

## AT Advisory Council Meeting Notes

April 14, 2021

10:00 a.m. -11:50 a.m.

Microsoft Teams Online

Present: Bill Hudson, Phil Seiler, Emma Cobb, Peter Jonke, Tracy Roux, Quinby McLellan, Marge Wells, Ana Kolbach, Allie Kelly, Rose Lucenti, and interpreters Paige Kirby and Sabrina Seeger.

10:00-10:15 Pre-meeting (Meeting will be open for attendees to test their connection and technology)

10:15-10:25 Welcomes and Introductions

All meeting members introduced themselves.

Introducing Bill Hudson our new AT Council member. He has worked with many of us in different capacities. He retired last October from VR and has worked with AT in the past.

10:25-10:30 Hearing Aid Bill and new state Director of Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Deaf Blind Services Laura Siegel.

[DAIL has hired a coordinator for all deaf hard of hearing deaf blind services.](#)

Laura presented a few months ago on a 3 Part Hearing Loss presentation for our AT program staff. She did a short [VPR](#) interview recently as well. Laura can be reached at [laura.siegel@vermont.gov](mailto:laura.siegel@vermont.gov)

Phil said that one of her priorities is that VT continues to be an outlier in the northeast of not requiring insurance companies to pay for hearing aids. [House bill 266](#) addresses this. It has been referred to the Committee on Healthcare. There is a concurrent bill in the Senate is [Bill 320](#) that was introduced last year. Feel free to advocate.

Bill said previously his work with those who are hard of hearing struggled with the cost of hearing aids. Glad to know this bill will help people.

Marge commented she used to be a VR counselor for 12 years, many HOH clients were losing jobs or could not gain employment because of not being able to obtain hearing aids.

Phil mentioned that [Opportunities Credit Union, Independence Fund](#) does offer low interest loans for hearing aids.

10:30-10:40 Update to AT4ALL

The AT Program has a few different types of data systems we use in our regular program duties. One of them is AT4All. It is our primary data system for managing our AT inventory and some of our core functions. It houses our inventory and reuse inventory. Recently, the website has had a "facelift". VT converted to this in early March. It has been a learning process for the teams but has worked well for the public. [www.vt.at4all.com](http://www.vt.at4all.com)

AT4All is currently needing a lot of accessibility fixes. Feel free to visit it and see if you can access it well. Report back to our program if you want to share feedback.

Bill said it is great to see that we have the AT4All inventory website. Technology changes so quickly and keeping up to date is important. He hopes that the new AT4All website will be beneficial for all.

The VT AT Program's [accessible recreation web page](#) has now been created and is online. Suggestions are always welcome.

#### 10:40-10:45 Accessible Web

Earlier this month Phil met with the Burlington company Accessible Web. They assist other companies to update their web accessibility. He hopes we can find a way to work together. The VT AT Program is mandated to perform accessibility trainings each year. This is a good resource for our council to know about. Here is the [website](#) for Accessible Web.

Marge noted there is no captioning access for virtual yoga, art and other online classes. She is wondering what can be done to get good captioning for these types of things.

#### 10:45-10:55 Annual Leadership Symposium Report

AT Acts, or AT Programs as they are known in the nation, gather annually in Washington DC. This year it was a virtual symposium. When it meets in person, AT program members are encouraged to make Hill visits and lobby for continued funding.

AT Programs have a lot of freedom in how they are organized and run. We have a multitude of organizational models. Some are in universities, and some in state offices.

We would like to have conversations perhaps quarterly with other AT acts as we have similar issues. One example is that our AT Specialists struggle with the ability to demonstrate devices over video with clients based on the ability for clients to see the equipment. Both sides struggle with computer issues around this currently.

Our annual grant allotment of \$430,000 is up for reauthorization soon. \$35 million is the total amount allotted to all AT Programs. It allows us to fund the specialist jobs and our equipment that we purchase. We leverage our program by providing services.

Rose asked that of the millions of COVID dollars that came into the state, did any come to our AT program. Phil said they did not, but many of our partner organizations received funding so we have the option to make referrals to these places.

Peter followed up to remind that there is funding through the [RISE fund at VCIL](#), available for assistive technology. Please refer anyone interested to apply.

11:05-11:30 Strategy Discussion: Post Pandemic World, where should VATP be focusing its energies? What are the opportunities for us to improve the lives of Vermonters that we can accomplish with our existing human resource capacity? (Free form discussion. Please come with thoughts, ideas, or questions.)

Phil says we are getting guidance in about a month or so on what it will look like for state employees and contractors to go back to work in person.

We will expect new consumers because of Long Covid syndrome. We are just starting to understand the challenges of what people will be experiencing. We are trying to anticipate this for our small and mighty group. Phil learned from the leadership symposium the many projects other AT programs have taken on. We need to prioritize our work. There is more demand than capacity to fill it. What do you consider to be our top priorities?

Peter started things off with the importance of starting with the basics. Make sure post Covid all core services are in place, and then look at potentially some opportunities to help persons with Long Covid. He believes issues will arise and we will become aware of as time goes on.

Peter said he would also be interested in hearing from some of our staff, actual requests that we might anticipate, challenges they are seeing. Phil asked if the group would like to have an AT Specialist attend our council meetings and have it as a standing agenda item.

Tracy spoke to Peter's question about what we have seen so far. There is a lot of opportunity offering supports to folks who are not familiar with tech, so that they can access telehealth. Having access and knowing how to use tech has been a large challenge. Tracy has been able to offer more in-depth skills so they can access services.

Peter said that has been a challenge in the RISE program as well.

Marge said that aside from professionals who know folks are being affected, how do you reach out to those individuals

that need help who may not have a professional to talk with, families, etc.

What Peter expects to see post Covid is the ability for Vermonters with disabilities to go out into public again. He says the recreation site will be good for this too. He suggested bikes and other adaptive recreational sports equipment may be very helpful for this population.

Marge reiterated what Peter said. Working with a new group who have become disabled later in life. Making sure they are vocal as a group and acknowledged.

Phil said that the VR program at the state of VT have recognized the training gap as well. They are looking to fund a Tech Assistant to help their clients navigate technology as time goes forward.

Tracy added that the pandemic has opened up the opportunity for workplaces to be more remote than before. It will bring up challenges for workplaces to be more accessible remotely, in terms of offering accommodations to present and future staff.

Marge commented on persons with disabilities working at home because people need to be around people and isolation needs to be avoided to ensure their well-being.

Tracy said there is such a thing as conflicting accommodations, one thing might be work well for someone with a physical disability and not good for someone with a hearing disability.

Meeting adjourned 11:33 AM