



State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

2020

ANNUAL REPORT

Vision Statement

The State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B) will be a catalyst for the emergence of State Services for the Blind (SSB) as a national leader in the development, implementation and continuous improvement of quality service programs and education for persons of all ages who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind throughout our state.

The SRC-B, in conjunction with SSB, will strive to insure people who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind are made aware of the full array of services available to them whether aimed at adjustment to blindness training, independent living, employment or education.

The SRC-B will work to make employers aware that people who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind have tremendous abilities for employment today and must be included in planning for the workforce of the future.

It is our vision that persons who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind will enjoy full equality of opportunity, education, complete integration in the life of our communities, and appropriate employment which fulfills each individual's needs and aspirations.

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Letter from the Chair

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State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind
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December, 2020

The Honorable Timothy Walz
Office of the Governor
130 State Capitol,
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Governor Walz,

It's my pleasure to write you as the chair of the State Rehabilitation Council-Blind (SRC-B), and to report on our work during 2020.

First of all, we want to thank you for your leadership during this challenging time of COVID-19 as we all are facing changes to physical and virtual realities. The SRC-B and SSB have accepted the challenge and have found alternative techniques to successfully conduct business and achieve our goals.

The SRC-B is proud of the wide range of committees supporting the effectiveness and reach of the council. As you will read in these pages, the committees and task forces bring both concerns and innovations to the council, and, in turn, the council guides the work of State Services for the Blind (SSB). It is a great relationship where the exchange of information and ideas can intersect and lead to ensuring that blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans have the best opportunities to succeed.

I would like to note three important highlights from 2020:

1. Director Natasha Jerde and her team have shown leadership in navigating the impact of COVID-19 and finding solutions to continue to meet customer's needs.
2. Communication and the free flow of information has continued through the use of virtual platforms and newsletters. The Biweekly Bits newsletter produced by Lisa Larges keeps staff and council members informed and engaged in the ongoing and upcoming events and programs at SSB. The SSB News email goes out to more than 2,500 subscribers and includes announcements about SSB programs, news from the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), and other announcements of interest to blind, DeafBlind and low vision Minnesotans. The Volunteers are staying connected through a newsletter produced by Volunteer Coordinator Roberta Kitlinski called In-touch. The volunteers have been impacted by these challenging times and the newsletter keeps the hundreds of volunteers informed of latest news and updates. Another newsletter/forum is The Microphone, produced by SSB's Jeff Bell, which provides tips and useful information for the volunteers who produce audio materials. These lines of communication are important especially during these isolating times.
3. As part of its innovative programming during the pandemic, SSB hired five transition students as peer educators over the summer. These students served as mentors to younger students, and helped lead the virtual programming with SSB's transition services. By hiring these five talented students, SSB not only provided work experience at a time when summer work was difficult to obtain, but also gave younger students role models they could connect with.

Minnesota's SRC-B strives to improve our effectiveness in advising SSB in this ever-changing landscape of Vocational Rehabilitation. The strong relationship we have with SSB staff confirms the importance of our work in guiding and advising.

We are confident that we, the SRC-B and SSB will continue bringing Minnesotans who are Blind, Visually Impaired, Deaf-Blind or have trouble reading the printed word, the best resources and services to lead successful lives.

Best,

Jeff Thompson

SRC-B Council Members



Pictured from top left to right

Row 1: Carolyn Cherry, Pat McGee, Jeff Thompson, Vivien Yip, Ron Woefel

Row 2: Lori Thompson, Jessica Eggert, Michael O'Day, Mark Groves, Ryan Strunk

Row 3: Deborah Leuchovius, Daniel Ashman, Kristina Petronko, Natasha Jerde, Judy Sanders

Row 4: Catalina Martinez, Gloria Lafriniere, Michael Colbrunn

Letter from SSB Director Natasha Jerde



Dear Governor Walz,

I'm not the first to say it, and I won't be the last, but, boy! What a year! Here in Minnesota we met the challenges of the pandemic, and, as a soul-searching response to the brutal killing of George Floyd, we strengthened our

commitment to fight racism and all other systemic forms of oppression. In such times as these, wise guidance from a trusted team is more important than ever. For me, the State Rehabilitation Council of the Blind (SRC-B) provided just such guidance. Even as we scrambled to find ways to meet remotely, at each step, the council reviewed the work of our agency, and provided needed perspectives on how best to continue this work in these unprecedented times. Below, I lay out the goals for SSB in 2020 and our progress toward achieving them. At every step, the council reviewed our progress and helped refine our strategies.

Strengthening Our Communication Center

Our goal this year for our Communication Center was to leverage the power of today's technology to strengthen our services and operations. Two key strategies in achieving our goal were 1: to transition the Radio Talking Book to broadcast on mobile platforms, and 2: to lay the foundation for updating our legacy database systems.

Radio Talking Book Reaches New Milestone

More than fifty years ago SSB launched the first-of-its-kind radio reading service. That first broadcast meant that for the first time, blind and visually impaired Minnesotans, and Minnesotans with a print related disability had access to the daily newspapers and other time-sensitive publications. Soon, the 24-7 reading service broadcast "today's papers, this month's magazines, and the latest books." It was a whole new way of providing access to print and it was a model that would be copied worldwide.

October 1, 2020 marked the end of one era for RTB, and the bold launch of another. On that day, we ended our reliance on broadcasting through closed-circuit radio receivers. The technology was dated and expensive to maintain. What's more, the receivers, which needed to be plugged in to operate, limited listeners options. Now, our iOS and Android apps, and the new Alexa Skill, give consumers the freedom to listen wherever and however they like. These new ways for listening to RTB makes the service accessible and viable for a whole new generation of listeners. The council and its Communication Center Advisory Committee have tracked this progress closely and provided valuable feedback.

Improved Data Systems

The quality of the materials produced in our Communication Center depend on the high standards set by our volunteers and staff, and their careful attention to detail. But, to do their work well, our team relies on access to good data. Being able to reliably input and retrieve critical information throughout the production process is at the heart of our capacity to provide quality material in accessible formats for our customers.

Over the past several years, various task forces have convened to develop a solid working plan for replacing our data tracking system. Our current system no longer meets our needs, and is inadequate for our security requirements.

After we fully documented our needs, and assessed future use scenarios, our next task was to secure adequate funding for a new system. We are extremely fortunate that our passion for equal access to information has been shared by many individuals and foundations, who have generously given financial gifts to help underwrite our work. We remain hopeful that a combination of public and private support, including gifts to our Communication Center held by the St. Paul Foundation, will enable us to successfully transition to a new data system.

Streamlining and Aligning Policies and Procedures

At their best, policies and procedures increase fiscal stewardship, provide staff with a clear road map, and contribute to building trust with customers, consumer groups and community partners. When not managed properly, they grow up like weeds, choking productivity, and adding layers of frustration for our constituents. This year we took the following important steps in streamlining policies and procedures:

- Our Workforce Development staff was tasked with policy review. Staff were divided into teams, and each team was assigned several policies and procedures relevant to their work. Each team made recommendations on streamlining or consolidating policies to promote clarity, efficiency, and transparency.
- One of our vocational rehabilitation technicians has been at work on writing a buyer's operations manual to bring together all the steps and procedures related to purchasing.
- In a similar way, the assistant to our fiscal coordinator has been documenting all of the protocols and procedures in order to develop a fiscal handbook.

Training and Staff Development

The foundation for serving our customers well is ensuring that our staff have the resources they need to excel in their work. This begins with onboarding. The onboarding training that we've developed over the last several years provides consistency across our agency and gives new staff a solid overview of all of the processes necessary to their position. We continue to refine this process, and look to the hiring of a training coordinator to take our onboarding process to a new level.

SSB's participation in two pilot programs have also increased staff opportunities for training. SSB has been selected for a VR Training program which will begin in May. A selected number of staff have already taken advantage of a pilot training program through LinkedIn. Through these programs, staff build skills, expand their knowledge, and gain exposure to new ideas. The end goal of these trainings is to improve the customer experience.

Serving During a Pandemic

Helping our customers in these uncertain times has been our highest priority. As we shifted to working remotely, and as our direct person-to-person contact with customers was curtailed, our staff quickly pivoted to new ways to continue serving customers. The list of new protocols and procedures is long, and, indeed, there isn't a corner of our agency that hasn't been significantly impacted by this crisis; even so, this partial list of our responses to these new conditions show how we, and the customers we serve, have remained resilient under challenging circumstances:

- Relying almost entirely on phone contact, our Senior Services team provided critical support to seniors living with vision loss. Despite the pandemic, we were able to serve nearly as many seniors in 2020 as in our record-breaking 2019.
- Working with new protocols established in our mailroom, our team of Assistive Tech Specialists got equipment to customers and conducted assessments and trainings via phone and virtual platforms.
- Employing every small measure that might help, we worked to support our Business Enterprise Program (BEP) vendors. Shutdown of government buildings and the continuation of telework for many employees after reopening resulted in a major hit to most BEP businesses.
- Our Transition Services team created innovative virtual programming including "Level Up" an advocacy skills building series, and the Peer Educator Program drawing on the experiences of older students to assist younger students in building skills.

- We successfully made our case to grant an exception that allowed our Radio Talking Book broadcasters to be in our studios on a limited basis during the shutdown. This allowed us to continue broadcasting the reading of local papers – providing timely information to our listeners.
- The staff in our Braille section nimbly adapted the braille production process, shuttling braille and print materials among staff members working from home. By doing so, we were able to ensure that students had their textbooks, even as they were facing the challenges of remote and hybrid learning.
- We relied on our audio volunteers who had the equipment to record from home, and worked tirelessly to put safety measures in place to prepare for the return of volunteers to our onsite recording studio.
- We stepped up communication to provide timely information to customers, volunteers, community partners and vendors.
- We held online vendor forums to keep these important partners informed and share strategies.
- We brought our staff together virtually to communicate updates and for the first of several virtual all-staff meetings.

Celebrating 100 Years of Vocational Rehabilitation Services with Productive Collaboration

- June 2nd, 2020 marked the 100th anniversary of Public Vocational Rehabilitation Services. In Minnesota providing these services is shared between SSB and Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS). This year, SSB joined with VRS to mark the celebration of this century of progress with thoughtful and inspiring programming. What's more, I am proud to say that the working relationship with VRS and with our partners at Human Services and Education are stronger than ever. Together we are demonstrating to Minnesotans with disabilities that they too are part of One Minnesota and their state government is at work for them.

With Gratitude for the Work of the Council

During this difficult year the members of the SRC-B have provided useful guidance and direction to help us better serve Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, or visually impaired. I offer my sincerest thanks to each member of the council for their commitment and dedication. With so many, I look forward to opportunities for meeting in person again next year.

Yours,

Natasha Jerde

Council Member Michael Colbrunn Advocates for Small Business Owners

The small business owners who manage vending services on federal and state properties as part of SSB’s Business Enterprise Program (BEP) have been particularly hit hard by the COVID-19 emergency. But, they are re-building, and finding ways to re-launch their businesses. One example is business owner and council member Michael Colbrunn who manages vending services in the Mankato area. Knowing that more and more students no longer carry cash, and that creating touchless point-of-sale solutions is increasingly important for health and safety, Michael worked with Mankato State University to add card readers to his vending machines. “They really saw the importance of my business on campus, and how it serves students,” Michael said, “I was proud of their willingness to partner with me in this way.” MSU paid for the card readers, and SSB technicians in the BEP program worked to procure new machines and install them. “It was a matter of my business, the BEP program, and the university all coming together,” Michael said, “I think, over the years, the university has come to recognize the value of our vending business on campus, and they were willing to invest in it, which is very positive.”

Michael grew up in Fargo, and moved to the Twin Cities in 1992. For many years he worked in the hospitality sector, in restaurants and hotel services. As he took on more management roles, his vision loss (he has a form of juvenile macular degeneration) made it increasingly difficult to adjust to technology changes.

“My career was starting to stagnate,” Colbrunn says, “So, when I heard about the Business Enterprise Program, I didn’t hesitate. I wish I had known about it sooner.”

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, Michael has been working on a national level and in our state to bring attention to the dire circumstances of many BEP small business owners, and to find some help for them. “The BEP provides a great opportunity for blind people to be independent and be their own boss,” Michael says, “But this crisis has hit really really hard.”

Michael serves on the SRC-B and throughout the year, the council has been apprised of the situation for BEP business owners.



“The BEP provides a great opportunity for blind people to be independent and be their own boss”

COMMUNICATION CENTER REPORT

Committee Charge

The product of this committee consists of reports to the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind, containing specific strategies for increasing and improving Communication Center services as well as making visible the accomplishments of the past year. Committee members were Steve Jacobson, Chair; Catherine Durivage, Kristin Oien, Pat Barrett, Ryan Strunk, and Jeff Thompson.

During the past year, the committee met three times to receive updates and offer input on the projects, staffing changes, and other ongoing work of the Communication Center. In addition, significant time and effort were directed toward issues surrounding the interruption of services due to the COVID 19 Pandemic.

The efforts of this committee are greatly enhanced by the extremely active participation of Communication Center section supervisors and managers. The committee wishes to express our thanks for their efforts and time. Rather than receiving extended general presentations at each meeting, the staff prepares what we have come to refer to as "preview reports" before each meeting. This permits us to concentrate more on asking questions and meaningful discussion. It also provides the committee with valuable information that goes beyond specific presentations.

The services of the Communication Center and the activities of this committee were changed significantly by the COVID 19 pandemic which started shortly after our meeting near the end of January. We held two more meetings virtually. The original "shelter in place" and subsequent social distancing meant that volunteers could not come into the Communication Center to record. Also, for several months, physical activities related to textbook production such as binding and mailing braille books were performed by a small staff. Proofreading of textbooks took place in the homes of staff members using virtual connections. Radio Talking Book services were suspended for a time and the Kansas Reading Service was distributed through Minnesota's network during that period.

Gradually, offices have been opened again and some staff returned to work in those cases where they had to be physically present to do their jobs. In addition, a large effort is being made to provide the tools needed for

more volunteers to work from their homes. Production of textbooks and programming on the Radio Talking Book Network resumed in August and September.

Before this crisis began, it had been decided to discontinue the distribution of Radio Talking Book programming through Minnesota Public Radio and other broadcasters. This means that the radios distributed to receive this service no longer function after September 30. Even with the current crisis, though, apps to listen to the Radio Talking Book on the IOS and Android platforms have been moved into production. In addition, an Alexa app is available as well which allows programming to be heard through Alexa smart speakers. A new system was developed, and web pages and apps were modified, to allow for the reading of Greater Minnesota newspapers. Finally, programming can be streamed on any device that supports streaming, and programs for the past week can also be selected. The transition appears to be going well. Even so, there is an on-going effort to find alternatives for customers who depended upon the radio and who do not have an internet connection to get Radio Talking Book programming.

As has been the case in so many areas, the year 2020 has proven to be very challenging. However, many people have stepped up to meet the challenge. While services provided by the Communication Center have certainly been affected, they have continued to meet the basic requirements of school districts and other customers.

DEAFBLIND COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Charge

This committee exists to support and advise State Services for the Blind (SSB) regarding its services to individuals who are both deaf/hard of hearing and blind/ have low vision. This committee provides input to the Customer Satisfaction & Goals and Priorities Committee of the full Council for consideration in the development of annual goals and priorities in conjunction with SSB.

The DeafBlind committee had been meeting in person monthly and the committee then voted to meet on the fourth Tuesday of even months because we have been developing great committee teamwork. I as chair agreed that we are doing great and ready to move to an every-two-month meeting schedule. When the COVID-19 pandemic began we were not able to meet so, while our meetings were on hold I as the chair reached out to a Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) rep for resources on how to do meetings that are not in-person.

SRC-B Committee Reports

The committee was able to resume with new meeting methods using Zoom and that has been successful.

Currently, the committee is working on figuring out setting up goals and priorities. The committee will then develop plans for each of these goals.

EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Charge

This committee exists to provide advice and propose strategies to increase the quantity and quality of employment outcomes for individuals served through the state vocational rehabilitation services for the blind system.

Because of the pandemic, the Employment Committee was unable to meet this year.

MINORITY OUTREACH COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Charge

The role of the Minority Outreach committee is to advise State Services for the Blind (SSB) with specific strategies concerning its services to individuals with minority backgrounds. Additionally, the committee is responsible to provide input to the council, and both the customer satisfaction and the goals and priorities committee in order to develop the annual goals and priorities in conjunction with State Services for the Blind.

At the beginning of the year, the Minority Outreach Committee met and began developing goals for the year. We had planned to do outreach at events during the year. These were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will resume meeting in 2021.

SENIOR SERVICES COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Charge

The Senior Services Committee exists to assist State Services for the Blind to improve and expand services to blind, visually impaired, or DeafBlind Minnesotans who are not interested in employment. The majority of this group is seniors. These customers face significant

barriers to independence, but they can benefit from services which help maintain or increase their independence. Activities include identifying unmet needs, recommending services necessary to meet these needs and identifying strategies to remove or reduce barriers to their independence.

Due to the health crisis, the Senior Services Committee did not meet in 2020.

TRANSITION COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Charge

This committee provides specific advice and counsel regarding services to transition-age youth (ages 14-21). This committee will provide input to the Customer Satisfaction & Goals and Priorities Committee and the full Council for consideration in the development of annual goals and priorities in conjunction with SSB, and will monitor those goals and priorities throughout the year.

In 2020 the Transition Committee tracked activities and programs for transition-age students from SSB and community organizations. We received reports from SSB's Transition Coordinator, Sheila Koenig, and from other SSB staff members. We also received updates from the Department of Education, and from other organizations. Online programming provided needed connections as well as education and training for transition-aged students.

VENDOR OUTCOMES AND MEASURES COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Charge

This committee exists to support and advise SSB regarding measuring the outcomes realized by the recipients of training in adjustment to blindness and technology. This committee will provide input to the Customer Satisfaction & Goals and Priorities Committee and the full Council for consideration in the development of annual goals and priorities in conjunction with SSB, and will monitor those goals and priorities throughout the year.

SSB and the SRC-B designed a customer survey to measure the satisfaction of Adjustment to Blindness (ATB) training participants with training completed

through SSB ATB vendors. Customers are chosen to be surveyed from 30 to 90 days after they have completed ATB training or when their case is closed with SSB, whichever is earlier. In the winter of 2014, SSB and the SRC-B worked to redesign the questionnaire to elicit more helpful survey responses. By fall 2017, SSB moved to just administer a WFD survey on a onetime basis. Now starting in the summer of 2019, the SSB ATB survey administration was adjusted to collect responses in-house at the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) via Survey Gizmo, DEED's online survey software system. The number of customers in the pool eligible for the survey has been declining in the past few years as well as the number of responses. This year it was even lower understandably due to the Pandemic. The committee will continue to monitor the situation and review the survey and results in further detail. Transition Committee Report

In 2020 the Transition Committee tracked activities and programs for transition-age students from SSB and community organizations. We received reports from SSB's Transition Coordinator and other staff members as well as updates from providers who offer programming for transition students.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND GOALS AND PRIORITIES COMMITTEE

Committee Charge

This committee exists to carry out specific duties contained in federal regulations for the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. These include:

- Conduct a review and an analysis of the effectiveness of and consumer satisfaction with the functions of the Department of Employment and Economic Development;
- Vocational Rehabilitation services provided within the state (except adjustment to blindness and technology services), and
- the employment outcomes of persons served.

In collaboration with SSB, evaluate the extent to which SSB achieved its goals and priorities, strategies used, and factors that impeded success and performance on the

federal Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) Primary Indicators of Performance.

Jointly with other committees of the Council, and in partnership with SSB, develop and, as necessary, revise a statement of goals and priorities.

Part I State's Performance Under the Performance Accountability Measures of Section 116 of WIOA

Program Year PY2019	MN
Employment Retention 2nd Quarter	57.8%
Employment Retention 4th Quarter	58.9%
Median Monthly Earnings	\$3,162
Measurable Skill Gain Rate	33.7%

The Performance Accountability Measures represent Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) and SSB.

Part II Customer Satisfaction Survey Review

In 2017, the frequency of the conducting of the customer satisfaction survey (CSS) was changed from quarterly to once a year. The survey for PY2019, conducted near the end of the fiscal year, covers customers served during the period from January through July 2020.

The Committee reviewed the CSS results for PY2019. Three additional questions were included this year to take account of the changes in service delivery caused by the pandemic.

SSB Customer Satisfaction Survey

PY2019 Summary Results

Summary	PY2019
Q1: How satisfied are you with the time it usually took to get your answer	82%
Q2: Satisfied that counselor (staff) understood customer's needs	82%
Q3: Satisfied that customer given enough info to make good choices on employment plan	70%
Q4: Satisfied that customer had an active role in decisions about services	84%
Q5: Satisfied that services helped plan for/maintain employment	65%
Q11: Overall satisfaction with services provided	79%
Q12: Extent to which services have met expectations	66%
Q13: Comparison with "ideal" set of services	65%

SSB's results on the Customer Satisfaction Survey are also computed by the Minnesota Department of Economic Development utilizing the Minnesota Customer Satisfaction Index (MnCSI). Simply put, this index summarizes overall satisfaction with services by applying a formula to the responses for Questions 11, 12, and 13 on the survey. Using the MnCSI makes it possible to compare the customer satisfaction ratings of SSB with those of other agencies in Minnesota and with industry in general.

Average MnCSI score over time (rolling quarterly 12 month periods).

Customers Served	Jul 16 –Jun 17	Oct 16 –Sept 17	Mar 18 –Aug 18**	Feb 19 –July 19**	Jan 20 –July 20**
Average MnCSI Scores	75.7	75.6	73.5	63.9	69.2
N size	235	238	260	134	114

The committee continued to track the questions about assistive technology that began to be asked on the survey in the year ending 2015:

**Q6 Have you received any Assistive Technology from State Services for the Blind?
This could be hardware or software.**

Responses	Jan-July 20
Yes	60%
No	30%
Don't know / Unsure	10%
N Size	163

Q7 Think about when you most needed to use your Assistive Technology. How prepared did you feel to use the Assistive Technology when you needed it? Were you very well prepared, somewhat prepared, not very well prepared, or not prepared at all?

Responses	Jan-July 20
Very prepared	51%
Somewhat prepared	41%
Not very well prepared	5%
Not at all prepared	2%
DK/Refused	1%
N Size	93

Q8 *How useful do you think the Assistive Technology equipment that you received will be/was in helping you meet your vocational plan goals? Do you think it will be very useful, somewhat useful, not very useful, or not at all useful?*

Responses	Jan-July 20
Very useful	73%
Somewhat useful	20%
Not very useful	3%
Not at all useful	2%
DK/Refused	1%
N Size	94

Additionally the committee reviewed results from the three new questions added to the survey to address changes in service delivery caused by the pandemic.

Q8a *Please describe the primary method in how you interacted with SSB to receive your services. (NEW for 2020)*

Responses	Jan-July 20
In person meeting	14%
Phone call	36%
Email	45%
Online meeting (e.g. Zoom, WebEx, Skype platforms)	4%
N Size	148

Q8b *How satisfied are you with the non-traditional method you used with SSB to receive your services? (NEW for 2020)*

Responses	Jan-July 20
Very satisfied	41%
Satisfied	45%
Dissatisfied	7%
Very dissatisfied	2%
DK/Refused	5%
N Size	124

Q8c *Please explain how the process of meeting in a non-traditional way (e.g. Phone, Email, Online meeting, Other) went for you in receiving your services from SSB. (NEW for 2020)*

Finally, the members of the committee read the verbatim comments elicited by the following two survey questions to determine if trends or issues specific to SSB were apparent. No significant trends were identified from this data.

Q9 *In your opinion, what is/was the most important part of the services you received from SSB?*

Q10 *If you could change one thing about the services you received, what would you change?*

Part III Review of Goals and Priorities Program Year 2019 July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020

Priority: Competitive Integrated Employment Strategies:

1. Review, evaluate, and modify the current approach and techniques for working with youth considering non-competitive integrated employment.

This strategy has been significantly affected by the pandemic and resulting changes in academic, social, and work restrictions. The WDU Transition Team has responded by establishing additional virtual activities and programs for students, such as "Elevate Your State" which is a collaborative effort with Minnesota, Delaware, Michigan, and Kentucky.

2. Establish formal relationships and information and referral protocols when working with WIOA Core Partners:

- Title I- Adult/Dislocated Worker; Youth
- Title II- Adult Basic Education
- Title III- Job Seeker Services
- Title IV- Vocational Rehabilitation Services

The Employment Services Team has prioritized relationships with WIOA Core Partners and maintains a minimum of monthly contacts to collaborate and exchange information to best serve all Core Partner program participants. The contact includes and is not limited to collaborating on workgroups, completing joint projects, completing and delivering co-presentations, and working to improve overall DEED service delivery.

3. Restructure, monitor, and evaluate customized employment services, both in-house and contracted, so those services are in alignment with the Department of Labor and Department of Education's definition.
 - SSB will provide Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) certified customized employment training to identified contractors and vocational rehabilitation staff.
 - Contractors will be required to meet customized employment competency standards in order

to provide contracted customized employment services. Competency standards include completion of an ACRE certified training and completed work samples of the Discovery process.

Workforce Development Unit staff have been thoroughly trained in all aspects of customized employment. The Employment Services Team is responsible for routinely reviewing and monitoring customized employment services to ensure standards are met.

4. Establish baseline and target measures for measurable skill gains and credential attainment for participants (customers). Monitor progress towards and evaluate staff performance on reaching the targets.

This is a work in progress and is part of meeting one of the corrective actions identified in our last Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) monitoring review.

5. Actively promote the Connect 700 and Supported Worker programs to SSB customers to increase employment of individuals with disabilities in state government.

The Employment Services Team and SSB leadership work across agency lines with other State of Minnesota business programs for continuous program improvement and development.

The Employment Services Team has created reference materials for distribution to SSB staff and customers as well as creating education about the program that is shared during team meetings, case consultation, job exploration, and during the job seeking process to ensure that all customers who would benefit from the program have the opportunity to do so.

Priority: Internal Controls and Quality Assurance

Strategies:

1. Modify and enhance the current case review process to ensure federal and state compliance, while meeting the individualized needs of customers served. Case review process will incorporate caseload, in-depth, and targeted reviews.

This too is being addressed as part of a corrective action resulting from the RSA monitoring review. WDU leaders have been meeting to begin planning our approach.

2. Analyze and modify current internal controls, processes, and quality assurance protocols. Further identify, document, and implement additional controls.

See above.

Priority: Under-Represented Populations

Strategies:

1. Establish and evaluate strategies to address literacy and English Language Learners as it impacts vocational rehabilitation. Map the literacy resources available from and through Core Partners, especially Adult Basic Education.

BLIND, Inc., a Community Rehabilitation Program located in Minneapolis has developed an English Language Learner (ELL) Program to meet the needs of our ELL customers. This unique program focuses on small group instruction in English, Braille, and rudimentary travel and independent living skill development that can be transferred to further adjustment to blindness training and community involvement.

2. Develop and maintain rehabilitation programming for both adults and youth within the DeafBlind population to achieve their employment outcomes through collaboration with Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota DeafBlind Technical Assistance Project, and Helen Keller National Center.

Initial meetings were held during the summer with Helen Keller staff to begin identifying how to best start approaching this project; no further updates at this time.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services and SSB are collaborating on two upcoming presentations to teachers and stakeholders about customized employment options for people who are DeafBlind.

A Transition Coordinator is part of the DeafBlind Collaboration workgroup sponsored by the Minnesota Commission for the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing.

Priority: Transition and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

Strategies:

1. Develop and implement strategies for imbedding literacy in SSB's Pre-ETS program, including:
 - Partnering with Community Rehabilitation Programs to include and enhance the focus on developing reading, writing, and reading comprehension skills.
 - Partnering with colleges and universities to maximize literacy supports for in-coming students.
 - Reviewing with post-secondary bound students the strategies they will use to read at a competitive rate, effectively produce print documents, and meet academic standards for style.

The Duluth Center for Vision Loss has embedded literacy into their year-round transition program.

We are establishing a contract with Learning Ally's College Success program.

We will be establishing a contract with Sky's the Limit to provide college-bound students with training to develop, enhance, and improve literacy and advocacy skills.

2. Conduct a qualitative and quantitative analysis on all youth (ages 24 and younger) case closures. Identify factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful outcomes.

Pending development of a data instrument to conduct this analysis.

3. Review and amend the Pre-ETS Blueprint to ensure it meets current federal and SSB expectations and strategies.

Completed and consistently done on an annual basis.

Priority: Staff Training and Development

Strategy:

1. Develop a comprehensive and structured training curriculum for new employee onboarding and ongoing staff training.

WDU will be hiring a dedicated trainer and this will be one part of their responsibilities.



State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

2200 University Avenue West, Suite 240
St. Paul, MN 55114

www.mnssb.org

State Services for the Blind's vocational rehabilitation program is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education with a state match. For Federal Fiscal Year 2020, the total amount of federal grant funds used for these services is \$8,901,006 (78.7 percent). The state match appropriation is \$2,409,040 (21.3 percent).

Upon request, the information in this document can be made accessible for persons with disabilities.

Equal opportunity employer and service provider.

JANUARY 2021