



State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

2021

ANNUAL REPORT

SRC-B Mission

The Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind, working on behalf of Minnesotans who are blind, visually impaired, or DeafBlind is charged with ensuring that State Services for the Blind is in compliance with mandates under Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act. The Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind strives to ensure that Minnesotans, who are blind, visually impaired, or DeafBlind receive the best possible services under the law.

SRC-B Vision

The 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 ensure 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 that fulfills each individual's needs and aspirations.

Table of Contents

Letter from the Chair2

SRC-B Council Members3

Letter from Director Jerde4

The Dignity of Braille
SSB Customer Justin McDevitt Shares His Experience6

SRC-B Committee Reports.7

Letter from the Chair

Michael Colbrunn, Council Chairperson
State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind of Minnesota
2200 University Avenue West, Suite 240, St. Paul, MN 55114

November 2021

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

Letter from the Chair

Dear Governor Walz,

First and foremost, I feel it necessary to thank you for your leadership during these challenging and unprecedented times. Rosa Parks said, “Knowing what must be done does away with fear.” I commend you for your service to the State of Minnesota. Next, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to each one who served on and assisted the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B) during 2021. Moreover, I want to express how proud I am of being elected to chair such a distinguished group of volunteers. This experience has been one of enrichment, and it motivates me to continue serving blind, DeafBlind, and visually impaired Minnesotans.

As chairperson, overseeing the 2021 SRC-B, I felt the responsibility to carry on all the great work that the Council had done in all the previous years. One of my concerns was keeping Council members motivated and engaged. My fear was that the COVID-19 pandemic (and all that comes with it) was making folks exhausted. I worried that health concerns, social issues, shutdowns, and lock outs had finally taken their toll on everyone. I asked myself: “Would folks still have the energy to give?” I am pleased to report that the fine Minnesotans who serve on the SRC-B did not disappoint. As an extrovert who desperately misses in-person meetings, I can say, thanks to Zoom, we met on schedule and had tremendous turn out and participation. I want to personally thank Susan Kusz for all the work she did behind the scenes setting up and coordinating all the meetings. I also want to thank Natasha Jerde for her consistent leadership and dependability over the course of 2021.

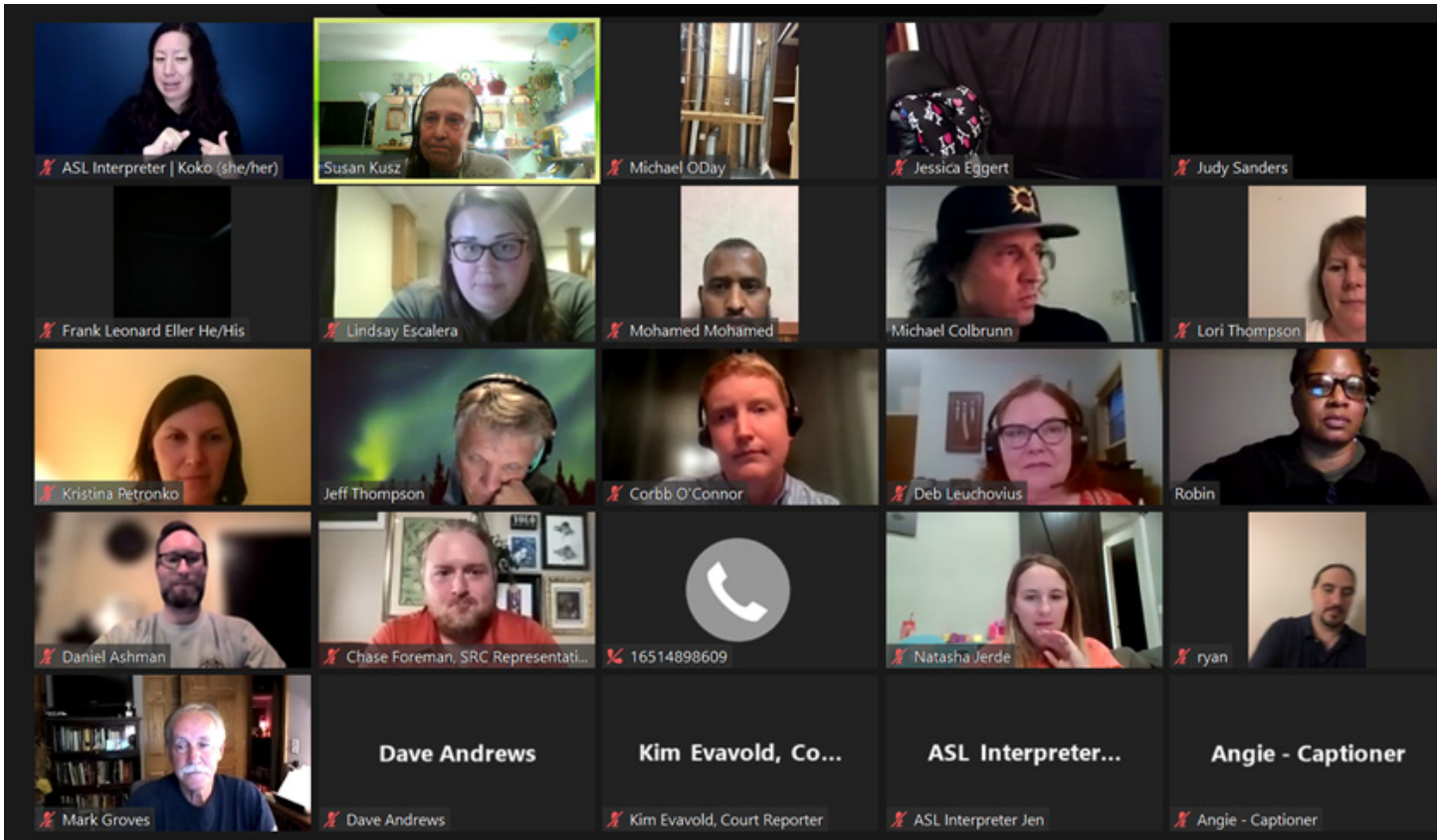
Besides the dedication demonstrated by the Council members, there are a few items I would like to highlight. The first is the work done by the Council on updating the New Members Orientation material. This packet is quite extensive in content and importance. The Council task force worked intently to create easy to understand language as well as convenient accessible links for on-line users. This update to the packet was long overdue and is greatly appreciated. Other work of the Council I would like to highlight is the work done by the committee structures task force. This group also broke down the language and made changes that improved the overall look and comprehension of the committees, their charge, and their structure. Finally, due to the cancelation of the in-person NCSAB conference and its decision to go virtual, we were able to allow more Council members than usual the opportunity to participate in said conference. Attending this conference is so valuable toward understanding the overall work that SSB does for its vocational rehabilitation customers.

In conclusion, I will end with a quote from Maya Angelou, “When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed.”

Respectfully,

Michael Colbrunn, Chair, State Rehabilitation Council-Blind

SRC-B Council Members



Pictured from top left to right

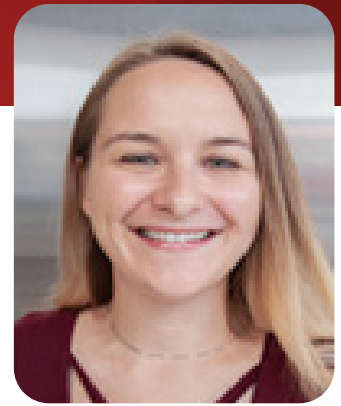
Row 1: Susan Kusz, Michael O'Day, Jessica Eggert, Judy Sanders

Row 2: Frank Leonard, Lindsay Escalera, Mohamed Mohamed, Michael Colbrunn, Lori Thompson

Row 3: Kristina Petronko, Jeff Thompson, Corbb O'Connor, Deb Leuchovius, Robin

Row 4: Mark Groves, Dave Andrews, Kim Evavold

Letter from SSB Director Natasha Jerde



Dear Governor Walz,

It has been a privilege to work with the SRC-B in 2021 especially as we continue to navigate in a world re-shaped and scarred by the effects of a global pandemic. The guidance and input from the council and its committees has been invaluable to me and the staff of SSB as we have pivoted to find new ways of delivering services in this changing landscape.

The Positive Power of “What We Can Do”

We all know the hardships, stress, and isolation people have gone through and are still going through. Staff and customers have experienced great loss, loss of loved ones and jobs. It was our commitment at SSB that we would still be there. We cannot solve everything, but what we could do, we would do.

Serving Customers

What we could do was advocate to get back into peoples’ homes as quickly and safely as possible. As a result, we were one of the first state agencies within Minnesota to be able to implement our comprehensive plan for in-person services. Since April of 2021, we have conducted over 700 in-person visits between our Senior Services and Workforce Development units. At those visits, we have consulted on job accommodations, provided adjustment to blindness training, delivered and set up low vision aids and assistive technology, and most importantly, just had conversations with people to find out how they are doing.

As it has for everyone, the pandemic has had a tremendous impact in the lives of our customers. Even as our customers have demonstrated resiliency in the face of new challenges, our own staff have stepped up to find innovative ways to provide needed resources and support.

A Changing Employment Landscape

Carla is one of our customers who comes to mind when I think about our experiences in the last year. Carla had been out of work for quite a while. She got an internship with United Health Group (UHG), an employer we have close connections with. This was supposed to be onsite; however, the Pandemic hit, and UHG had to scramble to make it a remote position. There were all kinds of technology issues but Carla worked closely with a UHG assistive technologist named JP. JP also

happens to be blind and was very familiar with the technology Carla uses. Together they got it figured out. UHG stretched out the internship as long as they could but because

of budget issues due to COVID-19, they were unable to bring Carla on permanently. Having just had a solid four months of work, Carla was energized and jumped into her job search. She landed a Connect 700 position with the State of Minnesota. SSB assistive technologist John Hess attended new employee training with her to help get everything working. He also taught her some additional things she needed to use the IT systems. Carla was closed successfully July of this year.

Even as many Minnesotans have faced serious setbacks in the past year, I’ve continued to be inspired by people like Carla who were spurred on by those setbacks to rise to the next level. At the beginning of the pandemic, along with the rest of the world, we were confronted by what we could no longer do; we couldn’t meet with customers, couldn’t gather at the office, couldn’t have our volunteers in our studios transcribing books. But, we quickly pivoted to the mindset of “What we can do!”

“What we can do” has been our guiding principle ever since and has shaped our successes in 2021. What follows are some further examples.

Serving Small Business Owners

What we could do is support our Business Enterprise Program (BEP) operators. We were one of the first states in the country to fully disburse over \$300,000 in Federal Restoration and Relief funds to our operators. In addition, the Elected Committee of the BEP voted to provide a one-time vacation payout of \$5,000 to each operator out of the Federal Commission fund. The BEP purchased \$1.8 million in new vending machines. This will allow the program to update and replace almost 30% of our total vending machine inventory – about 400 machines. All the old vending machines we would be replacing are obsolete with replacement parts no longer being manufactured. We believe this investment will put the program in the best position possible to meet the needs of our customers as our businesses start to return to a more normal business environment.

Serving Students

What we could do is come up with creative ways for students to still get paid work experiences. For the past two summers, we established a virtual work-based learning experienced program. SSB hired peer educators, a marketing and outreach associate, and a student literacy associate. Both summers, there were students whose very first job was working with us. All of our students were able to work remotely, which eliminated the transportation barriers. Having youth voices at the center of our programs is essential for us to continue to provide the best experience and services possible.

Serving Seniors

What we could do is be there for the seniors we serve, even when we could not enter into their homes. Our Senior Services Unit (SSU) team made thousands of phone calls. Many of those calls were just to check in and see how people were doing. Even with the difficult constraints of the pandemic, this team still is #2 in the country for number of seniors served. And, of course, while we can put a data point next to the number of seniors served, what's immeasurable is the impact of our services in the lives of Minnesota seniors. Nothing makes that more clear to me than this email shared with me from one of our Senior Services Specialists:

"One of my recent visits was with a 90-year old sweet lady. Her husband of 70 years passed away about a year and a half ago. Of course, she is still greatly grieving. He had dementia the last two years of his life, and my client kept her promise to him and cared for him at home. They had a 70 year anniversary party a couple of months before he died. Every year of their marriage, they dressed up in 2nd hand wedding clothes. This year, he asked her what they were doing. She said getting married, and he said they had been married for a long time already. Their kids played the song "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," and he stood up and asked her, clear as a bell, to dance. That was their last dance together. She said that he had written her 200 love letters when they were dating. She couldn't see to read them for many years and that was her goal. I set her up with a CCTV, and well, she read several of the letters to me. Her gratitude was through the roof. I love my job and feel privileged for the opportunity to work with our seniors every day."

Serving Minnesota's Diverse Communities

What we could do was find creative ways to provide access to print to Minnesotans who speak languages other than English. Our audio services team has been working to partner with Minnesota authors to record their books in an accessible digital audio format. Now, the first accessible title in the Somali language is available through the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled. We were proud to partner with author Hudda Ibrahim who recorded the Somali and English versions of her children's book *What Color is My Hijab*.

What we could do was help preserve native languages in accessible formats. Ojibwe and Dakota are important indigenous languages within our state and we are proud to have produced the first Ojibwe and Dakota titles in an accessible digital audio format. We partnered with Dr. Anton Treuer and the Bemidji State University American Indian Resource Center to produce an accessible version of the Oshkaabewis Native Journal. In the fall, we were honored to have Minnesota's Poet Laureate, Gwen Nell Westerman record *Follow the Blackbirds* a poetry collection in English and Dakota. Both of these titles, are also now available nationally through the Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD) service of NLS.

Working with the SRC-B

2021 has proven to be another year in which determination, creativity, resilience, and adaptation have been needed skills in serving our customers. Indeed, again this year, the SRC-B has demonstrated its capacity to adapt, to find creative solutions, and to wisely advise SSB in a changing landscape and turbulent time. I extend my thanks to each of the council members and to all the members who have served on committees. Your support and guidance has been invaluable.

Respectfully Submitted,

Natasha Jerde, Director, State Services for the Blind

SSB Customer Justin McDevitt Shares His Experience

Justin McDevitt got to Minnesota by climbing Mt. Rainier. After finishing a graduate degree and working for a time with seniors experiencing vision loss at the Virginia Department of Rehabilitation, McDevitt moved to Philadelphia and, in 1981, joined a group of disabled climbers to summit the 14,000 foot peak. After that successful climb Justin was invited to speak about his experience at the Minneapolis Society of the Blind (now VLR). A connection he made there ultimately landed him a job at Honeywell working in organizational development.

“Right from the start,” McDevitt says of the early days of his working life here in Minnesota, “The Communication Center was putting materials into braille for me.”

From Honeywell, McDevitt went on to work at several other Minnesota companies in materials management and marketing management. In each of those positions SSB’s braille section would transcribe materials such as articles from industry journals so that McDevitt could keep up with trends and innovations in his field.

At various points along the way, McDevitt turned to SSB’s Workforce Development Team for assistance in finding the right assistive technology and for mastering needed tech skills. “I’ve always believed that the individual is responsible for taking the initiative in finding a job. That’s how it was for me. But SSB’s employment services were important for connecting me with the right technology.”

A lifelong braille reader McDevitt notes that there are certain situations where braille is valuable as a reading format. “I turn to braille in situations where I need to stop and think about the text. Braille lets me easily go over the text again. It allows me the space to pause and ponder. It’s also invaluable when I’m learning something and want to commit concepts and ideas to memory.”

In retirement McDevitt is busier than ever. Among his several volunteer positions McDevitt works with the American Red Cross connecting service men and women and their families with programs and support. He also works in the kitchen at the Higher Ground Multi-Service Center in St. Paul. “It’s a big space with lots of aisles and counters, so it’s been a fun challenge to learn.”

“I do a lot of prep work,” he adds, “or I make sandwiches and salads. The other day I filled 180 cereal bowls, for instance.”

An avid and accomplished cook, McDevitt is nonetheless happy doing the more mundane chores at Higher Ground, “I think of Mother Teresa’s words about doing small things with great love,” he says.

For training materials related to his volunteer positions, and for his own personal growth, McDevitt continues to turn to the Communication Center for braille materials. “Looking back over some of the requests we’ve fulfilled for Justin,” says Jay Maruska, Supervisor of the Braille Section, “I see that we’ve produced materials for work, and materials for study, and materials for leisure. That fairly represents the breadth of what we do here.”

While McDevitt reads using audio and e-text along with braille, braille has a special importance to him. “There’s a dignity in being able to read directly for yourself,” he reflects, “It’s an ability that can build esteem. I know it benefitted my own self-worth.”

“We are proud that here in Minnesota, transcribing braille materials is integrated into the work of State Services for the Blind,” says Steve Jacobson, Chair of the Communication Center Advisory Committee of the SRC-B. “We know that braille literacy continues to be a significant factor in employment success, and critical to education.”

Looking back at the books, articles, training materials and other documents that SSB’s braille team has transcribed for him over the years, McDevitt says, “I wouldn’t be where I am today without their assistance. These resources have been a lifeline that has helped me both to work competitively and grow personally.”



COMMUNICATION CENTER COMMITTEE 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 Jennifer Dunnam.

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 engaging in meaningful discussion.

The services of the Communication Center and the activities of this committee continue to be affected significantly by the COVID 19 pandemic. One of our three virtual committee meetings during the past year was devoted to understanding the process of resuming normal activities. We also took an in depth view of the process of producing braille textbooks for K-12 students with a separate look at the challenges of producing math and science materials.

To meet the needs of students and other people during the pandemic, arrangements were made to allow recording books by volunteers in their homes. Software that permitted home recording using computers was distributed even as a large software upgrade commenced. Employees whose jobs could be handled remotely continued working in that mode. Radio Talking Book programming returned to normal. The statistics below represent a solid indicator of this gradual resumption of services.

Type	Number
Print pages transcribed / recorded	20,030
Print pages redistributed / previously recorded and sent to other customers	16,141
Print pages digitally structured for recording	53,886
Print pages transcribed for E-text and large print	363
Braille pages purchased from other states	169,849
Braille pages newly transcribed by CC	9,722
Braille pages reproduced and reused by CC	40,602
Total braille pages provided to Minnesota students	220,173
Total accesses (telephone and internet) of NFB-NEWSLINE for newspapers and magazines	394,446
Equipment and accessories circulated	4,174
Cassette machines repaired	15
Digital Book Players repaired, (basic model)	1,028
Digital Book Players repaired, (advanced model)	105
Total machines repaired	1,148
Listeners accessing RTB streaming services	4,372

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND GOALS AND PRIORITIES 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

Performance Indicators	PY 2019	PY 2020
Quarter 2 Employment Rate After Exit	50%	37%
Quarter 2 Median Wage After Exit	\$4,603.36	\$ 4,895.67
Quarter 4 Employment Rate After Exit	49%	37%
Quarter 4 Median Wage After Exit	\$ 5,399.38	\$ 6,129.70
Measurable Skill Gain (MSG) Rate	57%	48%

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 PY2020, conducted near the end of the program year, covers customers served during the period from January through June 30, 2021.

The Committee reviewed the CSS results for PY2020. Three additional questions were included in PY2020 to take account of the changes in service delivery caused by the pandemic.

SSB Customer Satisfaction Survey

PY2020 Summary Results

Summary	PY2020
Q1: Satisfied with time it took to receive an answer	83%
Q2: Satisfied that counselor (staff) understood customer's needs	77%
Q3: Satisfied that customer given enough info to make good choices on employment plan	75%
Q4: Satisfied that customer had an active role in decisions about services	84%
Q5 Satisfied that services helped plan for/maintain employment	72%
Q11: Overall satisfaction with services provided	76%
Q12: Extent to which services have met expectations	71%
Q13: Comparison with "ideal" set of services	72%

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	Oct 16 –Sept 17	Mar 18 –Aug 18**	Feb 19 –July 19**	Jan 20 –July 20**	Jan 21 –Jun 21**
Average MnCSI Scores	75.6	73.5	63.9	69.2	68.9
N size	238	260	134	114	144

**Prior to March 2018 survey was done quarterly via telephone. As of March 2018, the survey was done annually online.

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 21
Yes	64%
No	30%
Don't know / Unsure	5%
N Size	174

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 21
Very prepared	50%
Somewhat prepared	35%
Not very well prepared	8%
Not at all prepared	6%
Don't know/Refused	2%
N Size	109

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 21
Very useful	69%
Somewhat useful	26%
Not very useful	1%
Not at all useful	3%
Don't know/Refused	2%
N Size	109

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 21
In person meeting	10%
Phone call	44%
Email	29%
Online meeting (e.g. Zoom, WebEx, Skype platforms)	17%
N Size	163

SRC-B Committee Reports

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

Responses	Jan-July 21
Very satisfied	34%
Satisfied	47%
Dissatisfied	12%
Very dissatisfied	4%
Don't know/Refused	3%
N Size	147

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 new trends were identified from this data.

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

The most common responses were financial assistance, technology and training, and job search assistance.

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

The most common responses centered around communication and faster services.

Part III Review of Goals and Priorities Program Year 2020 July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021

Priority: Competitive Integrated Employment

Strategies:

1. Evaluate the best methods of providing informed choice options when working with youth considering nonintegrated or subminimum wage employment.

Response: Instead of evaluating practices around informed choice we determined that walking youth through the steps for seeking subminimum wage employment was of greater value. The reasoning for this decision was based on the continued confusion and misunderstanding on the part of students, families, educational personnel, and other stakeholders of the still new WIOA criteria for this area.

2. Work towards implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Human Services (DHS)-Disability Services Division (DSD) and the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED)-VRS/SSB.

Response: SSB staff were collaboratively involved in the planning and implementing of the MOU. SSB staff participated in weekly subcommittee meetings with VRS and DHS for many months in preparation for the implementation. The Provider Integration subcommittee worked on encouraging Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) licensed 245D providers to be VRS contractors, and VRS contractors to become 245D certified. They created informational flyers and held several trainings of which SSB had a part in. SSB staff also involved with VRS in creating their Employment 1st Performance Based Agreement (E1PBA). These collaborations with VRS have led to a new working relationship with VRS at unprecedented levels.

3. Implement a model for coordinating employer services with DEED Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) partners, including :
 - Title I- Adult/Dislocated Worker; Youth
 - Title III- Job Seeker Services
 - Title IV- Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Response: Work on this strategy continues with some successes so far: 1. SSB has been working with DEED partners and stakeholders to develop a Client Relationship Management tool. Currently partners are determining the cost to use Minnesota IT for consulting and services and what funding they can commit. 2. An Employer One Stop is an online virtual hub representing all partners and available services. 3. Employment 1st Minnesota (E1MN) is a site for DEED outreach and marketing, recently online also at <https://disabilityhubmn.org/for-professionals/work/e1mn-partnership/>.

4. Implement ongoing training, tracking, and oversight of measurable skills gains (MSGs) and credential attainment in order to reach negotiated targets.

Response: SSB has made changes and updates to our case management system to better help staff keep track of their customers and input the appropriate documentations. There have also been in depth reviews of enrollments/dis-enrollments, MSGs and credentials to ensure accuracy in reporting and validity of the MSGs and credentials claimed. Messaging continues to go out, as needed, around data fixes needed in and around these measures.

5. In coordination with the Advisory Task Force on State Employment and Retention of Employees with Disabilities, develop and implement methods for the hiring and retention of blind, visually impaired, and deafblind customers into state government including using Connect 700 and Supported Worker programs.

Response: The Director of State Services for the Blind served on an Advisory Taskforce on State Employment and Retention of Employees with Disabilities. As a result, a recommendation document was submitted to the Legislative subcommittee. Recommendations included items and proposed statutory changes that will specifically support the hiring and retention of blind, visually impaired, and DeafBlind customers, including:

- A requirement for all technology and digital content to be accessible and provided in a timely manner;
- Job posting language to be nondiscriminatory (including not requiring a driver's license when one is not actually needed);
- Hiring managers are made aware of the state Accommodation Fund;

- Reasonable accommodations are provided to allow full participation;
- State Services for the Blind and Vocational Rehabilitation Services must be consulted when it comes to any updates or changes to the Connect 700 policy;
- Training of staff on inclusive environments, digital accessibility standards, and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

State Services for the Blind continues to work with Minnesota Management and Budget to ensure those recommendations are carried out. Progress has been made, and we have seen an increase in the number of Connect 700 applicants, many whom go on to their pre-probationary 700 hour experience and then are hired on permanently.

Priority: Internal Controls and Quality Assurance

Strategies:

1. Enhance the case review process to allow for real time results that can be put in SharePoint and allow for trends and patterns that can shape training and accountability and policy process.

Response: We are in the process of working with WorkForce1 to create a new case review tool within the Case Management System. This is still in the beginning stages, so we won't be able to provide real time results or identify trends for training, accountability and policy until that tool has been developed.

2. Create a data dashboard to allow for real-time reporting of performance and demographics.

Response: We are in the beginning phase of creating several data dashboards for real-time reporting. We are gathering ideas for the different data points and dashboards that will be useful to our staff, including a report that is like the RSA Quarterly Dashboards we receive each quarter. We will be compiling our wants and needs, developing dashboards in-house, and potentially contracting out to create the remaining dashboards.

SRC-B Committee Reports

Priority: Under-Represented Populations

Strategies:

1. Increase minority applicants for vocational rehabilitation services who otherwise would not have applied as a result of statewide outreach with the minority communities.

Response: SSB has not been able to increase minority applicants. Statewide outreach efforts have been greatly hampered by COVID-19 and the loss of our staff member with community connections. This continues to be an area of struggle for SSB.

2. In coordination with partners and providers imbed exposure to work as part of ELL programming.

Response: Exposure to work as part of ELL programming was imbedded into services provided by Blind, Inc. Currently, they are the only partner providing that programming.

3. Research and develop avenues to bolster vendors to provide services to deafblind job seekers.

Response: SSB is in discussions with Helen Keller National Center do develop a contract to include employment services, Pre-ETS, Adjustment To Blindness, ProTactile, and other services to deafblind job seekers. Additionally, we are in discussions with another provider to develop a contract for ProTactile training.

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

Strategies:

1. Identify new and innovative Pre-ETS around financial, social, and language literacy.

Response: SSB has completed this strategy despite the impacts of COVID-19 and the inability to hold in person gatherings. Examples of Pre-ETS around financial, social, and language literacy include:

Peer Educator Programming in the Summer of 2020 included a series of workshops led by the Peer Educators. Topics included:

- Seeing Success in Self Advocacy
- College Readiness
- Complexity of Identity
- Sight Loss and Resilience

In the summer of 2021, the "Chill & Chat" monthly zoom meets allowed for students to socialize and the Summer Transition Program (STP) in 2020 and 2021 both had "Blind & Socially Savvy" as part of the curriculum.

Peer Educator Programming in the Summer of 2021 included:

- A student Braille Club
- Movie Night
- Presentations
 - Confidently College Ready
 - Social Media Savvy
 - The Confident Self-Advocate
- Confidence through the Arts program
- Exhibition Night

In the Fall of 2021, SSB hosted a monthly series called "Bring Your A Game" that connects Alexa games to job and work skills. For example, we connected "The Price is Right" to budgeting and money management.

2. Develop a longitudinal study on all youth (ages 25 and younger) case closures. Identify factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful outcomes.

Response: This strategy has not yet been completed. The Transition Subcommittee of the SRC-B has requested the data on case closures but has not yet received it. The committee specifically asked for student and youth 25 and under, with successful and unsuccessful closures. When the data is received, they will evaluate to identify factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful outcomes.

Priority: Staff Training and Development

Strategy:

1. Identify the resources to hire a designated trainer to provide a comprehensive and structured training curriculum for new employee onboarding and ongoing staff training.

Response: A designated trainer has been hired and is developing the comprehensive and structured training curriculum for new employee onboarding and ongoing staff training. We anticipate seeing results during the next year.

DEAFBLIND COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Charge

This committee exists to support and advise SSB regarding its services to individuals who are deaf/ hard of hearing and blind/visually impaired. This committee will provide input to the Customer Satisfaction and 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.

Our DeafBlind Committee has two new members joining our committee. We worked on and successfully completed Step to Step guidelines for DeafBlind consumers and now those guidelines have been placed on SSB website. We're currently brainstorming ideas for the staffing meetings in areas where we as committee members feel information would be very valuable.

Respectfully Submitted,
Jessica Eggert, Chair

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.

Committee Membership

- Committee Chairs: Michael Colbrunn (9/2020 – 3/2021), Michael O'Day (3/2021 – 8/2021).
Committee Members: Daniel Ashman, Mark Groves, Lori Thompson, Kathy McGillivray.
- SSB Staff Members: Dave Smith and Sara Kreiling.

FY 2021 Meeting Dates

The Committee met remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 31, May 5, and June 16.

Committee Activities

At the March meeting, Michael Colbrunn expressed a desire not to serve as Chair of the Employment Subcommittee, since he was assuming the

responsibilities of Chair of the SRCB. Michael O'Day offered to take over as Chair of the Committee for the rest of the fiscal year.

At the March meeting, we discussed some of the things the Subcommittee had been working on before the pandemic interrupted Subcommittee meetings. SSB staff provided committee members with an update on the Connect 700 Hour Program, which is a program to help individuals with disabilities obtain employment with the State of Minnesota. Under the Connect 700 Hour Program, if the individual with a disability is qualified for the position, the individual receives priority in the hiring process. It is not a guarantee that the candidate will be hired, but there must be a conversation to see if the person is qualified to do the job. The person then does the job for up to 700 hours as a training period. If the person works out, he or she can then be hired permanently.

SSB reported that an outside consultant was brought in to look at why the rate of unsuccessful outcomes was so high in the program, meaning that most people that went through the program were not ultimately hired. There seems to be a problem related to supervisory education. Supervisors need to better understand the program and reach out for help if things are not going as planned with the Connect 700 Hour Program participant. SSB has had some success with the program, but more work needs to be done to increase the success rate.

Successful clients tend to be the ones that are more social and willing to self-advocate for what they need. Also, the organization where the individual is working needs to reach out to SSB for assistance on accommodation needs if there is an issue.

The Employment Subcommittee also discussed the job search club, which was just starting when the pandemic began in March of 2020. Mark Groves, developer of the job club concept, felt that doing the job club virtually would be ineffective. We discussed the idea of gleaning information from literature and other programs that promote self-advocacy for blind individuals as a way for clients to gain self-confidence in the job search process.

At the May meeting, we invited Sheila Koenig who manages the Blind and Socially Savvy program at SSB to provide some of the main themes of that program. Sheila stated that there are several components to the

SRC-B Committee Reports

Blind and Socially Savvy Program. They include:

- Nonverbal Communications
- Networking
- Dressing for Success
- Dinner Etiquette
- Navigating Difficult Environments
- Job Seeking Skills

Typically, there is a presentation followed by an activity, such as networking or a mock interview. The Employment Subcommittee discussed how these types of activities might apply to job seekers that are customers at SSB. Perhaps counsellors could recommend customers that would likely benefit from the job club experience. There might also be some self-selection among customers where those that would be interested in a particular job club event would make an effort to attend. We also discussed some of the difficulties posed by people not being able to meet face to face due to the pandemic. Sheila said that much of the Blind and Socially Savvy program can be done virtually.

She said there is an abundance of resources available through the internet, such as information on active listening, resume writing, interviewing, etc., so there are plenty of resources available that are free of charge and not proprietary.

At the June meeting, Mark Groves presented on the job club idea he calls “Career from Here.” Mark described his experience with the Department of Corrections developing a program for ex-offenders who were looking for work. He believes that both groups face some of the same obstacles and misconceptions in obtaining employment. Because of these unique challenges, it makes sense to have a program geared to the unique circumstances that blind people face when looking for employment.

He shared his outline for how the Career from Here job club would work. Below is the abbreviated outline.

1. Purpose of job preparation class, expectations
2. Skills
3. Resume
4. Job Search

5. Interview

6. Accessible technology in the workplace

7. Transportation strategies

Counselors could recommend customers that are ready to begin, or are already in, the job search process. Mark estimates that attendance for any particular session would be around five or so participants. Subject matter would be in part driven by what customers want to learn about. Sessions would occur twice a month. Mark has also developed some additional materials, such as a participant email and follow-up survey.

In the coming year, we will continue to work on the projects that we initiated this year and possibly add new initiatives based on input from committee members and SSB staff.

Respectfully Submitted,

Michael O’Day, Chair

SENIORS 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.

This will go down as the strangest year in the history of this committee. It took us a while to learn how to live through a pandemic so we did not have regular meetings.

The Senior Services Unit was finding ways to creatively reach out to the senior population without going in person to provide instruction. Zoom was the new classroom and everyone was brainstorming ways to stay in touch.

Our most exciting accomplishment of the year was our

“Possibilities Fair.” This was a cooperative effort to reach out to seniors and to staff who assist people in senior facilities who might not yet know the best way to serve blind residents.

SSB’s partners were the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota and BLIND, Incorporated. Conference participants learned about the wide variety of services offered by SSB; they became acquainted with classes designed to help blind seniors retain their independence in their own homes and they were encouraged to take an active part in their own destiny.

Our hope for this year is to prove in-person activities while not losing contact with our new friends on Zoom.

Respectfully Submitted,

Judy Sanders, Chair

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 and 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.

1. SSB Transition Programs

- Summer Transition Program - STP took place over the week of June 14, 2021 and was attended virtually. Blind and Socially Savvy are part of the program as they have been in the past.
- SSB Work-Based Learning Experiences - SSB has hired several students this summer for various work-based learning experiences. Four students were hired as peer educators and helped to create and facilitate programs for July.
- “Food for Thought” Pilot Project - This was a virtual program that took place for students over the summer and the students met virtually. The first class was held on Tuesday, May 25th. SSB delivered planting kits to each students’ home. The kits consisted of: pots, herbs, soil, a watering can, and

a free composting kit. Students choose two herbs and pot at home. The students meet weekly over Zoom with SSB Transition staff. Each week a career was covered that was related to gardening and the food industry. The students also completed gardening activities together and reported on their progress over Zoom. There were a total of seven students and one of the students was DeafBlind.

2. Committee Project Goal:

It was concluded after the discussion that the committee would focus on goal number 2 listed under the “Transition and Pre-ETS Priorities”: Conduct a qualitative and quantitative analysis on all youth (ages 24 and younger) case closures. Identify factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful outcomes.

- a. The committee requested data from SSB’s Quality Assurance Specialist and Data Specialist on all “unsuccessful student case closures” for the past three years (pre-COVID and post-COVID). The committee members will analyze this data and try to determine causes for the unsuccessful closures. These factors will then help guide the committee to determine what areas, skill sets or services are lacking.
- b. The committee will then make recommendations to the Advisory Board on how to address these barriers either through additional training for the students, counselors, and/or service providers.

VENDOR OUTCOMES 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.

In 2021, State Services for the Blind (SSB) made an adjustment to how the Adjustment To Blindness

SRC-B Committee Reports

(ATB) Customer Satisfaction Survey is administered to participants. The online survey was shifted from an annual administration to a quarterly administration for several important reasons that include:

- To attempt to improve the overall ATB survey response rate by sending the online survey(s) closer to the time when participants have completed their training. In 2019, the survey response rate was at 37%. For 2020, the rate had dropped to 26%.
- By shifting to a quarterly participant pull, we will cut down on the lag time for participants between when they last received their training and when they receive an invite to complete the survey. This should also lead to participants sharing fresher impressions of the training services provided to them by the vendors.
- A quarterly administration also serves to help SSB program staff get the survey re-aligned to proper reporting timeframes and will give SSB the ability to report the data on the State Fiscal Year (SFY), a period that runs from July 1st to June 30th each year.

As a result of this shift to a quarterly administration, a 2021 ATB survey results report will not be available due to not having enough responses gathered in time for inclusion into the annual report. When administration shifts like these occur, survey and reporting protocols dictate that they need to wait for the four full quarters of data to be collected and reported out on to ensure consistent and unbiased cohort of data. Starting in the Spring of 2022, SSB will have four quarters of data and will be able to begin reporting the ATB results, with a particular eye on producing a report that contains data from July 2021 through June 2022 for inclusion in the 2022 SRC-B annual report. The 2022 SRC-B annual report will have an addendum which will include the reporting data from January 2021 through June 2021.

Respectfully Submitted,

Daniel Ashman, Chair



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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 2021, the total amount of federal grant funds used for these services is \$9,505,298 (78.7 percent). The state match appropriation is \$2,572,590 (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 2022