

AVIT Minutes– September 1, 2020

In attendance:

Ann Phillips, East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind
Chris Montgomery, TSBVI DB Outreach
Chris Tabb, TAER O&M
Cyril Miller, Chair, Central TX Professionals for VI
Dr. Anne Corn, associate member
Dr. Heather Munro, SFASU
Dr. Rona Pogrud, TTU, TX University Professors in Visual Impairment (TUPVI), TAER
Dr. Shannon Darst, SFASU TX University Professors in Visual Impairment (TUPVI)
Hillary Rodriguez, TAPVI
Jacqueline Izaguirre, DB Camp
Juanita Barker, Texas Workforce Commission (TWC)
Karissa Sanchez, HHSC Blind Children's Program
Kate Borg, TSBVI Outreach, Central TX Professionals for VI
Kathi Garza, TVI
Laura Hampton, TVI
Mari Garza, ESC 2
Mary Ann Siller, AVIT Treasurer, TVI
Neva Fairchild, AFB, AER
Nicholas Trotter, TEA VI Program Administrator
Stephanie Walker, TSSN, ESC 11
Susie Welch, DBMAT

Note: there is an acronym list at the end for help in following these notes!

Cyril Miller called the meeting to order on ZOOM at 10:00 a.m.

Approval of minutes

Chris Tabb moved to approve minutes with a corrected spelling of Mary Faith Cowart's name and Mary Ann Siller seconded. The revised minutes of the June, 2020 meeting were approved.

Treasurer's Report

Mary Ann Siller reported via email that AVIT currently has \$4,116.12 in the bank as of September 1, 2020. There have been no deposits and 1 withdrawal for costs related to the website domain.

New Business

Teacher of Students who are Deafblind (TDB) update

Chris Montgomery came back to give us an update on the progress towards developing the new position of Teacher of Students who are Deafblind (TDB). Since our last meeting, and with the help of those of you who wrote letters to support the certification, SBEC met and accepted the TDB certification proposal. In September, hopefully, the State Board of Education will adopt and add this TDB role to State rule. Next steps are the development of a test and certification standards. This will be a supplementary certification to be added to a TVI or TDHH certification.

Agency/Organization Updates

TEA, Nicholas Trotter

Nicholas Trotter is the new TEA Visual Impairment Program Administrator. He's been there 2 months, coming most recently from Florida, where he is enrolled in a doctoral program. TEA is currently looking at virtual learning needs for students with visual impairment. Nicholas helped contribute to an FAQ for TEA's COVID-19 documentation. He noted that the SSVI Supplemental funding is about ready to be posted for the ESCs. (This is specialized VI funding for ESCs to support regional educational activities.)

TWC, Juanita Barker

TWC is working with HHSC and TSBVI on creating an amazing White Cane Day on October 14 at 9am. It will be on ZOOM and livestreamed via Facebook. She shared the good news that the OIL program that focuses on independent living, not employment, for those over age 55 has secured new funds that will allow them to expand their staffing. They will concentrate on underserved areas, installing a new hotline and starting a peer to peer mentor network. They are now looking for mentors for the program. If you know of potential mentors, please share that information with juanita.barker@twc.state.tx.us.

HHSC BCP, Karissa Sanchez

Karissa shared this message from Lauren Cox, Blind Children's Program Manager:

What a year! BCP spent FY20 building a stronger program. We doubled the number of service contacts that families received this year. We are also strengthening the services received by children with dual sensory loss through the creation of a DB Team Lead and adding two DB Specialists in the field to directly serve children and families. Like many others, we have shifted to a virtual model of service delivery and are contacting families via phone, video calling and virtual skills trainings. BCP is partnering with the ARC to offer a 5-part series of parent training sessions on future's planning. These trainings are being offered in both English and Spanish. We will be hosting virtual camps for children with dual sensory loss in October. We continue to be open to partnerships both on the statewide and local level.

HHSC Executive Commissioner Appointed

Cecile Erwin Young was appointed executive commissioner of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission by Gov. Greg Abbott, taking leadership of the state's largest agency on Aug. 14, 2020.

- Young previously served as acting executive commissioner from June 2018 to October 2018 and most recently as chief deputy executive commissioner. From 2007 to 2011, she served as associate commissioner for health coordination and consumer services at HHSC and returned as chief of staff in January 2015.
- Young has over 30 years of state government experience in Texas. She served as a conference committee clerk for HB 7, which created HHSC in 1991, and she came to work at HHSC to implement the legislation.
- Young has served with four Texas governors, an attorney general and a state representative. She has performed budget and policy work since 1987.
- Service Delivery during COVID-19

HHSC staff continue to work remotely. Throughout the pandemic, the agency has been in ongoing discussions about when it is safe and feasible for staff to transition back to the office. However, final timelines are unknown. As always, staff remain focused on the children we serve and our service delivery priorities have not changed. And, we are proud of how they have responded to the challenge.

Karissa also noted that the IL centers are all open for services either by appointment or virtual services.

TSBVI, Kate Borg

The TSBVI Board met last week and agreed to a 4-week extension for online learning and a transition after September 11 to bringing 25% of the student body back. The focus will be on those students who have been unable to access distance education adequately. TSBVI has created a transition plan to help guide the campus to a safe reopening as students return slowly.

The [Short Term Programs](#) continues virtually. They are receiving an increase in requests for 1-1 assistance this year as distance services continue across the state.

The Outreach Programs are also virtual this fall. [Trainings](#) and [webinars](#) are being provided online. The popular [Coffee Hours](#) that started this past spring are continuing, as are the [Texas Families Together](#) online discussion sessions.

SWOMA, the Southwest Orientation and Mobility Association conference, will be held virtually November 5-7th. The DB Symposium is for sure going virtual, however the final format of the conference has not yet been determined. More to come on that!

East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind, Ann Phillips

Ann noted that the ETLB has been open, with longer shifts needed to keep up with high demand for their products. Client services are back face to face. The Children's Programs are ready with Plan A and Plan B as they see whether and how the schools open up.

TAER, Rona Pogrund, President and Chris Tabb, TAER O&M

The hope is that the March 25-27 TAER conference, Building Relationships, Making Connections and Changing Lives, will be in person in Denton, although they are starting to explore possible options for online access. A request for presentation proposals will be sent out soon. Belinda Rudinger has updated their dynamic TxAER Facebook page - check it out at <https://www.facebook.com/TxAER>. They are featuring 2020 award winners now. TAER is also updating procedures and policies.

The AER International O&M has posted awards online and are providing excellent online learning information.

Chris Tabb noted that there is a new gap growing as teachers are retiring (especially for those who are older and/or have health concerns during the COVID pandemic) but university students are facing barriers to getting their required hours of direct instruction with real students, as internship placements are difficult to locate. There are no emergency credentials available for COMS so they must complete the program before securing jobs.

TUPVI - TTU and SFASU, Rona Pogrund, Shannon Darst and Heather Munro

TTU held all classes virtual this summer, so they were not able to provide cane classes. They are very aware of the problem with locating internship placements in a virtual world! TTU had 24 students enrolled for cane class who will now need that class next summer, in addition to all new students - a future problem! The eye course weekend was moved to online. Now TTU has face to face classes in Lubbock, so there is an in-person weekend for the blindfold classes.

SFA has a lot of personnel changes: Shannon Darst and Heather Munro are the only full time personnel, now that DJ Dean, who coordinates the O&M program, went part-time, and Donna and Cricket retired. New adjunct faculty include Jerry Mullins (TSVI, COMS), Dr. Kevin McCormack (COMS) and Laura Hampton.

Undergraduate courses were allowed to do hybrid instruction so that worked. They had a large group of students this summer, including 6 undergraduates. There were challenges in placing interns but most eventually found options this fall. SFA is moving the undergraduate O&M courses to an online format, which could add more opportunities for students to join that program without moving to Nacogdoches.

TAPVI, Hillary Rodriguez

Hillary Rodriguez is the new president of TAPVI. She lives in Houston. TAPVI is highlighting World Literacy Day on September 8, and will be hosting teen/tween events, like a virtual Trivia Night and a Talent Show. The next newsletter is nearly ready to publish. TAPVI is active! If you are interested in connecting with TAPVI, or know a parent who might be interested in belonging, please go to their Facebook site, <https://www.tapvi.org/> or @TAPVIfamilies for the Twitter feed.

DBMAT, Susie Welch

DBMAT has updated their website, and they are posting new information there now. They had to cancel their annual family camp and the annual golf tournament fundraiser. Instead, there will be an online auction with wonderful items to bid on - It will be held October 16th-18th. You can find more DBMAT information at <http://www.dbmat-tx.org/>.

DB Camp, Jacqueline Izaguirre

DB Camp had to cancel their in-person camps, and their fundraiser. They are hoping to set dates for the future looking forward to when we can all get together!

AFB and AERBVI, Neva Fairchild

AFB

AFB had to cancel their Leadership Conference in spring and are now planning a virtual conference for spring 2021. AFB joined with others to do several surveys:

Flatten Inaccessibility: Impact of COVID-19 on Blind and Visually Impaired Adults in the United States. The results are available at <https://www.afb.org/research-and-initiatives/flatten-inaccessibility-survey>.

A Survey about Access and Engagement for students was done early on in the spring to see how the field was faring during the pandemic. You can get a sneak peek at the results at <https://www.afb.org/research-and-initiatives/education/access-engagement-survey>. There are plans to re-send that survey in the fall to see how things have changed and/or improved for students, parents and professionals.

AFB is part of the Ability Commission and proposing to focus on knowledge-based jobs where people need degrees and strong computer skills to help train people with blindness for those fields.

Neva's AFB job changed on August 1 (busy summer, Neva!) to work with the Blind Leaders Development Program. The first cohort is going now, and they will be recruiting for a new class next year. They held employment summits focused on IT, finance, and healthcare employment and how to improve the systems to help advance job prospects for people who are blind and visually impaired.

AER

July 1st Neva moved into the post as President of AERBVI, making Emily Coleman the Past-President now. Olaya Landa-Vialard is the incoming President-Elect. AER had their international conference delayed and rescheduled it for 2022 in Saint Louis. To share the fabulous content that had been created for the conference, they have been presenting summer learning and are now starting a fall learning series, all online. They are looking for a host platform so that they can continue to offer Continuing Education credits for those who watch recorded versions. For the next 2 years they are going to work on updating bylaws and procedures to strengthen them in recognition of our newly virtual world.

Neva would LOVE to hear from anyone about ideas for AERBVI (or AFB). They are hoping to launch new focus groups this fall, but in the meantime, you can contact her at nfairchild@afb.net

Austin Lighthouse - provided by Angie Hall via email

Due to the unordinary circumstances surrounding our community, we have altered our daily functions with various departments. We have been extremely busy with shipping out mass orders of hand-sanitizers. One department transformed into a mask producing unit. If you are in need of mask, please do not hesitate to ask. To give back and help other organizations, we made a donation to DBMAT to support their Intervenor scholarship program. Austin Lighthouse is also coordinating with TWC to assist with the White Cane day shirt distribution. The social distancing and limited group reduces our in-service training. Our technology unit is now conducting webinars bi-weekly as well as remote classes. Everyone is welcome

Discussion/Announcements

AVIT Future Initiatives

There was discussion about whether there are initiatives needing AVIT advocacy for this coming year among our member organizations. The American Council for the Blind has been working on improving access to voting. Cyral will reach out to see whether there are specific legislative initiatives for AVIT members to support. (Note: AVIT will actively support initiatives proposed by members after a unanimous positive vote from membership organizations.)

There is a problem that might lead to a request to the State Board of Educator Certification (SBEC). Currently, university students in the undergrad O&M courses are not allowed by SBEC rules to register for the braille courses as they are not enrolled in teacher certification coursework. This may be holding some folks back who are hoping to get dual certification in progress toward the TVI certification.

Kate Borg noted that the newest Summary of Professionals in Visual Impairment, available at <https://www.tsbvi.edu/professional-preparation-program> indicates that although there are more students, we are not keeping pace with the supply of new personnel. Discussion revolved around the lack of new funding for stipends to keep up with rising tuition costs at university, the increase in the number of contractors rather than full time professionals in some areas, and a difference between locations where there are open positions and locations where certified candidates are looking for jobs. Although some ISDs offer stipends to help lure new VI staff, and there are many regions that help local districts hire with their State Supplemental Visually Impaired (SSVI) funding, others do not and it can be difficult to get people to relocate.

Announcements

Mary Ann Siller noted that she is going to be updating the AVIT website and would like people to share any important/relevant documents or dates so she can post them on our site. Please let her know at dmasiller@sbcglobal.net.

Future Meeting Dates:

The next meeting dates are Dec 3 and March 11. AVIT meetings are from 10-12.

Mary Ann Siller motioned to adjourn the meeting and Rona Pogrund seconded.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:45a.m. by Cyral Miller.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Cyral Miller.

A. Acronyms!

There are a lot of shortcut acronyms used in these notes. Here's a handy cheat sheet:

AVIT - Alliance of and for Visually Impaired Texans

BCVDDP (or BCP) - Blind Children's Vocational Discovery and Development Program (aka Blind Children's Program), now housed at HHSC

CILS - Center for Independent Living Services

COMS - Certified orientation and mobility specialist

DB - Deafblind

ESC - Education Service Center

FAQ - Frequently Asked Questions

HHSC - Health and Human Services Commission

HR - human resources (personnel)

IL - independent living programs

IT - information technology (technology services)

NFADB – National Family Association for Deaf-Blind

OIB - Older Individuals who are Blind

O&M – orientation and mobility

RCT – Rehabilitation Council of Texas

SFA or SFASU – Stephen F. Austin State University

SSP - Support Service Provider

STP - Short Term Programs at TSBVI

TEA - Texas Education Agency

TSBVI - Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

TTU – Texas Tech University

TUPVI – Texas University Professors in Visual Impairment

TWC - Texas Workforce Commission

TWS - Texas Workforce Solutions

VR - vocational rehabilitation

WIOA - Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the legislation that governs much of the vocational rehabilitation moneys from the Federal government