**State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)**

**Policy Committee Meeting**

**February 13, 2025**

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Location: Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) Central Office, 721 Capitol Mall, Room 407, Sacramento, CA 95814

*Draft Meeting Minutes*

Note: This committee meeting was held in accordance with California Government Code section 11123.5. There may be members of the public body who participated in meeting who were granted a reasonable accommodation per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

In attendance:

* SRC Policy Committee members in attendance (by Zoom): Brittany Comegna, Ivan Guillen, Theresa Comstock.
* SRC Policy Committee members absent: La Trena Robinson
* SRC members in attendance as members of the public (by Zoom): Yuki Nagasawa, Shannon Coe
* DOR staff in attendance (in-person): Kate Bjerke
* DOR staff in attendance (by Zoom): Jessica Grove, Nancy Wentling, Megan Davis
* Members of the public in attendance (by Zoom): Sarah Issacs, Christopher Waltrous

# Item 1: Welcome and Introductions

Brittany Comegna, SRC Policy Committee Chair, welcomed attendees to the meeting. Kate Bjerke, SRC Executive Officer, reviewed the Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act requirements.

# Item 2: Public Comment

None.

# Item 3: Approval of the January 9, 2025 Policy Committee Meeting Minutes

It was moved/seconded (Comstock/Guillen) to approve the January 9, 2025 Policy Committee meeting minutes with the addition of “or other access” to the following sentence at the bottom of page two: *Does working in the office present physical or other access barriers for DOR staff?* (Yes – Guillen, Comstock, Comegna), (No – 0), (Absent – 0), (Abstain – 0).

# Item 4: Policy Priorities

The agenda item began with Kate Bjerke, SRC Executive Officer, providing a recap of the policies and topics of interest identified by the SRC Policy Committee during their January 9, 2025 meeting. During this meeting, the top priorities identified for the SRC Policy Committee to address in 2025 were: 1) DOR staffing, 2) serving immigrants and refugees, and 3) the phase out of subminimum wage. In addition, the SRC Policy Committee agreed that the full SRC should receive presentations on the following topics, and then the Policy Committee will explore these topics in greater detail: 1) housing, 2) diversity, equity and inclusion, 3) public and private schools, and 4) the DOR Mobility Evaluation Program. Bjerke provided the following updates on some of these topics:

* DOR Staffing: DOR Chief Deputy Director, Victor Duron, is interested in meeting monthly as needed with the SRC Policy Committee to discuss DOR staffing. He respectfully requested that these conversations begin in the late Spring 2025 after his role as Project Director for the Master Plan for Developmental Services has concluded.
* Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI): Bjerke plans to invite the DOR Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) team to the June 2025 SRC quarterly meeting.
* Housing: at the statewide level, DOR is participating on a California Health and Human Services Agency workgroup. Regional efforts occur based on local needs and circumstances.
* An overview will be provided during the upcoming March 5 – 6, 2025 quarterly meeting on 1) policies on the use of public and private schools, and 2) DOR’s Mobility Evaluation Program.

Bjerke concluded her recap, and then the agenda item was opened for an interactive discussion with the SRC members and Jessica Grove, Deputy Director, DOR VR Policy and Resources Division, Nancy Wentling, Chief, DOR VR Policy and Resources Division, and Megan Davis, Chief, DOR Policy and Performance Section. The goal of the discussion was for DOR to learn about the SRC Policy Committee priorities. SRC Policy Committee members provided the following comments, insight and feedback:

* Regarding DEI:
	+ Concerns that DEI terminology used by DOR may not align with the current federal administration's stance. Alternative phrasing was suggested.
	+ Acknowledgment that this issue is politically sensitive but it’s important to remain committed to DEI and its values.
	+ Interest in hearing from DOR’s IDEA team.
* Regarding DOR staffing and workforce challenges:
	+ Impact of staffing shortages across different regions and the ongoing difficulties in recruitment and retention.
	+ Specific challenges faced by counselors who are Deaf.
	+ The relatively low salaries for DOR Counselors likely contribute to the difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified personnel.
	+ Suggestion to increase telework in areas with high vacancy rates to mitigate staffing shortages.
	+ Suggestion to increase the pool of candidates - post DOR Counselor jobs as available statewide, and then the incumbent can work from the DOR office that is located closest to them.
	+ Acknowledgement that State of California employment has requirements that are out of DOR’s control (example: bargaining, wages), and the importance to focus on things that DOR can control or change.
	+ Suggestion to streamline administrative processes and improve service delivery through technology. AI and automation for routine approvals, such as transportation reimbursements and financial aid verification, could alleviate the burden on counselors.

The SRC Policy Committee members and DOR representatives then discussed services to immigrants and refugee populations. It was confirmed that as long as individuals had a reasonable expectation of being able to work at the conclusion of their training, DOR can provide services. It was noted that vocational rehabilitation services do not fall under the public charge rule and thus do not pose a risk to citizenship applications.

Public comments:

* Yuki Nagasawa, SRC member and DOR Student Services Counselor, commented that she supported the idea of automating approval processes, but noted that many consumers struggle with digital literacy, limiting their ability to use existing online portals effectively. Nagasawa recommended the development of training programs that can improve consumers’ ability to navigate digital systems and upload required documentation.
* Sarah Issacs, DRC, noted the importance of ensuring individuals previously working in subminimum wage employment settings are transitioned into meaningful, competitive employment. She also cautioned against overcorrection in response to federal policies, emphasizing that legal challenges could shift the landscape.
* Christopher Waltrous suggested the creation of a virtual hub for certain services to assist in certain job functions to relieve some issues.

# Item 5: Debrief, Recommendations & Future Agenda Items

The debrief began with a discussion about DOR staffing shortages and staff retention. The SRC Policy Committee members offered the following suggestions and ideas:

* Allow for increased remote work in areas where employees are sector-based.
* Allow for increased remote work when a particular vacancy threshold in a region has been reached.
* Engage in legislative advocacy regarding this issue.
* Survey DOR staff about their work locations, commuting challenges, and preferences for remote or alternative office placements.
* Hire DOR Counselors in any location in California to provide services statewide.

Kate Bjerke, SRC Executive Officer, noted that the requirement for staff to work onsite at least two days per week is a state level requirement. Bjerke also explained that the SRC’s scope likely does not include the ability to directly contact and survey rank-and-file staff. Bjerke noted that Victor Duron, DOR Chief Deputy Director, has committed to discussing DOR staffing with the SRC Policy Committee in late Spring 2025. Bjerke said she has compiled all of the SRC’s feedback, suggestions, questions and ideas regarding staffing for reference during the late Spring 2025 discussions.

Action: To memorialize the SRC Policy Committee’s interest in this topic, it was moved/seconded (Comstock/Guillen) for the SRC Policy Committee to present the following draft recommendation to the full SRC during the March 5 – 6, 2025 quarterly meeting: *The SRC recommends that DOR work to understand and address barriers to attracting and retaining staff.* (Yes – Guillen, Comegna, Comstock), (No – 0), (Absent – Robinson), (Abstain – 0).

DOR staffing will remain a top priority for the SRC Policy Committee, and the path forward for addressing this priority will be engaging with Duron in the Spring of 2025, and 2) presenting the draft recommendation to the full SRC during the March 5 – 6, 2025 quarterly meeting.

Bjerke then asked the SRC Policy Committee what they would like to focus on, in addition to DOR staffing, as this information will help her when scheduling presentations. It was suggested that at the next Policy Committee meeting, to learn more about the phase out of subminimum wage. Bjerke asked what specifically the SRC Policy Committee would like to learn about this topic, and the following questions and ideas were offered:

* How has the phase out impacted individuals that were in subminimum wage employment settings? Are statistics or data available regarding their current employment?
* Gather more information from staff and vendors/service providers to determine if additional resources are needed.
* What are the challenges for individuals in accessing services from all the different agencies involved, like the Regional Centers, DOR and local school districts?
* Are there any programs, initiatives or pilots that will help streamline transitions?
* Learn more about the Master Plan for Developmental Services and how it ties into the phase out of subminimum wage.
* Do some individuals prefer subminimum wage settings because it makes them eligible for benefits such as Medicare or Social Security? Does transitioning out of a subminimum wage employment setting affect an individual’s eligibility for these benefits? Are individuals receiving work incentives planning services so they can feel confident working?

Ivan Guillen, SRC Chair, noted that during the Client Assistance Program (CAP) report out at the March 5 – 6, 2025 SRC meeting, he will highlight the following trends that CAP has identified over the past year when working with consumers:

* Delay in services because of DOR staffing shortages, particularly counselors.
* Consumers who need reasonable accommodations in order to access DOR and DOR services, like a communication device, laptop, iPad, or specific communication strategy.
* Lack of vendors to provide services. For example, there are very few options for assistive technology vendors, which leads to delays in consumers receiving their needed assessments.
* DOR worked to make the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) more user-friendly, and the boilerplate language was updated; however, there is still a lot of verbiage being inserted into the IPE by counselors which makes the document confusing. There have also been instances where statements within the IPE are in conflict with regulations. There is an opportunity now for further refinement, to balance the need to include all the necessary information but make the document easy to follow. The use of the IPE also varies amongst the different DOR offices – some counselors will insert numerous unnecessary statements using older language like  “DOR will never pay for repeat classes” however this is not necessarily true – if there was an issue a consumer experienced with a class, this can be addressed.

The SRC Policy Committee agreed to hold off on further discussions regarding DOR services for immigrants and refugees at this time.

Public comments:

* Sarah Issacs, DRC, noted that she has spoken to some vendors who have shared with her challenges they’ve experienced in working with DOR to support clients. Sarah explained that she could help connect these vendors to Bjerke and DOR representatives, if interested.
* Shannon Coe, SRC member, commented that it would be a great idea to have a presentation from vendors to understand their perspectives and challenges. Comstock noted that it may be beneficial to meet individually with vendors outside of a public forum.

# Item 7: Adjourn

Brittany Comegna, SRC Policy Committee Chair, adjourned the meeting at 12:00 p.m.