

DRAFT - Ability & Access Committee Meeting Minutes

March 15, 2022

6:00pm-7:40pm

Minutes submitted by Cindy VandenBosch

Agenda:

1. Presentation from AHRC
2. Finalize priorities for letter to elected officials and relevant agencies

Meeting notes:

1. Presentation from AHRC from Self-Advocacy Advisor Matthew Estep and AHRC self-advocate Victor Carrion
 - a. **Introduction to AHRC.** AHRC was founded approximately 70 years ago and is the largest disability service provider for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the state. They have 5,000 staff that support approximately 15,000 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
 - b. **Overview of AHRC Services** - The organization provides a range of services, including running 4410 and 853 special education schools and a higher education program out of Kingsborough Community College and three other colleges outside of Brooklyn. They also provide residential programming, both ISS (Individual Supports and Services) housing and self-directed housing, where people live independently and get a little help with daily living skills, as well as group support homes. They also provide services for people who might need a little support with laundry, cooking, and other daily living skills. Additionally, they offer supported employment programs, respite, camping and recreational programs, as well as day habilitation services, both site-based and without walls.
 - c. **Self advocate Victor Carrion shared his experience** receiving services from AHRC, including participating in Day Hab without Walls program volunteering in the local community and he also participates in their employment training program. Victor shared his experience of going to Albany to advocate for funding for the employment training program and the committee watched a video about his experience and advocacy work.
 - d. **Need for raising wages in state budget for direct support staff** - AHRC is seeking support from members of the community to contact their state representatives to encourage them to include raising the wages in the state budget for payment of direct support staff for disability services.
 - i. Victor Carrion shared his concern about staffing shortages for disability support staff because they are not getting paid enough.
 - ii. Matt shared that most direct support staff make minimum wage and the rate for those reimbursements is set into state law. It's a difficult, but rewarding job and requires a great deal of responsibility, but the pay is \$15/hour and it makes it incredibly hard to fill positions and provide quality services to people who need the help. You can't live on that much money. Unfortunately, that's what the law allows AHRC to pay their staff. 10 out

of 11 years when Governor Cuomo was in office, there was only one 2% cost of living adjustment. Every other year the cost of living adjustment was a line item veto by Cuomo's office.

- iii. The current Assembly budget calls for an 11% increase, which would enable AHRC to pay more competitive rates to keep staff and prevent so much staff turnover and vacancies.

e. Questions and Answers:

- i. **What are the ratios for day hab services?** State guidelines call for 1:8 for day habilitation services and AHRC limits it to 1 staff member per 6 people who receive services.
- ii. **Was AHRC affected by COVID?**
 - 1. AHRC lost staff due to the pandemic, especially in other departments, such as residential and home care. They were essential workers going into people's homes and AHRC wasn't able to pay hazard pay due to set wages at the state level. A lot of people received services over Zoom instead.
 - 2. Some group homes that people live in are categorized in the same way as nursing homes. They are congregate settings with a lot of people who have pre-existing conditions and are likely to be impacted by a disease.
- iii. **Do the clients set goals as part of the program?** Yes, Victor shared that he does make life plan goals with support from AHRC staff.
- iv. **How can it be that direct support staff are only making minimum wage?** Job coaches are being hired at minimum wage or close to minimum wage. There have been years of disinvestment and it's a huge problem. The program should grow as the population grows. Those increases have not passed and haven't been included in the state budget, and that's how we got to the point where we are now.
- v. **What is involved in home care?** We have a department that does home care that helps people with daily living skills at home. For someone who is living independently, they might need help with cooking, cleaning, making sure bills are paid on time. Home care staff will go to the home to assist with that.
- vi. **How many job developers do you have helping people find employment?** AHRC has a social enterprise called Hudson River Services that provides janitorial disinfection services that saw immense growth during the pandemic since it was in such heavy demand. They do a lot of work with Restaurant Associates as well.
- vii. **Where do you volunteer in the community?**
 - 1. Victor mentioned that his day hab group has been volunteering at Meals on Wheels. Before the pandemic, he delivered food out in the community. Because of COVID, he's now volunteering in the kitchen and doing food service with staff and other volunteers.
 - 2. Victor would like to know about other possible volunteer opportunities in the local community. Cindy VandenBosch said

that the community board could help by sending a list of local organizations that take volunteers to Matt at AHRC to share with Victor and his day hab group.

viii. **Can you tell us more about the college program services?** We have a higher ed program that is at Kingsborough Community College, College of Staten Island, Hostos Community College, and Manhattan Borough Community College. We support five students per school per year. Each school is supporting 25 people, including four years of college and an alumni year focused on job placement. It's a certificate program. Students audit classes and take them alongside all other students and have staff who accompany them, assist them, and a study buddy. They try to hire students at their school of choice whenever possible.

ix. **Do your participants participate in the AmeriCorps program?** Matt Estrep was not entirely sure whether or not AHRC is currently working with AmeriCorps. Melissa Del Valle Ortiz mentioned that this might be a partnership to look into as an organization so that they can hire participants in the program. It could be potentially added value since they'd receive an educational stipend without affecting their benefits (medical, SNAP, etc.). The stipend they receive is not considered income. It's considered a stipend. It could be cultivated in a way that allows them to be more socialized and experience the world depending on how you programmatically set up their participation.

x. **Comment about Congressional Award for Youth:** Melissa Del Valle Ortiz from Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez's office mentioned that if they are providing services for 14-21 year olds, they can register through the Congresswoman's office and sign up for volunteer hours and receive federal recognition for their contributions to the community.

f. Current campaigns to support state budget allocations for AHRC

- i. Support increasing wages for direct care professionals
- ii. Support pay parity for special educators
- iii. Increase in housing subsidies so people can afford to live in their homes
- iv. Historically, AHRC has gone to Albany, but this year they are relying on digital campaigns due to the pandemic. Support digital campaigns. Matt Estrep shared the following links to help support AHRC to keep providing services:

1. <https://www.cpstate.org/advocacy/>

2. <https://p2a.co/CJ9gcfF>

g. To get more involved with the disability service provider community and people with disabilities, Matt recommended the Brooklyn DD Council Meeting at the Brooklyn Family Support Service Advisory Council: <http://bfssac.com/>

2. Letter to elected officials and agencies

a. Format:

- i. Introduce committee and community board's priorities regarding disability rights, services, and inclusion in the district

- ii. Invite support and responses
- iii. Outline priorities by category:
 - 1. Civic engagement
 - 2. Transportation and Safety
 - 3. Adult Services and Workforce Development
 - 4. Youth, Families, and Education
 - 5. Housing
 - 6. Public Spaces, Parks, and Playgrounds
- iv. Priorities currently include:
 - 1. Accessibility-related capital and budget expense items that CB7 has already approved for this year
 - 2. Other items that have been voted on and requested by the board are also included, such as exploring the installation of ramps in subway stations wherever feasible and secondary egress at all of our subway stations.
- v. In addition to already voted on items by the board, the committee voted with unanimous consent to include the following additional priorities and clarifying language into the letter:
 - 1. Priorities:
 - a. Civic Engagement
 - i. Support accessible meeting announcements and practices
 - ii. Provide services for accessible and language accommodations at meetings
 - iii. Request that the offices elected officials and agencies “walk the talk” by planning for, funding, and implementing accessibility into public meetings
 - b. Transportation and Safety
 - i. Request that the MTA reactivate customer service booths to support riders.
 - ii. Request more education and public outreach about the new Omni system for public transportation, including how it’s going to work, where to get the cards, when the new vending machines will arrive, and how customers receive discounts for the new program.
 - iii. Request presentation from the MTA on the OMNI system about when discounts will be incorporated, when vending machines will change, how to get the cards to use it, etc.
 - iv. Mention that we want upgrades to all subway stations in the district to be fully accessible and ADA compliant

- v. Reform approval authorization process for Access-A-Ride in New York City by removing requirement for in-person assessment
 - vi. Continue and Expand MTA funding for Access-A-Ride On-Demand Service
 - vii. Ensure the entrance to police precincts are accessible to people who use wheelchairs
 - viii. Add bus boarding platforms or bus boarders wherever possible
 - ix. Increase frequency of bus service for B37
 - c. Adult Services and Economic Development
 - i. Support local employment programs for people with disabilities that integrate with or partner with workforce development programs within the district
 - d. Housing
 - i. Increase access to genuinely affordable and accessible housing options in the district
 - e. Public Spaces, Parks, and Playgrounds
 - i. Incorporate changing tables into design of bathrooms in public parks in the district
 - ii. Increase access to public restrooms in general in the district, including in the subway stations
2. Language
- a. Provide a definition in the letter of disability that includes people with apparent and non-apparent (visible / invisible) disabilities and veterans.