



MEETING MINUTES

Benton County Accessible Communities Advisory Committee (ACAC)

Benton County Justice Center

Thursday, August 19, 2021

2:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

The meeting of the Benton County Accessible Communities Advisory Committee was held in-person at 2:00 p.m. on Thursday, August 19, 2021, at the Benton County Justice Center. Present at the meeting were committee members Matt Nash-Chair, Amanda Hatfield, Vice-Chair (County Elections Manager), Shyanne Palmus (Commissioner's Office), Judith Davis, Theresa Payne, and Deidra Beck, Coordinator. Sheila Turner (Edith Bishel Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired) joined the meeting as guest speaker.

Prior to turning the meeting over to our guest speaker, Matt Nash asked each committee member to introduce themselves. Sheila Turner then introduced herself as the representative for The Edith Bishel Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired located in Kennewick. This valuable community center, open Monday – Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., services six (6) counties in the State of Washington (Franklin, Benton, Columbia, Yakima, Walla Walla, and now Klickitat) at no cost to their clients. The center has a low vision clinic with a volunteer doctor that provides consultation and a comprehensive evaluation. They make recommendations for low vision devices to assist clients in their personal needs at their many varying levels of visibility or lack thereof. Training programs are offered to help with transition skills such as cooking, cleaning, orientation mobility, and clothing management. In addition to a store that offers (at no fee to clients) a variety of low vision accessibility items (i.e., special measuring cups, utensils, talking or large print timers, thumb dots to mark appliances, and canes, etc.), the center has a fully equipped kitchen to aid in teaching skills such as how to organize items and cupboards and to label their items so that they are more easily accessible. A newsletter is sent out to clients every month, and they host a social event with the United Blind of the Tri-Cities where clients meet for a book club, to play bingo, and teach each other in a tech group. The center has a Braille embosser with which they can print pretty much anything anyone needs printed in Braille such as menus for restaurants and Meals-On-Wheels. This is done at a cost of only \$.50 per page.

Sheila, blind from birth, began with Edith Bishel as a client reaching out for low vision equipment, but she quickly volunteered to teach a Braille class. When the Washington Department for Services for the Blind needed Edith Bishel to expand to serve five counties in Eastern Washington, Sheila interviewed for the job and was hired November 1, 2021, and has remained there for 20 years. Her primary job is the Independent Living Program which services primarily those aged 55 or over, but also includes individuals that need help and are not working. Sheila likes this program especially because it is the one program that takes place in the person's home or where they are located. This makes it much more personal, and they are more comfortable sharing their difficulties and needs while in their own familiar environment. This is a case management type of service where she can assess and identify areas of need to help aid her clients to become as independent and successful as possible. She offers skill training and low vision aids. If she is unable to help them, she refers them to those that are certified to train other skills such as cane use. She is able to sign them up for services they may not know about, for example, the Washington Talking Book Library, Dial-A-Ride, the visually impairment services team through the VA, or other resources like 211. Her desire is to be the advocate and link between clients' needs and the services that will best meet those needs.

"A large part of what I do," said Sheila, "is counseling." Losing your vision is a grieving process which requires much encouragement in the transitioning.

Most recently with the Independent Living Program, the State Department Services for the Blind has given the center many technical items such as cell phones and iPads to enable them to train clients in their usage. They also rent out (or loan out for free) large magnifiers; currently they have 60 signed out.

In addition, Sheila communicates with other agencies to assist them with diversity training so that their staff can learn how to handle serving the disabled community with proper and sensitive etiquette. She also goes into schools to talk to young students about the blind and answers their questions so that they can become more comfortable with others with this disability.

The Independent Living Program exists from a contract of \$80,000/year, and it's Sheila's job to fill that contract through referrals. Normally the Center serves between 100-150 clients each year, however, during the pandemic that number dropped. She encouraged the committee that if they know of anyone with a vision need, to please refer them to her.

Judith asked whether Sheila does any recreational referrals for those who want those activity opportunities. Sheila stated that such is usually provided by the teachers for the visually impaired in the schools, but she explained about programs such as SKILLS, YES, and YES2 that provide opportunities for young visually impaired people to receive skills and career training in camp-like settings. Sheila admitted that she would like to bring in younger clientele that are still active and want to receive recreational activity opportunities, but that most of her clients are 55+ and are no longer wanting that service.

Sheila works at Edith Bishel primarily by herself with one office administrator and a part-time driver. The Center has experienced a couple of difficult years due to the pandemic and previous mismanagement. Currently, they do not have an Executive Director and no current board. This is a large need; volunteers for the board are greatly desired. She also stated that she really needs a grant writer and researcher. Admittedly, Sheila said that this lean time has meant that they no longer have the Beeping Easter Egg Hunt or the Dinner In the Dark fundraiser. She hopes they can take on those and other past activities soon, but they require long time planning and sponsorship for venue costs. They can't do them without help from other agencies and more people on their board.

Remarking that she's not been there for 20 years for the money; it's the commitment to the importance of the service, Sheila stated, "The Tri-Cities needs this agency." Because our community is growing so rapidly, the need increases, and the Tri-Cities is beautifully centrally located for it. She would very much like to see an Independent Living Center for all disabilities established here especially since the closest one for eastern Washington is in Ellensburg. She emphasized the need and closed her presentation by reminding us, "The thing about disability, is anyone can become disabled at any time."

The committee thanked Sheila for her tremendous presentation and requested she stay in contact with us, and that if she finds any area that we can partner or assist the center in, to please inform us.

With the short time left for the meeting, Deidra quickly reviewed that she had reached out to the Washington Advocates of Deaf and Hearing for potential member interest and encouraged the committee to be mindful of reaching out to others, as well. We were happy to learn of Sheila's interest in applying as a committee member, and Deidra promised to send her the application process and committee information. Our ultimate aim, as our committee grows and advances, is that we become a diversified committee representing a variety of disability knowledge and experiences.

Because we were not able to discuss the All-County ACAC Virtual Zoom Meeting nor the "Drive-By" ADA Lawsuits affecting the Tri-Cities businesses, it was agreed that those topics would be tabled until our September meeting. Deidra also reported that, after discussion with Donna Tracy (ARC of the Tri-Cities), she learned that they are no longer in need of our assistance for their roundtable meeting. However, Donna had mentioned a future project idea they have for a remodel of an accessible activity room. This may possibly be something we would be able to partner with them and assist in acquiring the necessary funds.

Matt adjourned the meeting at 3:02 p.m.

The September meeting is scheduled as an in-person meeting on September 16, 2021, at 2:00 p.m. in the Executive Conference Room at the Justice Center in Kennewick, WA.