

MINUTES OF MEETING
GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES BOARD
May 10, 2023
1:00 PM – 2:30 PM
45 Baxter Street UGA Tate Student Center, Athens, GA 30602
+1 470-579-3674

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:

Tom Wilson (Chair)
Faye Perdue (Vice Chair)
Sandy Adams (Secretary)
Suzanne Dooley
Louise Hill
Vincent Martin
Jane McCall
Jimmy Defoor (Chair Emeritus)
GVRA Executive Director Chris Wells (Non-Member)

Introduction

GVRS Board Chair Tom Wilson welcomed everyone in attendance, and the meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m.

Approval of Agenda

The board unanimously approved the agenda for the meeting.

Approval of Minutes

Minutes from the March 8, 2023 meeting were unanimously approved.

GVRA Staff Updates/Reports:

Executive Director Report – Executive Director Chris Wells

- Executive Director Wells discussed the importance of State Employee Recognition Week. He mentioned the full day of training and the inter-agency contests such as the crazy tie and crazy sock competition.
- Executive Director Wells recognized Larry Price in the Columbus VR Office as February Employee of the Month and Crystal Clark in the Stone Mountain Office as March Employee of the Month.
- He discussed capital improvements at residential facilities and the possibility of adding new certificate programs at Roosevelt Warm Springs.

- Executive Director Wells shared that the agency is focusing on improving the educational framework for rural districts. He also discussed the success of strategic planning, which brought leaders together for a two-day retreat where the group re-examined the mission statement and reviewed the agency's goals.
- GVRA is re-establishing the Employment First Council; EFC members have been nominated and are awaiting appointment by the Governor's Office.
- Executive Director Wells attended the Georgia Association of Training, Employment, and Supports (GATES) board meeting to discuss upcoming events and to provide updates.
- He discussed the agency's budget, noting GVRA is in a good financial situation.
- He wants to address barriers potential clients are facing.
- He provided a brief update on the FY 2024 appropriations.
- Executive Director Wells noted that services are up but expenses are down because GVRA found a way to provide service delivery more efficiently.
- He provided details regarding the FY 2024 Bond Update, noting that money is being requested for renovation and repair at RWS.

Legislative and Program Updates – Deputy Executive Director of Programs, Bethany Whetzel

Program Highlights, Client Services

- Application to Determination of Eligibility has increased from 77.4% in March to 96.2% in April.
- Determination of Eligibility to Individual Plan for Employment has increased from 67.3% in March to 83.2% in April.
- Since July 1, 2022, 929 clients have been closed.
- Currently serving 7,978 VR clients and 12,929 PTS cases; hoping to increase those numbers.
- Continued partnership with Shepherd Center to improve the vocational, health, and financial outcomes of persons with the most severe TBIs. Five referrals have been received and counselors are working to provide rapid engagement and coordinate service delivery with Shepherd Center. Instead of someone leaving the center and becoming a VR client, GVRA is working to get in the door while they're receiving services at Shepherd Center so their employment outcome and transition will be faster and more streamlined.

Program Highlights, Disability Adjudication Services

- The Interim Commissioner of the Social Security Administration and her team visited and met with DAS leadership at the Stone Mountain office.

- Quality continues to improve – Rolling Quarter Accuracy Rate through March 2023 is 92.8%.
- FFYTD case clearances through April 21, 2023 is 48,966. The majority are initial claims totaling 30,843.
- Hiring continues with an additional 42 employees to be onboarded by September 30th.

Program Highlights, Residential Services

- Staff is preparing to serve students participating in GROW. About 50 students are anticipated to attend GROW at RWS this summer.

Policy Updates – Director of Policy and Compliance, Jeff Allen

- Simplified Supported Employment Policy
- Removal of the 35-mile rule for Post-Secondary Support
- Removal of Financial Need Policy
- Updated comparable benefit language
- Developing a standardized rate for Post-Secondary Support
- Added policy for agricultural job retention
- Removed all references to entry-level
- Continued work to remove procedures from policy; procedures will be housed in SOP Manual
- Developing new policies around the federal indicators of Measurable Skill Gains and Credential Attainment. They will appear in a later version of the policy manual.
- **Bond Resolution – Zain Farooqui, General Counsel**

General Counsel Zain Farooqui asked the board to approve a bond resolution.

- Motion: The Board hereby requests the Georgia State Financing and Investment Commission to undertake to issue \$7,810,000 in aggregate principal amount of State of Georgia General Obligation Bonds.
- The bond resolution passed unanimously.

New Business/Old Business

- A resolution honoring the work of GVRA Executive Director Chris Wells, commending him for leading the agency through the COVID-19 pandemic, was read aloud by Chairman Wilson. Vice Chair Faye Perdue moved to approve the

resolution, several board members seconded, and the board unanimously adopted the resolution. The text of the resolution follows:

RESOLUTION

OF THE GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES BOARD

COMMENDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CHRIS WELLS

FOR HIS EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP, INSIGHT, AND DETERMINATION TO ENACT
SIGNIFICANT AND LASTING CHANGE IN THE GEORGIA VOCATIONAL
REHABILITATION AGENCY

WHEREAS, The Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency is charged by the General Assembly and the Governor with the delivery of effective counseling and vocational training services for eligible people with disabilities in order that they may achieve independence through employment; and

WHEREAS, the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Executive Director Chris Wells assumed leadership of this Agency in June 2020 at the beginning of the COVID pandemic; and

WHEREAS, he became Executive Director in the midst of a major organizational change effort initiated by his predecessor after a study of the agency's needs by a consulting firm; and

WHEREAS, unforeseen disruptions and uncertainty created an atmosphere of fear and anxiety in staff which resulted in high turnover, low morale, and less effective services to people with disabilities; and

WHEREAS, as he assumed office the GVRA faced significant financial challenges due to funding reductions, systemic failures, and lack of accountability; and

WHEREAS, the Agency found itself woefully short of Certified Rehabilitation Counselors, its most impactful service delivery position, due to the above-stated disruptions but also because Counselor salaries had become uncompetitive with other state agencies and the private sector; and

WHEREAS, the Roosevelt Warm Springs residential facility had need of study, reorganization, and re-consideration of its mission; and

WHEREAS, Executive Director Wells and GVRA staff successfully led the agency through the COVID pandemic and organizational change while utilizing data and existing resources to implement remote learning and provision of services; and

WHEREAS, he has worked tirelessly to find efficiencies in administrative costs in order to maximize state matching funds, working toward larger federal grant funding; and

WHEREAS, he created the "One GVRA" initiative which consolidated duplicative administrative functions, resulting in better communication and decision-making among staff; and

WHEREAS, he established a career ladder for Rehabilitation Counselors, raised salary levels to be competitive across state agencies for similar positions, and has initiated hiring in order to achieve staffing levels commensurate with 2019 levels; and

WHEREAS, under his leadership, GVRA initiated a focus on quality services for individuals with blindness and impaired vision by creating and funding a position assigned to the Georgia Academy for the Blind, charged with providing transition services to their students as they graduate, return to their homes, and enter the workforce; and

WHEREAS, Executive Director Chris Wells continues to demonstrate effective leadership through the agency's development and implementation of comprehensive plans to improve operations, expand outreach, and facilitate partnerships in support of GVRA's important work across the state.

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED AND ADOPTED BY THE
GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES BOARD:**

THAT the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board fully supports and commends the efforts of Executive Director Chris Wells to improve and increase Vocational Rehabilitation services to Georgians with disabilities; and

THAT the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board hereby unanimously resolves to commend Executive Director Chris Wells to Governor Brian Kemp for his exemplary service to people with disabilities and the citizens of Georgia.

RESOLVED ON this, the 10th day of May 2023, in public session:

**Thomas Wilson, Chairman
Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation
Services Board**

**Faye Perdue, Vice Chairwoman
Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation
Services Board**

**Sandy Adams, Secretary
Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation
Services Board**

- In other new business, the Chairman asked board member Louise Hill to preside over the election of board members for the following roles:
 - Chair
 - Vice-Chair
 - Secretary
 - Chairman Emeritus

Board member Hill moved that the board accept the slate of Tom Wilson, Chair; Faye Perdue, Vice Chair; Sandy Adams, Secretary and Jimmy Defoor, Chair Emeritus.

- All members were in favor of the election, so the vote was unanimous. Board member Hill then returned the chair of the meeting back to the Chairman.
- Executive Director Wells asked the Board to consider moving the upcoming July meeting to August and the September meeting to October. The Board unanimously approved the requests.

Public Comment/Adjournment- Board member Vincent Martin's brother, Vardis Tyrone Martin, commended the board and the agency for their work in serving individuals with disabilities.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

Official Minutes Statement

The foregoing Minutes for the March 8, 2023, Regular Meeting of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Services Board were approved and adopted by the Board at the Board's meeting on May 10, 2023.

Tom Wilson, Chair

Date

Sandy Adams, Secretary

Date