

# NEWSLETTER



## Message from our Executive Director

I have been with OVR for about fourteen years and one of the things I've come to realize is that OVR is an extension of my family, a part of who I am. My goal is for staff to feel the same way that I feel, like OVR is family. As we walk in each other's shoes and understand who we are, and we're just people first, we'll get there. My goal is that we become creative and innovative in the things that we're doing together, that we begin to come together as individuals first, friends and then, hopefully, family.

Since my appointment as OVR Executive Director just over a year ago, it has been my privilege to meet with many OVR staff and countless stakeholders. As we work to improve our continuity of services in a telework capacity, our goal is to strive to have sufficient and effective communication amongst our staff, consumers and stakeholders to maintain consistency and success across the agency.

Communication is a top priority within all levels of OVR. I believe that communication is essential in fostering relationships; increasing productivity and performance; promoting organizational growth and ensuring transparency statewide.

*To view Shannon Austin's full State of the Agency Address, please visit: [Shannon Austin's State of the Agency Address](#). Read [Shannon's bio](#) to learn more about her!*



I want OVR to be the go-to agency on disability employment within the state and to be recognized from a national level for innovation, development, and employment alliances and partnerships with employers. I want myself and OVR to be that change agent when it comes to disability employment – change in systems, filling in gaps, connecting the dots when it comes to hiring individuals with disabilities, going after their dreams, employment and becoming more self-sufficient.

- Executive Director Shannon Austin



[dli.pa.gov/ovr](http://dli.pa.gov/ovr)

# Meet our Executive Team



**Stephanie Perry**

Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRs) director

[Learn more about Stephanie](#)



**Jill Moriconi**

Hiram G. Andrews Center (HGAC) director

[Learn more about Jill](#)



**Rod Alcidonis**

Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services (BBVS) director

[Learn more about Rod](#)



**Jeremiah Underhill**

OVR deputy director

[Learn more about Jeremiah](#)



**Melissa Hawkins**

Office for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing (ODHH) director

[Learn more about Melissa](#)



**Ralph Roach**

Acting Bureau of Central Operations (BCO) director

[Learn more about Ralph](#)



# HGAC Update

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## HGAC looks forward to continuing to serve OVR customers in 2021!

The Commonwealth Technical Institute at Hiram G. Andrews Center (HGAC) is open for in-person services and is accepting referrals for all programs! In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, HGAC obtained approval for a reopening plan in June and developed detailed guidance for safe operations. All protocols and precautions set in place by the PA Department of Health and CDC have been implemented, including, but not limited to, daily screenings; temperature checks; mandatory masks; physical distancing; and modified visitation, dining and recreational activities. HGAC placed their classrooms at a new maximum capacity and temporarily converted to single-occupancy dorm assignments, where students can sustain safe physical distancing guidelines.



The Summer and Fall 2020 Terms were successfully completed using a combination of remote and hands-on instruction, leading to the graduation of nearly 80 students since the pandemic began. The Spring 2021 Term began in person on January 4, 2021, for students who provided a negative COVID-19 test following the holiday season. In order to better focus resources, CTI is teaching out the Drafting and Business Retail Sales programs, which have been placed in escrow. Meanwhile, enhancements to other programs are being added, including customer service, general math and Career Prepped curriculum. Career Prepped, which will begin in the Center for Occupation Readiness (COR) and extend through vocational training, provides independent and instructor-led instruction on 6 skills areas of job readiness. New credentials and exit points are also being added to CTI programs. Additionally, the Career Services Department has expanded to better assist graduates with job placement, to better collaborate with the PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) district business services staff and to better track HGAC outcomes.

HGAC has resumed other in-person services in the Vocational Evaluation Department, Cognitive Skills Enhancement Program (CSEP) and Center for Assistive and Rehabilitative Technology (CART) and is accepting referrals. HGAC is also working to develop guidelines so that CART can safely resume AT evaluations and training in customers' homes and worksites, as well as a virtual Pre-ETS CREATE program and a virtual tour to serve individuals who cannot travel to HGAC at this time.

Lastly, while directing efforts toward safe operations, numerous HGAC staff have been using their talents and skills to assist our BVRS and BBVS district offices by preparing posters and signage, plexiglass barriers for protection of staff and customers, and clear masks for communication with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Connect with HGAC on Facebook!



# ODHH Update

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**The Pennsylvania Office for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing (ODHH) has been hard at work serving individuals who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recently, they've been:**

- Collaborating with Governor Wolf and the PA Department of Health's (DOH's) communication teams to ensure communication access is available at all press events
- Supporting students and parents with guidance on remote learning, as virtual environments can create barriers for students who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing
- Continuing to provide support with challenges in medical facilities, including providing guidance and solutions for masks, which are often not deaf friendly
- Partnering with DOH to create videos in ASL that provide vital information to the community about COVID-19
- Helping create a visual card for hospitals and medical facilities to use when communicating in urgent situations with individuals who use ASL

Contact ODHH:  
Email: [odhh@pa.gov](mailto:odhh@pa.gov)  
V/TTY: 717-783-4912  
VP: 717-831-1928  
Connect with ODHH  
on social media:



# COVID-19 Taskforce



In March, under the direction of OVR's executive director, the OVR COVID-19 Taskforce was formed with the goal of assessing and prioritizing COVID-19 and telework needs, as well as identifying work teams to develop short-term plans and potential solutions to address identified needs.

Over the course of approximately six months, the teams (listed to the right for reference) worked diligently to create tools and resources for staff, customers and stakeholders to use during COVID-19 mitigation and beyond. While the OVR COVID-19 Taskforce accomplishments are too many to mention here, every Taskforce team worked tirelessly to identify the needs and barriers in their priority area and developed and shared the necessary guidance, tools and training to address these immediate needs. The individual and collective efforts of these teams allowed OVR to address the unique challenges related to COVID-19 so that our staff could continue to provide services to OVR customers during these extraordinary times.

The COVID-19 Taskforce officially ended on October 6, 2020, but the OVR Executive Team continues to review some of the longer-term recommendations made by the Taskforce teams.

To access our newly created COVID-19 website, please visit: [OVR's COVID-19 page](#).

To meet the team leads listed, as well as view a list of our staff who participated in the Taskforce subgroups, check out the [COVID-19 Taskforce Album](#).

## COVID-19 TASKFORCE

### Taskforce Lead:

OVR Executive Assistant John Miller

### Return to Work Protocols, Tools and Resources Team

Co-leads: Policy, Staff Development and Training Division Chief Lee Ann Stewart and HGAC Deputy Director Jim Marker

### Increasing Referrals in a Telework Environment

Co-leads: Regional Managers Tammy Burke and Rick Walters

### Virtual VR Services Development and Delivery

Lead: Pittsburgh BVRs District Administrator Marci Katona

### Training Platforms for Staff Directed Services

Co-Leads: VR Specialist Supervisor Karen Walsh-Emma and VR Assistive Technology Specialist Justin Laffey

### Transition Services Delivery in a Telework Environment

Lead: Transition and 511 Division Chief Kim Robinson

### Self-Care

Leads: OVR Training Director Sara Gales and VR Specialist Kimberly Gerlach

### Communication Planning and Coordination During Telework

Lead: Recruitment, Retention, Diversity and Communications Specialist Hattie McCarter

### Business Services Delivery in a Telework Environment

Lead: Acting BCO Director Ralph Roach



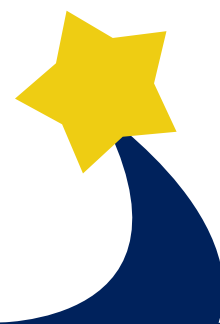
# Ruth's Story



Ruth (right) and a fellow Summer Academy student

Meet Ruth Nielowocki, a student at RIT, pursuing her bachelor's degree in criminal justice. Through the PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), Ruth had the opportunity to participate in one of our former summer Commonwealth Internship Programs, where she worked for three months in a paid internship at the PA Department of Education. She was also a participant in and then several years later a resident assistant (RA) at our Summer Academy for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, a program that helps prepare students experiencing hearing loss for success in college and employment.

Ruth credits the Academy with helping her succeed in college, and the tools it gave her were one of the reasons she wanted to return as an RA. Ruth shared, "As a student at the deaf and hard of hearing academy camp, I learned countless resources and it was life changing. It was a rich experience, working with the students who are in the same shoes, and I had the opportunity to guide them for three weeks. I showed them resources, advice and ideas for them to use for a better life".



What's her advice for other students with hearing loss pursuing post-secondary education?

"I would advise students with hearing loss considering enrolling in college to always advocate for themselves," said Ruth. "That's the key to break the barriers. Always ask for an interpreter, CART, FM, seating area, volume, note-takers. Whatever suits you and helps you to thrive in college."

# Sandy's Story

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When several operations sent her to a nursing home, Sandy connected with our Altoona Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services (BBVS) team to receive Orientation & Mobility and Vision Rehabilitation Therapy Services that provided her with the instruction she needed to begin to regain her independence. After learning travel and daily living skills, which included travel training with a white cane, assistive technology training, and lessons on cooking and cleaning techniques, Sandy has been able to move into her own high-rise apartment in Northumberland County. She shared, "now I can cook my own meals, tell time using a talking watch, use my eye drops and go to the pharmacy by myself".



## ***Congrats Sandy***

and great job Altoona BBVS team – Social Worker Lori Mutchler, O&M Specialist Grace Fontanez and Vision Rehabilitation Therapist Sarah Krug.



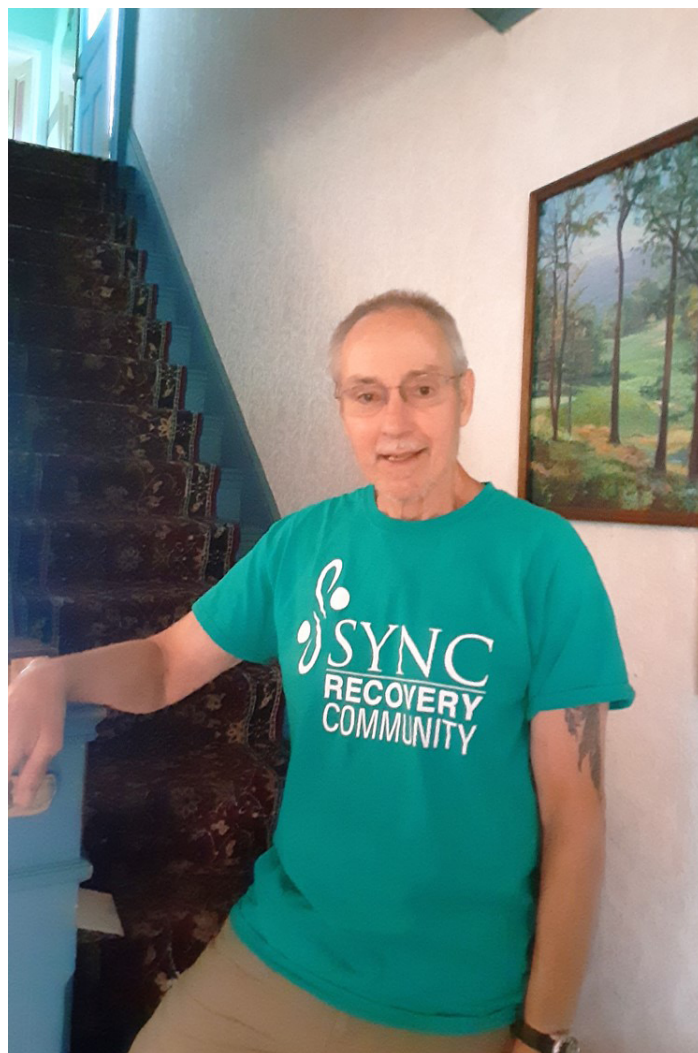
# Meet William

William began working with our Norristown Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services office in 2018, while he was participating in the Coatesville Veterans Affairs Medical Center's (VAMC's) Fresh Start program. As a cancer survivor who has overcome the challenges of herniated discs, mental disabilities, and substance use disorder, to access his educational and employment goals, William decided to pursue work in the field of social services to help other individuals in recovery.

After completing his inpatient treatment at VAMC, our Norristown team assisted him with vocational counseling and guidance, benefits counseling, job search/placement services and funding for Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) training so he could secure employment while finishing his Human Services Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree at Montgomery County Community College (MCCC). After completing his CPS training in 2018 and earning his AAS degree this past May, William's plans are to participate in MCCC'S Addictions Certificate program.

Because of his CPS training and AAS degree, William was able to secure a position with the Penn Foundation-Recovery Center Outpatient-B-CARES Warm Hand Off Program in Sellersville, Pa, where he will receive paid training to become a Certified Recovery Specialist. William is hopeful that with this job he will be able to have a significant impact helping others who are in recovery and that, one day, it will lead to an opportunity to assist fellow veterans as a certified peer specialist.

*We'd like to give a shout out to Brian Hoerz, William's VR counselor, and the whole Norristown team for your great work to help William succeed.*



## **Congrats William**

on all your accomplishments, and we look forward to hearing about your future efforts to help individuals in recovery!



# Employer Highlight – PHL Airport



We're excited to highlight the recipient of our 2020 Governor's Employment Achievement Award – Philadelphia International Airport (PHL) – for their work to create job opportunities for young adults with intellectual disabilities and autism. The PHL team's efforts began with an initiative to make the airport more accessible for people with autism – the Autism Access Program. As passenger ADA coordinator, Lucinda West lead this program that provides opportunities for individuals with autism and their families to become familiar with traveling through PHL.

After the success of Autism Access, Lucinda was then asked to participate on the Business Advisory Council for Project SEARCH, a collaborative partnership between our Philadelphia Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services District Office, Community Integrated Services, Drexel University, the School District of Philadelphia and Intellectual DisAbility Services that helps prepare students with disabilities for success in the workforce through internships and classroom learning.

After witnessing the incredible impact SEARCH has on students as they transition from school to work, Lucinda knew that she wanted talented SEARCH graduates working across PHL's many departments. She created four departmental aide positions for SEARCH graduates in four of PHL's departments. The graduates were hired full-time and are dues-paying union employees of the City of Philadelphia, who each enjoy a living wage, scheduled pay increases, a generous benefits package and a pension program!

# BBVS Summer Academy Goes Virtual

Last year, our Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services (BBVS) Summer Academy for Students Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired went virtual!

In partnership with the PA Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education's PA Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) and Penn State, the BBVS Special Programs Division was able to leverage Penn State University's online CANVAS Learning Management System, as well as Zoom, to deliver the program's core curriculum areas of: assistive technology, vocational development, social work, vision rehabilitation therapy, orientation and mobility, and college prep classes. Students with low vision also experienced a live telehealth low vision appointment with doctors and staff from Salus University. In total, sixteen students from across the state of Pennsylvania logged in daily from July 7 to July 17 and engaged with the instructors and their fellow students for live lessons.

Because of COVID-19, the team had to work incredibly hard in a short amount of time to convert the Academy to a virtual experience. Karen Walsh-Emma, BBVS VR specialist supervisor and Summer Academy director, shared: "It has been an extremely professionally rewarding summer, being able to work with such dedicated staff within BBVS as well as our partners at PaTTAN, Salus University and Penn State University. Everyone was immediately all-in, with only eight weeks to plan a brand-new program. It was incredible to see the passion, the ideas and the coordination take place. It was also amazing to see the students engage in an online learning environment, access new skills, ask questions and be open to experiencing the Summer Academy in this way."



Justin Laffey, BBVS VR assistive technology specialist, commented:

*"All students across Pennsylvania have been effected by COVID-19 and were tasked with being flexible and creative, as well as asked to rise to meet new challenges in the classroom. For students of our program, accessibility is the foundation to which learning is built upon, so it was critical for our program to deliver this virtual experience with that foundation in place. As these students return to high school or step into the college classroom, hopefully they draw upon their experience in our program to become the best advocates and students they can be".*

# OVR by the Numbers

July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2020



**54,549** individuals engaged with OVR<sup>1</sup>



**12,060** new applicants



**22,327** students received Pre-Employment Transition Services<sup>2</sup>



**6,953** individuals placed into employment



**\$14.11** average hourly wage of individuals employed

<sup>1</sup> Number of OVR customers who had an open VR case as of June 30, 2020, or had their case closed during the Program Year 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Includes potentially eligible students and students with OVR cases, and both purchased and staff-provided services.



# Money Talks

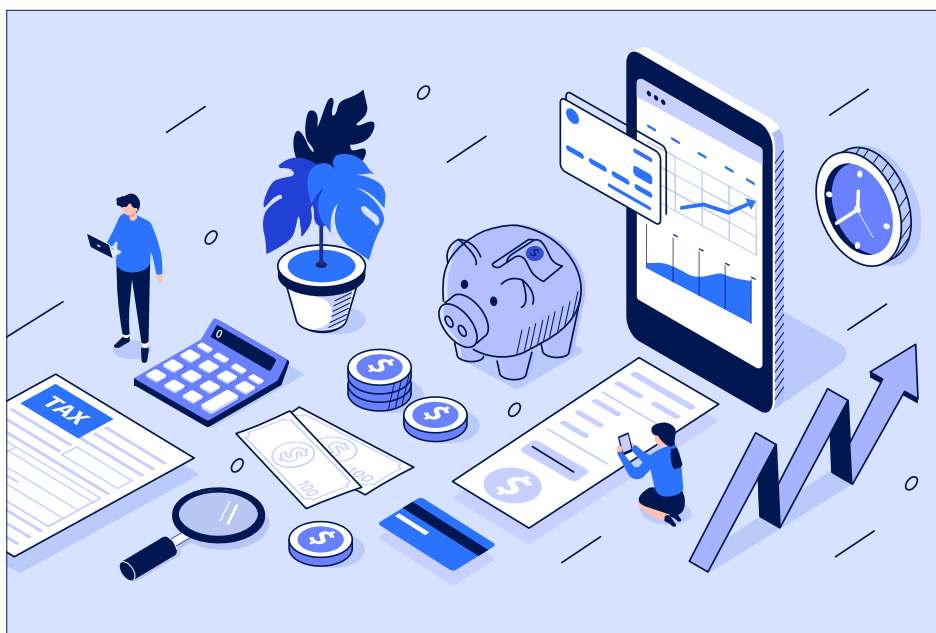
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We are proud to be one of the partners collaborating with the Pennsylvania Assistive Technology Foundation (PATF) to bring you Money Talks, a free webinar series on financial empowerment for people with disabilities! At a time when many people are working and learning from home, this is an opportunity to increase your financial knowledge and skills where you are.

Each month, Money Talks dives into a different topic with information and resources needed to handle the unique financial issues that impact individuals with disabilities, including new issues that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are a person with a disability, a family member of someone who has a disability, an advocate, an educator or a service provider, this series is for you. Each accessible webinar consists of 30 minutes of interactive learning with 15 minutes for questions and takes place one Wednesday every month. All sessions will also be recorded. Join in and gain the tools you need to have an impact!

## Money Talks

A free webinar series on  
**Financial Empowerment for  
People with Disabilities**



**Learn more and register: [patf.us/MoneyTalks](https://patf.us/MoneyTalks).**

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clude educators, students, family members, youth leaders, therapists, agency personnel, vocational rehabilitation staff and many others. Together Towards Tomorrow was the theme of last year's conference that was held virtually, July 15, 2020.



- Promoting success of all youth and young adults by addressing the transition needs of those who are at-risk and struggling
- Empowering families and caregivers with transition knowledge and resources
- Engaging youth and young adults in social interactions and in understanding their potential for post school success
- Building the leadership skills of all transition stakeholders to promote successful outcomes of youth and young adults
- Supporting and building community partnerships and local transition coordinating councils

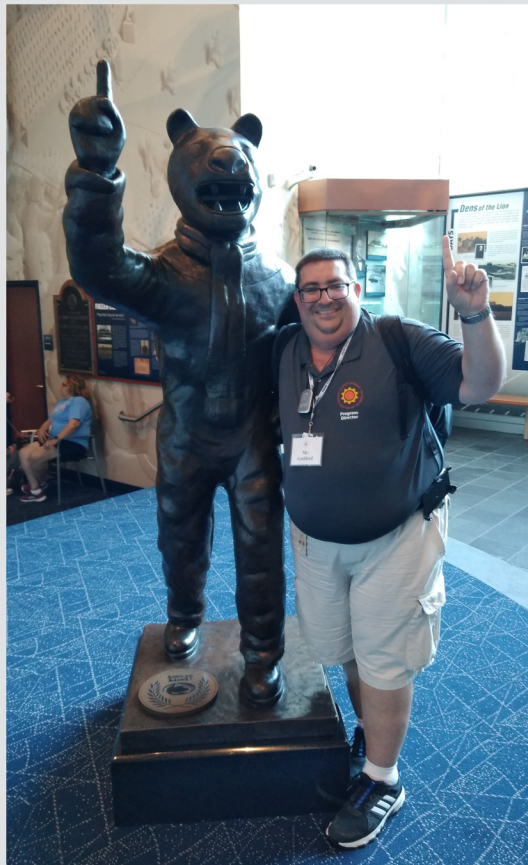
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# Specialist Corner

Recently, we checked in with one of our VR Specialists, Russ Goddard, and asked him to share a little bit about his role as Statewide Coordinator of Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind Services. Read on to learn about some of the innovative projects and initiatives he's involved in.

In collaboration with the PA Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Office of Administration, Russ has been working hard these past few months to make available for staff and customers who are deaf or hard of hearing an accessible videoconferencing platform, which he is hopeful will be available very soon. He's also provided feedback and technical assistance on the current videoconferencing platform for the PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) to ensure it is as accessible as possible for the deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) population.

In 2020, Russ participated in several COVID-19 related taskforce subcommittees that were focused on planning for OVR staff to safely return to offices after COVID; business services and job retention; and development of



a referral process. Speaking about these subcommittees, Russ shared, "my participation was always with the goal of increasing access to our services for the DHH population". With COVID, virtual service delivery has become a priority and Russ has also taken the lead in regional meetings with neighboring states to discuss ideas, options and best practices for delivering virtual VR services to DHH customers.

Speaking of virtual services, as the DHH Summer Academy program director, Russ shared that planning for the virtual Summer Academy for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing is under way! This program, which will take place in July 2021, will be offered to high school students who are deaf or hard of hearing to prepare them for success in college and beyond.

If you'd like to get in touch with Russ to learn more about the DHH Summer Academy or his work, please email him at: [rgoddard@pa.gov](mailto:rgoddard@pa.gov).

Thank you Russ for all you do!



# OVR's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Program

In 2016, the PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) re-established its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Initiative that included a research and training phase. OVR's Diversity Specialist Hattie McCarter collaborated with Dr. Jason Gines, PhD., from Pennsylvania State University, on the research phase from February 2018 – December 2019. Once the research phase was completed, OVR transitioned into its training phase; however, due to COVID-19, this phase was put on hold.

In June of 2020, as America became saturated with the unknowns concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the overwhelmingness of civil unrest, OVR decided to transition into a deeper cultural format regarding the racial and social injustice of certain marginalized communities. As part of this new direction, we have or will be conducting the following:



- A Recorded Virtual Discussion:  
"A Time to Choose: When Complacency, Apathy and Silence Is No Longer an Option"  
Presenters: Hattie McCarter and Sara Gales,  
Vocational Rehabilitation Specialists  
Facilitated by: Dr. Jason Gines, PhD
- The development of educational anti-racism resources
- "Together We Stand" – a diversity panel series that will include members from SEIU and AFSCME, administrators, specialists and upper management (TBA)
- The establishment of a book club and/or lunch and learns that will provide a safe place for staff to provide feedback on diversity and inclusion topics

DEI Trainings will resume in 2021, and we are pleased to announce that OVR will be launching its first pilot for Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and Cultural Brokers (CBs) statewide. We are scheduled to have a total of 5 groups that will include: **People with Disabilities (Internal/External), Women, African American, LGBTQIA+ and Latino.** In collaboration with and support from SEIU and AFSCME, these groups will help promote cultural awareness and ensure diversity, equity and inclusion that will support, cultivate and strengthen our workforce and our communities within Pennsylvania.

For more information, please contact Hattie McCarter, VR Specialist-Recruitment and Diversity, [hmccarter@pa.gov](mailto:hmccarter@pa.gov).



The Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Association (PRA) is a private, voluntary membership association comprised of professionals from a variety of disciplines, persons with disabilities, their families, students and other interested citizens.

Chartered in 1952, PRA is committed to the advancement of rehabilitation to promote full inclusion of people with disabilities into the mainstream of society and to provide opportunities for professional development for persons in the field of rehabilitation and independent living.

It is the purpose of PRA to promote the development of best practices in the delivery of rehabilitation services to people with disabilities; educate the community about disability; advocate for the public policy to support full inclusion of people with disabilities in society; and encourage and foster the recruitment, professional growth and retention of qualified, competent, dedicated personnel in the field of rehabilitation.

To learn more about PRA, including info on the 2021 PDI conference, please visit: [parehab.org](http://parehab.org).

## WHAT DOES PRA DO?

PRA maintains an active and aggressive legislative and advocacy program targeted to the provision of quality services, supports and outcomes for all individuals with disabilities. They recognize and embrace that the key elements to an effective system for change are: disciplined people, disciplined thought and disciplined action. To this end, PRA uses training seminars and institutes, networking and coalition building to achieve the greater good for consumers, providers and professional rehabilitation personnel.

## WHAT CAN PRA DO FOR YOU?

PRA is committed to bringing learning opportunities to their members. They realize that not only must members stay up to date on the legal and ethical aspects of their rehabilitation careers, they must also be connected to other professionals that have been creative and successful with varying approaches of service delivery. As such, PRA hosts a statewide conference entitled the Professional Development Institute (PDI) every spring in the Harrisburg area.

The 2021 PDI is scheduled for April 13 – 14, 2021, and will take place virtually. Session topics will include compassion fatigue; traumatic brain injury; strategic planning for employer needs; suicide assessment and intervention; and attitudes and access, to name a few.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR PRA?

Achieving change in rehabilitation is an arduous process. To succeed, PRA must be strong, dedicated, persistent and willing to work hard. Led by the Board of Directors, the organization and its individual members can exercise great power in the legislative, regulatory and policy-making arena. The Board meets four times a year in person, but PRA's committees are working via phone, videoconference and email all year long. In addition to planning next year's PDI, they are also working actively to engage more employers in PRA and to increase their young professional membership.