HO’OPONO

Business Enterprise Program

Services for the Blind Branch

Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

State of Hawaii Department of Human Services

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M I N U T E S

STATEWIDE ANNUAL BLIND VENDORS MEETING and COMMITTEE MEETING of the HAWAII STATE COMMITTEE OF BLIND VENDORS (HSCBV)

DATE: Saturday, June 15, 2024

PLACE: Pagoda East International Ballroom

1525 Rycroft Street

Honolulu, Hawaii 96814

1. ROLL CALL AND CALL TO ORDER:
2. Committee: Chair Stan Young, Vice Chair Don Patterson, Treasurer Steve Kim, Kyle Aihara, Chris Akamine, Ivy Galariada, Lespaul Naki and Wanda Takaesu

Excused: Secretary Dane Alani

1. Licensed Blind Operators: Evelyn Ah San, James Chinn, Emily Cruz, Ron Flormata, Itutaua Fuimaono, Byron Jitchaku, Shontel Jones, Roxane Kaneshiro-Sasaki, Desiree Lacewell, Clifford Miyashiro, Mike Miyashiro, Doug Moises, Thomas Morikami, Rhani Naki, Norman Ota, Jessica Parsell, Lynn Schempp, Brandon Tamashiro, Brian Tamashiro, Myles Tamashiro, and Martha Vo
2. Certified Trainees: Isaiah Leui, Satomi Morioka, and Dane Waltjen
3. Ho'opono: Temporarily Assigned Services for the Blind Administrator (TA-SBA) Gavan Abe, Business Enterprise Business Enterprise Program (BEP) Manager Barney Higa, Vending Facilities Specialist (VFS) Tad Matsuno and Bruce Chin, BEP Secretary Mary Jane Andres
4. Guests: Deputy Attorney General Lili Young, Jaime Young, and Rachelle Hayakawa

The annual meeting was called to order at 8:45 a.m.

1. PROGRAM REPORT:
2. TA-SBA Gavan Abe reported that this past year we expended $1,412,000 for equipment, maintenance, repairs, and benefits and is committed to spending closer to the $2,000,000 cap next year. He reported that Vocational Rehabilitation Administrator Lea Dias will go to the Legislature to request that the $2,000,000 cap continue, because it was only approved for a 2-year period. With the proposed budget of $10,000 medical, $5,000 supplemental, $10,000 stimulus, $5,000 retirement, and $3,000 vacation/sick leave for a projected total of $33,000 in benefits for about 44 licensed blind vendors, that will be about $1,452,000 in benefits and leaves over $500,000 for renovations, equipment, maintenance, and repairs. He noted again that we will try our best to expend the $2,000,000 for the next year.
3. Chair Stan Young introduced Barney Higa, new BEP Manager. Barney Higa noted he’s new to Ho’opono and is still learning the process working with the state and the program. He also gave a short history of his background in the food industry and human resources. He noted that he’ll provide his vision and expectations for the program later in the meeting.
4. GUEST SPEAKER TERRY SMITH (via PHONE):

Terry Smith sent greetings from Nicky Gacos, President of the National Association of Blind Merchants, who was not able to phone-in due to a conflict. Terry Smith noted that they provide services such as advocacy, training, and technical assistance to state agencies. His experience included 30 years serving as the Director of Services for the blind in Tennessee, participation in the Randolph-Sheppard program under the Vocational Rehabilitation and served as the Chair of the Randolph-Sheppard Committee of the National Council of State Agencies of the Blind. He encouraged members to attend the Business Leadership and Superior Training conference from November 19-22, 2024. There will be micro market certification training for members and breakout sessions for training state licensing agency staff and attorneys.

He reported that the number of blind vendors has declined over the years. In 1974, there were 9,000 blind vendors across the country and only 1,428 at the end of 2023. He noted that they are working to reinvent the Randolph-Sheppard program, adding that they need to take the lead and work with the state, and not expect the states to do it for us. An initiative they’re working on is to give the state Randolph-Sheppard program innovation dollars for innovation projects to modernize the program such as bringing in new technology, new vending machine, Robo Order, and innovative equipment that are out there. They are asking Congress for $36,000,000 to go towards a study of the Randolph-Sheppard program so they can make recommendations to Congress on how it can be improved, whereas, $35,000,000 go to the state agencies for innovation projects.

Another initiative going on is that they have filed a lawsuit against the Army Air Force Exchange Service. They believe that blind vendors have been denied the rights to operate traditional vending facilities at the military bases.

They have developed an active participation protocol and are encouraging states to use this as a guide for active participation in their states.

He addressed a concerning problem in the program in the Department of Defense across the country with vendors not working their facilities, but basically turning them over to third parties to operate while the blind vendor is sitting at home and drawing a paycheck. There are state agencies around the country with vending stands at the airport and they have a third party operating the stand, as opposed to the blind vendor actually on the job. While this seems be the trend, this continued practice will hurt the program in the long run. There are literally 2 vendors who are unable to take care of their personal needs who are living in nursing homes and are still assigned to vending facilities and are collecting a paycheck. If Congress finds out that their selling their priority to third party companies, they will take it away from us.

There are several arbitrations that we’re waiting decisions on, one case in Arizona to see if we’ll be able to continue that operation. Here in Hawai‘i, the Federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the priority applies to dining facility contracts, which is a huge victory. However, that decision only applies to the Ninth Circuit district and any contract that’s not in the Ninth Circuit district will not recognize the priority. The state agencies would have to challenge and file for arbitration which could last for years.

The last thing he addressed were available trainings.

1. HSCBV COMMITTEE MEETING (called to order at 9:30am):
2. Releasing of VF #1 Downtown Post Office Back to the State: Chair Stan Young noted that although VF #1 was the original blind vending facility, it hasn’t been expanded over the years and in recent years, the post office hasn’t been accommodating with helping to address the issues with the facility because it’s a historic building and there are restrictions and limitations with that location, so the stand hasn’t been profitable.

After discussion, Chair Stan Young asked for a motion. Steve Kim moved to give stand back to the State. Ivy seconded the motion. Chair Stan Young asked if there was any public testimony.

Don Patterson amended the motion to close the facility and release it back to the State. Steve Kim seconded the motion. Stan Young asked if there was any further discussion or public testimony. There was none. Upon call for a vote, the motion passed unanimously with no abstentions.

1. Discussion on Current Budget: Chair Stan Young noted that the committee tried to pass as much of the budget to give blind vendors benefits and it’s been a struggle all year, but as TA-SBA Gavan Abe said earlier, hopefully this coming fiscal year will be much better. He noted that they passed a vacation/sick leave benefit of $3,000 which was intended to be spent this fiscal year but didn’t happen as well as the digital recorder and Orcam reader which individual blind vendors can apply for.

Chair Stan Young asked if there was any public testimony. There was none.

1. Proposal to Start Process to use Blind Vending Ohana (BVO) Contributions to Randolph Sheppard Revolving Account (RSRA) to Fund Equipment Innovations Directly: Stan Young is proposing for the agency to start the process to distribute a portion of BVO’S annual contribution directly to blind vendors. Don Patterson moved start the process to use BVO contributions to RSRA to fund equipment innovations directly. Steve Kim seconded the motion. Stan Young asked if there was any testimony discussion or public testimony. There was none. Upon call for a vote, the motion passed unanimously. There were with no nays or abstentions.
2. Adjournment: Don Patterson moved to adjourn the committee meeting. Wanda Takaesu seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. There were no nays or abstentions.
3. STATEWIDE BLIND VENDORS VOTE ON THE BUDGET FOR State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2025:

Chair Stan Young noted that the budget was proposed and approved by the budget committee and was brought up to the Hawaii State Committee for a vote to be referred to this statewide meeting.

Don Patterson said that the budget committee proposed the following:

1st Quarter, $7,000 for Medical

2nd Quarter, $3,000 for Medical (for total of $10,000) and $5,000 Medical Supplement

3rd Quarter, $10 Stimulus

4th Quarter, $5,000 Retirement and $3,000 Vacation/Sick Leave

Legal Defense Funds of up to $300,000

Digital Recorder and Orcam for each blind vendor

Chair Stan Young noted the total proposed benefit package for each licensed blind vendor is $33,000 for SFY 2025: July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025. Chair Stan Young asked if there was any discussion or public testimony. There was none.

Don Patterson moved to accept the proposed budget. Steve Kim seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously with no nays or abstentions.

1. TRAINING – HUMAN RESOURCES (HR) AND PAYROLL SERVICES:

Chair Stan Young shared his comments telling the members that this program is their program, and they all have an opportunity to grow according to the effort and time they put into the program. He suggested hiring of employee(s), either part-time or full-time depending on the need. He noted that we all operate our business on government properties and need to comply with government regulations so if we hire employees, we need to be compliant. He suggested using employment services for future growth and success.

1. Guest Speaker Monica Caringal, ProService Hawaii:

This company provides services to help support businesses with hiring, managing and terminating employees, payroll, health care (partnered with Kaiser), benefits, Worker’s Compensation, Temporary Disability Insurance and compliance with HR services.

1. Guest Speaker Gabrielle Chu, Abilities Unlimited: This company is contracted by the State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and they are a team of advocates focusing on building inclusive communities to empower individuals with disabilities. They offer supportive employment services for individuals with significant disabilities: assessment process anywhere from 4-8 weeks; develop social interaction to replicate being in the workplace and see how much support/accommodations they need; job development – customize employment, resume building, mock interview; job placement – they partner with employers to help the client find suitable employment, and job coaching. They offer adult training services to help clients obtain competitive entry level employment or higher for clients with college education. They have youth services called pre-employment transition services (PRE-ETS), contracted with various high schools for blind or visually impaired students or youths. They will cover Worker’s Compensation cost for their interns.
2. BEP MANAGER BARNEY HIGA:

Barney Higa noted that moving forward, BEP wants to help with sales for the blind vendors who are just getting by month-to-month. He commented that they can’t continue selling the same products that everyone sells. He is working to find distributors who will deliver products to the blind vendors.

Barney Higa announced we will be hiring a third VFS in a couple weeks and once we fill the account clerk position, we should be able to provide much better support. With a third VFS, we can purposely design a schedule whether weekly, monthly, etc., or just a phone namely to help bring the blind vendor to a high level.

He noted his vision is to focus more efforts and resources in opening up more facilities. He also wants to remodel some facilities that desperately need renovation.

He noted that his expectations for the coming year are for blind vendors to turn in reports timely, pay-off debts, improve customer service, and build trust. He also noted that after next year, the stimulus monies will be awarded as needed to help facilities that are struggling and need improvement.

1. ADJOURNMENT:

There being no further business and hearing no objections, Chair Stan Young moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Steve Kim and carried unanimously by voice vote. There were no nays or abstentions.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:03 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

BH:mra

Ho’opono/Employment Section