in touch with one of the board members, including Mr. Wayland. Gustavo can give out information about how to get in contact with the organization. Last, if anybody has any ideas, FAIRS would appreciate hearing them.

#### **Report on Quarterly Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) Advisory Committee**

##### **Activities-Terry Sheeler:**

Mrs. Terry Sheeler stated that the OIB Advisory Committee did meet this morning. Mrs. Sheeler said it was unnecessary to go over all the updates that have already been repeated in this meeting. However, the OIB Advisory Committee did take time to follow up on a previous discussion that was had regarding transportation. This is because the OIB Advisory Council members are looking into sitting on some boards, and what is available to them. While working on that, Ms. Betty Johnson has been great at following up and doing some legwork regarding securing information for the OIB Committee. Mrs. Sheeler reported that the OIB Advisory Committee wants to make sure that the committee continues to exist regardless of where the DSB & ARS merger falls. The OIB Advisory Committee next meeting is scheduled for June 13, 2025.

### **Consumer Input:**

#### **Disability Rights Arkansas (DRA) – Mollie Hernandez:**

Mrs. Hernandez stated Disability Rights Arkansas is currently only serving two consumers of the Division of Services for the Blind. Mrs. Hernandez took just a moment and exclaimed that it would be quick to speak about the merger. Ms. Hernandez said she heard all the concerns related

to receiving fewer services and concerns that the agency will not receive what it needs. Ms. Hernandez wanted to remind the DSB board and staff of the purpose of the Client Assistance Program. Disability Rights Arkansas is here. The Client Assistance Program is also funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, under a grant to help ensure that applicants and consumers of Vocational Rehabilitation Services have the right to explore and assert due process. Disability Rights Arkansas (DRA) is charged with informal dispute resolution at the lowest possible level. So, if anyone just feels like they are being denied a service, or that maybe things are just not being communicated well with their counselors. The Client Assistance Program is here to provide those advocacy services even if this merger goes through.

Mrs. Hernandez stated that DRA assists consumers of both Arkansas Rehabilitation Services and the Division of Services for the Blind. Consumers can reach out to Mrs. Hernandez to receive an explanation of what the organization does and how it works. Disability Rights Arkansas is very knowledgeable about the code of federal regulations that govern Vocational Rehabilitation, and policies that each of the vocational rehabilitation agencies use. Mrs. Hernandez said that there is a great working relationship with each agency. Ms. Hernandez placed emphasis on the fact that the Client Assistance Program is here to serve the consumers, and it wants to. And for those who do not know me personally, Ms. Hernandez revealed, "I'm also Blind, so I am keenly aware of your concerns." Mrs. Hernandez stated that she knows the importance of the services that consumers receive from the Division of Services for the Blind. DRA does not want consumers to not receive the services that they need.

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

Ms. Erika Evans stated she would represent the American Council of the Blind (ACB) for today's DSB Quarterly Board Meeting. The American Council of the Blind will have its state convention next month. April 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, and 27<sup>th</sup>, at the Hilton Garden in Fayetteville. Ms. Evans said that Theresa Petrey and she will attend. Ms. Erika Evans said that Rita Reese Whiting, who is the current president, did send out information regarding the state convention. Ms. Evans stated that she is not sure if DSB received the information, but did try to reach out to Ms. Brandy Bryant the other day to find out. Those who are attending need to get rooms booked. Ms. Erika Evans mentioned that the American Council of the Blind does hope to participate in the Pre-ETS Transition Fair meeting next month on April 10<sup>th</sup>. Ms. Erika Evans stated, the ACB 2025 National Convention is in Dallas starting July 4<sup>th</sup> through July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, at the Hyatt Hotel. The room rate is \$99/night. Mrs. Theresa Petrey also stated that the room rates in Fayetteville at the Hilton Garden Inn for the ACB 2025 State Convention are \$149

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

NFB representatives traveled to Washington, D.C in February to promote several resolutions and ideas about bills that enhance the lives of blind people everywhere across the nation. NFB reps met with two senators and four congressmen and were able to talk with them about those issues. Currently, April 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, NFB will have its State Convention in Bentonville, Arkansas, at La Quinta Inn. Registration is \$70 and includes the banquet meal. Also, rooms are \$129/night through March 20<sup>th</sup>. Late registration is \$75, and the room rate will increase to \$169/night. NFB National Convention will be in New Orleans, LA from July 8<sup>th</sup> through the 13, 2025. Information regarding the conference can be found on NFBAR.org.

Dr. Stokes stated that the DSB staff will attend the state and national ACB and NFB meetings.

**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.

**Schedule for the Next Meeting:**

The DSB Quarterly Board Meeting is scheduled for June 13, 2025, at 1:00 P.M. in person.

**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 2:41 P.M.**