

A decorative background pattern consisting of a grid of rounded rectangular shapes in various shades of gray, arranged in a staggered fashion.

# State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

# 2023

• 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.

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## Letter from the Chair

Corbb O'Connor, Council Chair  
State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind of Minnesota  
2200 University Avenue West, Suite 240, St. Paul, MN 55114

November 2023

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 serve as chairperson of the SRC-B, comprised of a dedicated group of Minnesotans who give of their time, talents, and experiences that benefit thousands of Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, or low vision. I also write to express the gratitude of the council for your ongoing support of the critical work performed by SSB. The increase in funding reflected in the historic budget which you signed into law restores staffing levels, strengthens services, and ultimately expands the opportunities for achievement for blind, DeafBlind, and low Vision Minnesotans.

Along with many members of the council, I was pleased to celebrate the one hundred year anniversary of SSB at the joyful gathering on June 22nd. Yet, even as it is worthwhile to pause and commemorate 100 years, our focus remains on the actions we can take to expand access, equality, and opportunity.

As this report will show, the committees of our council were active in reviewing policy, making recommendations, tracking progress and advising the SSB staff and council.

During the course of our regular meetings this year, we held two significant public hearings. The result of the first was to repeal the process of order of selection for new customers in the vocational rehabilitation program. The second was to take comments ahead of a renovation project which will create a teaching lab for daily living skills at SSB's 2200 location.

These two public hearings showcase the forward momentum of SSB and the council's role in supporting that progress. The end of the order of selection process means that there are now no more imposed requiring SSB to prioritize new applicants restoring SSB's ability to serve more Minnesotans more quickly. The go-ahead for the renovation project means that more blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans will gain the necessary skills for leading full, independent lives as they pursue their personal and professional goals.

As you'll read, I had the privilege to be part of the contingent that welcomed Assistant Secretary Glenna Gallo to SSB. As she toured SSB, it was clear that the legacy of 100 years of service has resulted in a state agency that is flourishing in its mission to serve blind, DeafBlind, low vision, and print disabled Minnesotans. Once again, this year, the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind has been a proud partner in improving services and expanding opportunity.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Corbb O'Connor, Chair, State Rehabilitation Council-Blind*

## SRC-B Council Members



**Pictured from top left to bottom right**

**Row 1:** Michael O'Day, Frank Eller, Judy Sanders, Ryan Strunk

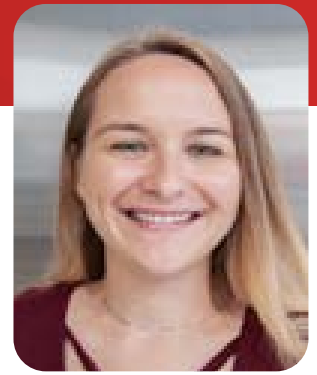
**Row 2:** Trevor Turner, Kyle Van Acker, Thomas Heinl, Kristin Oien,

**Row 3:** Corbb O'Connor, Daniel Ashman, Ryan Haenze

*Not pictured:* Catalina Martinez, Jennifer Points, Samantha Flax



# Letter from SSB Director Natasha Jerde



## Dear Governor Walz,

It has been a privilege to work with the energetic, engaged, and dedicated council members you have appointed to the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. At each of our meetings, as I present my report on the progress made at SSB, they ask probing questions, offer sound suggestions, and provide smart guidance as we shape our future.

Indeed, shaping a bright future has never seemed more urgent or more possible. In this year, marking 100 years of serving Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, low vision, or print disabled, even as we took some time to look back, our focus, our energy, and our creativity were all directed to the future. The following brief overview of some of our successes in this year will indicate the momentum we've generated – a momentum that will propel us forward into a new century of service.

## Strong Skills and Good Jobs

As we continue to live into our multi-year comprehensive plan to evolve our vocational rehabilitation program I shared many successes with the council this year. Of the 76 Minnesotans who reached their job goals this year, the average wage for fulltime employment was \$30.70, and for full and part time, \$25.02. And the range of these jobs was truly impressive. Blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans are now working in fields across all sectors and income brackets that, because of bias, or lack of accommodations, were all but closed to them even a few years ago. Our customers obtained jobs in healthcare, education, business, building, engineering, and tech.

Through the year I also shared with the council our efforts to ensure that our workforce customers got the training they needed to land that job. In order to address the critical need for skills-based training – especially in Greater Minnesota – we added several positions to our staff. What's more, our pre-Employment and Transition Services (pre-ETS) staff held programs and activities for our students to help them create a smooth path on their way to college, work, and living independently.

I shared with the council, and in this letter last year, the significant challenges faced by the small business owners in our Business Enterprise Program. This year, the 23 business owners and the SSB staff in our BEP section faced these headwinds with creativity, determination, and a focus on the future. They've consulted with and even visited other states to fully explore other business models. They've begun the slow, painstaking work of developing new, viable vending locations. They've looked for other opportunities for expansion, and they've invested in new equipment.

## Serving Minnesota Seniors

This year 3,600 Minnesota seniors living with vision loss got practical support from our Senior Services team. Our partnership with the Mayo Eye Clinic in Rochester has grown and strengthened. What's more, because of the foresight of your administration and the legislature, we were able to add two new Senior Services Counselors to our staff. All of our current staff has been working past capacity, and yet the need is only growing. The addition of two staff members means we can provide more seniors with the tools and resources they need in order to live as independently as possible for as long as practical.

## Minnesota's Accessible Reading Source

Two of the books produced this year showcase the breadth of the work of our Communication Center staff and volunteers in making print accessible in formats that best serve our customers. This year, 15 volunteers, and Audio Services staff recorded the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (the DSM-5 TR). Coming in at 87 hours

of recording time, this volume, which was requested by a social work student at St. Scholastica, will be invaluable to students, clinicians and others in healthcare, and will be available nationally through the National Library Service.

Also this year, our RTB team collaborated with six other reading services in the network of Audio Information Services to record the book *Bicycling with Butterflies*. The book narrates the author’s journey following the monarch migration, and the reading services from across the country create their own sonic journey.

These two books represent a small fraction of the thousands of pages recorded and brailled in our Communication Center which serve our customer’s reading needs for school, work, and leisure. In order to maintain this level of production, we rely on cataloging and database software. The unique requirements of our braille services necessitate having a robust and complex system. This year, we began the painstaking work of fine-tuning and bringing online a new cataloging system that will give us fully compliant data security and a system that will serve us into the future.

### **First-of-its-Kind Employer Accommodation Fund**

The staff at SSB, and indeed, our council members, know that providing reasonable accommodations often presents a real barrier to employment for our customers. In many cases, it might just be a mis-conception about the potential cost of providing a new employee with what they need to do their job. In other cases, though, especially for small businesses, the cost of providing reasonable accommodations represents a financial strain. That’s why I was thrilled to report to the council that SSB is the administrative site for DEED’s Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund (ERAF). ERAF, a pilot project funded by legislation from this last historic session, will make a difference for Minnesota job seekers with disabilities, including our own customers. What’s more, the fund is a boon to Minnesota small businesses looking to hire in a tight market and seeking that competitive edge.

As the year marking our one hundredth anniversary draws to a close, we at SSB are energized and excited for the next chapters ahead. I especially want to thank the members of the SRC-B for their thoughtfulness and passion for promoting employment, independence, and achievement for Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, low vision, and print disabled.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Natasha Jerde, Director, State Services for the Blind*



# SRC-B Committee Reports



## Assistant Secretary Gallo Visits the Communication Center

In a year of highlights, including the celebration of 100 years of service and an historic increase in funding, yet one more highlight was the visit in September by Assistant Secretary Glenna Gallo, who oversees the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services in the Federal Department of Education. As she and Secretary Cardona traveled through Minnesota on their Raise the Bar tour, Assistant Secretary Gallo chose to come to our 2200 office to learn more about the Communication Center. Council Chair Corbb O'Connor was on hand and spoke movingly of the importance of braille in his own life and in his young son's life.

Established in 1953 with funding from the Hamm Family Foundation, the Communication Center prides itself as Minnesota's Accessible Reading Source. As you will read in this report, the Communication Center Committee of the Council guides and advises Communication Center staff in the critical work of providing books and materials in accessible formats for education, work, and leisure.

Before touring the Center, Assistant Secretary Gallo met with SSB staff and special guests to learn about

the importance of accessible content in the lives of the customers served by SSB. Phuong Nguyen, who is studying Social Work at Augsburg University recalled learning braille as a young student in Vietnam. Having access to tactile graphs for science classes in high school in Minnesota and books in braille and audio in college enabled Nguyen to pursue her education and career goals.

Council Chair O'Connor spoke compellingly of his own path to learning braille as an adult. Noting how not knowing braille while growing up had limited his options, he told of his young son's familiarity with braille. He recalled a time when his son entered a public library and wondered at the lack of braille books. The story led to a lively conversation in which the Assistant Secretary created a picture of a world where braille was as easy to access as print.

In welcoming Assistant Secretary Gallo to SSB, Director Jerde noted the recent celebration of 100 years of serving Minnesotans. She added that through the Communication Center, many more Americans who are blind, DeafBlind, low vision, or who have a print disability have access to books in formats that work for them. The Braille Unit buys and sells books with other school



districts, and our engineering team uploads books from Audio Services and Radio Talking Book (RTB) on to the network for the National Library Service.

Director Jerde also highlighted the work Audio Services and others have done to produce books in languages other than English. Assistant Secretary Gallo was also pleased to hear about the newly created Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund, which is administered through SSB and provides a simple way for small and mid-sized Minnesota businesses to be reimbursed for the costs of reasonable accommodations for applicants and employees with disabilities.

As Assistant Secretary Gallo made her way through the Communication Center, visiting RTB, Engineering, Audio Services, and Braille, she had thoughtful questions to ask of staff and volunteers, and remarked on the innovative spirit of the work. As we gathered in the braille work area, Braillist Anna Werner presented her with a tactile graphic of the seal of the Department of Education. The seal depicts a tree with a crown of leaves set against the rays of the sun. The image of growth and hope was a fitting summary for the Assistant Secretary's visit, and in her concluding remarks she commended SSB and the Council for embedding collaboration and innovation in its work to better serve Minnesotans.

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## 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 Activities for 2023

Committee members were Steve Jacobson, Chair; Catherine Durivage, Kristin Oien, Ryan Strunk, Lynn Johnson, Sharon Monthei, and Rocky Hart.

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 during each meeting. We appreciate the staff effort to produce these reports for us.

This committee held four virtual meetings during the 2022-2023 term. In an effort to understand the services provided by the Communication Center and make

# SRC-B Committee Reports

recommendations, the following topics were covered in depth at each meeting:

- 9/22/2022 - Provide an overview of the services the Communication Center provides, and its structure to assist in the orientation of new committee members and to update other members.
- 12/21/2022 - We learned the various sources of Communication Center funding, and the efforts to gain additional funding during the coming legislative session.
- 3/2/2023 - We had a presentation on the history of the Communication Center and State Services for the Blind in general as part of the one hundred years anniversary coming in June.
- 5/25/2023 - We received a detail presentation on the DAISY format, a standard that allows quick navigation of braille and audio books on digital devices. More than just recording or transcribing materials in braille, preparation must be done to mark up pages, chapters, and other logical levels of text so those using the materials can access different parts of a document even easier than can be done with a hard-copy book.

The Communication Center is a busy place as can be seen by some of the statistics. The braille section transcribed 10,342 braille pages during the first ten months of 2023, and they reproduced and distributed 85,221 pages. The Audio Section circulated 3,963 Talking Book players, recorded 34,791 print pages, and duplicated and redistributed another 12,333 print pages in Audio format. NFB Newline provides access to numerous newspapers from around the country, and the Communication Center administers that service in Minnesota. In the fiscal year just ended, there were 656,082 accesses of this service by Minnesotans.

The Communication Center provides an important service to blind and other print-disabled people, and it plays a significant role in the education of blind children as well as other children with disabilities that prevent them from reading print. This committee attempts to play a meaningful role in making these services as effective as possible.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Steve Jacobson*

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS 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.

The committee studied the outcomes of last year's satisfaction surveys of customers who either completed their adjustment to blindness and/or technology training or had their cases closed. We discovered that there was not a sufficient participation rate and enough results to determine any useful information. The committee will try to figure out ways to raise the response levels or find other ways to glean information from participants.

In the coming year, the committee will explore other ways to gain feedback from customers who have participated in adjustment to blindness training. It may be that contracting with a third party to conduct focus groups would be a more suitable method of increasing participating and gathering useful information.

Our objective is to ensure that SSB customers are truly learning what they need to live the lives they want, and they come to know that their blindness does not need to get in their way.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Judy Sanders, Chair*



## CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND GOALS AND PRIORITIES COMMITTEE REPORT

### Committee Charge

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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 2021	PY 2022
Quarter 2 Employment Rate After Exit	36%	39%
Quarter 2 Median Wage After Exit	\$7,348	\$7,326
Quarter 4 Employment Rate After Exit	35%	35%
Quarter 4 Median Wage After Exit	\$6,428	34%
Measurable Skill Gain (MSG) Rate	34%	41%

The Performance Accountability Measures represent SSB individually.

### 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 PY2022, conducted near the end of the program year, covers customers served during the period from January through June 2023. Full results will soon be available on the DEED web site.

The Committee reviewed the CSS results for PY2022.

### SSB Customer Satisfaction Survey

#### PY2022 Summary Results

Summary	PY2022
Q1: Satisfied with time it took to receive an answer	90%
Q2: Satisfied that counselor (staff) understood customer's needs	90%
Q3: Satisfied that customer given enough info to make good choices on employment plan	84%
Q4: Satisfied that customer had an active role in decisions about services	90%
Q5: Satisfied that services helped plan for/maintain employment	80%
Q11: Overall satisfaction with services provided	87%
Q12: Extent to which services have met expectations	79%
Q13: Comparison with "ideal" set of services	77%

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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	Feb 19–July 19**	Jan 2 –July 20**	Jan 21–Jun 21**	Jan 22–Jun 22**	Jan 23–Jun 23**
Average MnCSI Scores	63.9	69.2	68.9	72.0	78.2
N size	134	114	144	150	154

\*\*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-June 23
Yes	56%
No	30%
Don't know / Unsure	14%
N Size	185

**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-June 23
Very prepared	54%
Somewhat prepared	32%
Not very well prepared	8%
Not at all prepared	4%
Don't know/Refused	2%
N Size	101

**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-June 23
Very useful	81%
Somewhat useful	14%
Not very useful	0%
Not at all useful	2%
Don't know/Refused	6%
N Size	101

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-June 23
In person meeting	10%
Phone call	40%
Email	30%
Online meeting (e.g. Zoom, WebEx, Skype platforms)	21%
N Size	177

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

Responses	Jan-July 23
Very satisfied	44%
Satisfied	42%
Dissatisfied	6%
Very dissatisfied	2%
DK/Refused	6%
N Size	158

**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 as of 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.

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

The most common responses involved technology/equipment, staff/trainer/vendor assistance, and education/classes/training.

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

The most common responses centered around issues related to finding/searching/getting trained for a job, staff improvement, and process issues.

## Part III Review of Goals and Priorities Program Year 2022 July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023

**Evaluation and Reports of Progress:** VR and Supported Employment Goals. For the most recently completed program year, provide an evaluation and report of progress for the goals or priorities, including progress on the strategies under each goal or priority, applicable to that program year. Sections 101(a)(15) and 101(a)(23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to describe progress in achieving the goals and priorities identified for the VR and Supported Employment Programs.

### 1. Priority: Competitive Integrated Employment

#### Strategies:

#### A. 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
- SSB is 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. Once this is finalized the planning process will begin by identifying partner business and customer needs and how to assemble these into a cohesive product.
- Monitor the Employer One Stop online virtual hub representing all partners and available services and determine any modifications and adjustments needed to ensure its effectiveness.
- Monitor the E1MN section of the Disability HUB website for DEED outreach and marketing and determine any modifications and adjustments needed to ensure its effectiveness.

#### Review:

We have made considerable progress on designing a model for better, more coordinated employer services across our Department. For example, we now have

# SRC-B Committee Reports

regional meetings across DEED divisions related to serving businesses and connecting them with workforce services, including talent recruitment.

There has been unfortunately no progress on the Client Relationship Management (CRM) tool. We also were not able to create the Employer OneStop hub as we envisioned, since the Department put resources were instead put towards improving the CareerForceMN.com platform. However, we have identified a new avenue to accomplishing both items, which includes leveraging the new labor exchange system that is being designed.

Several partners within DEED expressed interest in obtaining a CRM, such as Salesforce, to better track our contacts with businesses. A few divisions within DEED already had Salesforce, and other divisions did not see the benefit. While it has limits, it is a good tool for tracking the employer relationship side of our work. Instituting a new system across partners, which includes funding agreements and joint policies, is a large-scale effort that requires consensus. While we had Commissioner's Office support, we did not have consensus across all partners. We are undergoing a digital transformation project, which includes a new labor exchange system, and there was fear a CRM would require dual entry. We are now determining if the new labor exchange, which will integrate with CareerForceMN.com, could meet our needs instead. We are confident that the digital transformation work within DEED will result in a system that will allow us to better engage with businesses and track those contacts. In addition, we believe that instead of creating a new system, that once modified, our existing CareerForceMN.com, will act as the hub we envisioned. SSB is on the steering committee for this entire project, which allows us provide input and share feedback.

Under the E1MN initiative with the Departments of Education and Human Services, a process map was developed called the [Engage, Plan, Find, Keep](#) framework, which clarifies roles and determines funding of services for those on Medicaid waivers. [E1MN Training](#) was launched in 2023 to support the E1MN referral and funding decisions for all roles. The Disability Hub Work Toolkit has a section on [Supporting People on Waivers](#) that provides tools and resources to support understanding on the Engage, Plan, Find, Keep framework. The Disability Hub is a premiere website

site that is constantly being updated and refreshed. This specific strategy has been successfully completed.

## **B. Implement ongoing training, tracking, and oversight of Measurable Skills Gains (MSG) and credential attainment of students to reach negotiated targets.**

- Monitor staff tracking of their customers and input of appropriate documentation by in depth review of staff input of customers MSG's and credentials between enrollment and disenrollment.
- Ensure accuracy in reporting and validity of the MSGs and credentials claimed.
- Train staff as needed regarding data fixes necessary for these measures.

### **Review:**

While we have made considerable progress as it relates to reporting on and tracking MSGs and credential attainment, we still have a long way to go. Based on recent data reports from RSA, SSB is below the mean when it comes to our performance rates for these two measures. We attribute this primarily to incomplete and inaccurate tracking by staff in our case management system.

We have employed several strategies to mitigate this. Our Quality Assurance Specialist does in depth reviews of the MSGs and credentials claimed after each semester, while also flagging staff of potential MSGs that have not yet been claimed. Additionally, multiple reminders are sent as MSG deadlines approach. These reminders include instruction on what needs to be collected as well as links to previous trainings. Throughout the year, additional training is provided to counselors on MSGs and credentials. Our case management system has several reports available to staff that assist in identifying potential MSGs and credentials. However, while these strategies have helped us double our MSG rate from the previous program year, they are not fully resolving the issues we have. This coming year, we will be looking at the following activities:

- Full system integration between our case management system and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). We already have access to the NSC data however, it is a manual process and by integrating the data into Workforce One, we can make it automated.

- Hiring an administrative support specialist to assist the quality assurance specialist in case reviews, which will include fixing data entry errors in the system and tracking down supporting documentation. We will still be communicating those errors to counselors, but we know many of the errors are occurring because counselors are incredibly busy managing their caseloads. This is one small thing we can do to reduce administrative burden and increase our accuracy in reporting.

### **C. 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.**

- Monitor the recommendation document submitted by the Advisory Taskforce 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 will continue to work with Minnesota Management and Budget to ensure these recommendations are carried out.

### **Review:**

All strategies in this area are considered complete. This past Legislative session put all the Advisory Taskforce recommendations into the applicable statutes, which includes:

- Strengthening state accessibility requirements
- Nondiscriminatory job posting language, including changing the driver’s license requirements to instead say “reliable form of transportation” or equivalent (unless the position is a driving position)
- Better awareness of the Centralized Accommodation Fund
- Consultation with VRS/SSB on changes to the C700 program prior to implementing them
- Mandatory disability training requirements for all levels of staff

The Advisory Taskforce will be reconvening at the start of 2024 to review progress made and conduct oversight on progress made on the above items.

## **2. Priority: Internal Controls and Quality Assurance**

### **Strategies:**

#### **A. 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.**

- Case reviews will be conducted by the Quality Assurance specialist.

### **Review:**

As of November 2023, our case review tool has been integrated into our case management system. This allows for a streamlined case review procedure, ability for reviews to be stored in a central location, the option for running reports and more easily identifying trends that can shape future training or inform policy updates and program decisions. Case reviews are conducted monthly by the Quality Assurance specialist, as well as one supervisor on a rotating basis. This strategy is considered successfully completed.

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

# SRC-B Committee Reports

- We will be continuing the work on developing the data dashboard by reviewing existing tools that may be available to meet this need compared to building our own. The expectation is to have completed this project well within the year.

## **Review:**

While we have made some progress in this area, we are not as far along as we wanted to be. Our data analyst went on a one-year extended leave, so we have relied on other department data analysts to assist when they are available. We have, however, been able to work with DEED's Performance and Technical Management division to begin building data dashboards in Power BI. We have one report fully completed, which is the post-pandemic application and successful closure trend report. We have a list of other reports we would like to have in a more comprehensive dashboard, once we have the staffing level to do so. We are in the process of hiring a second data analyst who will have a larger focus on the creation of data dashboards and tools.

## **3. Priority: Under-Represented Populations**

### **Strategies:**

- Increase minority applicants for vocational rehabilitation services who otherwise would not have applied because of statewide outreach with the minority communities. Use applicant data on race, ethnicity, gender, and religion to measure against closure rates to determine if there are trends in unsuccessful closures among a particular protected class.
- Once measurements are established, an action plan will be developed to identify what gaps exist and how to reduce them.

### **Review:**

We have made considerable progress in our intentional and targeted outreach efforts toward underserved and underrepresented communities; however, we still need to do more. The following activities highlight this progress:

- The State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B) revitalized and renamed the Minority Committee to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Committee; this group is tasked with helping SSB reach and serve more individuals from BIPOC communities.

- We added a demographic profile to our customer satisfaction survey so we can track satisfaction by age, gender, race, and ethnicity; satisfaction results show higher satisfaction with our services if you are Hispanic/Latino, BIPOC, or DeafBlind.
- We are hiring a second outreach coordinator who will be able to devote time in connecting with those communities who are historically underserved; this includes our Tribal communities.
- Our data shows that we are serving more individual from BIPOC communities than in the past; however, across the board, these communities have higher unsuccessful closures.
- We established a contract with a new orientation and mobility specialist contractor who is fluent in Somali.
- We have launched our Literacy for All campaign in our Communication Center; this means we are offering more accessible materials in languages other than English. We have been able to translate our brochures in multiple languages, both written and via audio. In addition, we are in the early stages of supporting the Language Revitalization efforts through the Minnesota Department of Education, which is an effort to revitalize the Dakota and Ojibwe languages.

A work group was created to investigate applicant and closure data and identify gaps and trends. This group spent a considerable amount of time reviewing historical data from the last 3 to 5 years. They even dug into case notes to determine what led to the unsuccessful closure. Through that considerable amount of research, they identified the biggest area of need had to do with serving new Americans and refugees. DEED is fortunate to have the Office of New Americans, and the work group met with the Assistant Commissioner for that office to learn more about this population, including cultural components.

It was identified that many staff lack cultural awareness, especially when it comes to how we describe our services and the purpose of our program. We also have a significant lack of service providers who know how



to bridge the language and cultural barriers, especially when that barrier is partnered with a vision loss or blindness. We are not yet sure what we can do to develop community partners with this skill set, but we are considering the creation of “community liaisons” who can be a cultural bridge between SSB staff and the communities.

All of our staff are receiving ongoing training as it relates to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, but this training is geared more towards their employment through the State of Minnesota and less around how to engage with and serve customers. We are considering implementing the ABCs of Cultural Competence to staff, which is a training offered through UA Currents.

## 4. Priority: Transition and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

### Strategies:

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

- The Transition Subcommittee of the SRC-B has requested the data on case closures specifically for student and youth 25 and under with successful and unsuccessful closures.
- When the data is received, the Transition Subcommittee will evaluate to identify factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful outcomes.
- Based on the factors we will begin to develop strategies to address how better to ensure successful outcomes.

### Review:

These strategies were not implemented, and thus this has not been successfully completed. Due to SSB staffing changes and shifts in leadership of the committee, this work was unable to be started. The committee still plans to move forward with the study once the second SSB data analyst has been hired.

## 5. Priority: Staff Training and Development

### Strategies:

#### A. Provide a comprehensive and structured training curriculum for new employee onboarding and ongoing staff training by the designated trainer.

- The designated trainer is developing the comprehensive and structured training curriculum for new employee onboarding and ongoing staff training. Expected outcomes are:
  - On boarding and training packages specific to each role that make up the Workforce Development Unit (WDU)
  - An annual training and development schedule for the WDU as a whole and for specific unit roles and functions
  - Acquiring data about training effectiveness and adjusting as needed

### Review:

SSB hired a dedicated staff development specialist, who oversees our annual training plan, as well as ad-hoc and on-demand training. Our trainer has improved the existing onboarding training, creating a robust and comprehensive onboarding for all new WDU staff. Counselor and VR-Tech training plans have been created along with plans geared more toward the other roles in WDU and other units that require a less comprehensive training.

The trainer has also created an annual training plan to ensure unit staff are receiving the necessary training to continue to do their work and develop in their roles. This includes monthly counselor only training sessions that focus on topics specific to counselors and provide counselors a venue to collaborate with one another regularly. At times, training topics may be relevant to other unit roles, and the staff in those roles are invited to attend those sessions.

Additionally, there is a training newsletter that goes out weekly and identifies training opportunities that may be valuable to unit staff.

We have been able to procure the YesLMS platform, which houses all of our training. YesLMS puts together content for us, and we can modify the content to meet our needs or upload our own. CEUs are available for many of them.

We have successfully completed this strategy.

# SRC-B Committee Reports

## B. Increase the level of awareness of the importance of timely communication with customers in response to customer comments on the Customer Satisfaction Survey (CSS)

- The Customer Outcomes and Goals & Priorities Committee, together with SSB staff, will monitor the frequency of comments on subsequent surveys.
- SSB staff will investigate other internal controls that could be useful in identifying any communication timeliness problems.

### **Review:**

Each year when the results of the annual customer satisfaction survey are released, SSB leadership reviews each and every comment. While timeliness in communication continues to be a frequently referenced issue, it appears to be targeted towards only one or two specific staff and not the entire work unit. For that reason, we have been able to address those instances on a case by case basis. Overall, due to steps we have taken and continue to take to reduce administrative burden on staff, we see less complaints about communication responsiveness. Staff turnover was another major factor in communication timeliness. At one point, we were down several counselors and VR-Techs, and we had a turnover rate of more than 30%. At the time of this review of our goals and priorities, we are almost fully staffed with less than 5% turnover. Caseloads are at an average of 45, and we have no counselor vacancies.

We also have a number of internal controls in place to monitor this on an ongoing basis.

Timely communication in internal controls via caseload review.s

### **Internal control:**

Every caseload review includes the date of the last live contact each customer had with SSB, as well as the date that the next live contact is due by (the 90-day mark) if it's within the next 30 days. The dates under 'Next Live Contact' might be highlighted (or noted for those with a visual impairment) yellow or red - yellow indicating the next live contact due date is coming up within the next month, or red indicating that the due date has passed and we did not make live contact with the customer within 90 days of the last live contact. However, even if a due date is red, a counselor may have

still made attempted contacts which is always noted for the counselor and supervisor to see. Any concerns that are identified, including a lot of past due dates without attempted contacts, are emailed to the supervisor who is asked to review the report with the counselor.

### **Trends:**

We have not seen any overall trends or changes in this area. Counselors are overall consistent in how much red or yellow they have on their individual caseload reviews, whether that's a lot or none at all.

Timely communication in internal controls via intensive case reviews

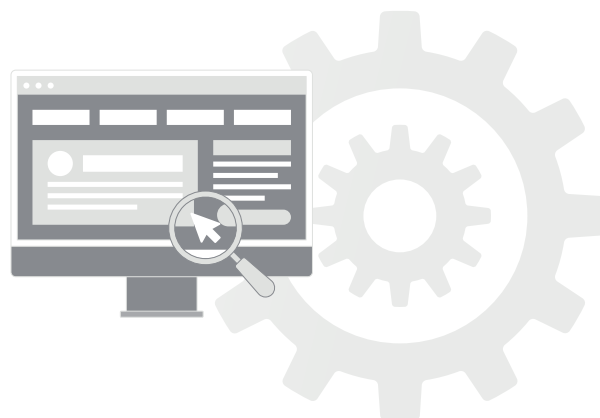
### **Internal control:**

Every intensive case review includes reviewing the items listed below:

- Correspondence with customer, vendors and other SSB staff is professional and responses are sent in a timely manner.
- Counselor maintained contact with customer at least once every 90 days OR; if customer did not respond to contact attempts, counselor continued to try to engage customer until contact could be made.

### **Trends:**

Counselor review ratings on these items have not included any non-compliant; they are always mostly compliant and most often, compliant ratings.



## Part IV PY 2024 Goals and Priorities

During September and October, this committee worked with SSB management to facilitate the council's input into the goals and priorities for the upcoming program 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 & 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.

We have met 4 times already this year and have set goals to review training materials and documents for SSB in 2024. We have meetings scheduled for January, April, August, and October in 2024.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Trevor Turner, Chair*

### DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESSIBILITY COMMITTEE REPORT

#### Committee Charge

The role of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) committee is to advise State Services for the Blind (SSB) with specific strategies concerning its services to individuals from traditionally under-served communities. 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.

First, we are pleased that the full council voted to update the name of our committee to be the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) of the council.

Second, the major work product of our committee this year was a series of recommendations for improving services for under-served Minnesotans. These

recommendations were compiled for the purpose of assisting Jessica Burke, Management Analysis and Development consultant in her work with SSB vocational rehabilitation services. In presenting these recommendations to the council at its August meeting the council voted to endorse these recommendations and submit them to MAD as a council action.

In compiling these recommendations our committee met with staff, reviewed data, and determined the current state of practices and procedures at SSB.

#### ***Recommendations for improving diversity, equity and inclusion practices within Minnesota State Services for the Blind.***

The following are the recommendations approved by the council, as submitted by our committee.

#### ***Policy and Process Recommendations***

- 1. The SSB customer survey and any communications with customers about the survey should be at a minimum available in the five primary languages spoken in Minnesota: Spanish, Somali, Hmong, Chinese and Vietnamese.**
- 2. The training manual for counselors and other SSB staff should be updated to provide clarity on policies governing translation and interpretation services addressing the following points: Clear guidelines on timelines for requesting translation or interpreter services. Information about the location of an approved vendor list for these services. precise definition of necessary activities for which translation or interpreter services must be provided, variability in interpretations has led to inconsistent access to information for customers.**
- 3. Inclusion of language emphasizing the importance of obtaining informed consent during the enrollment and service provision process for individuals with limited English language proficiency.**
- 4. Provide staff with consistent access to documents required to procure translation and interpreter services.**
- 5. Update Workforce One to require that a customer's primary language is documented. This will help to reduce the number of times a customer needs to request translation or interpreter services and ensure customers receive both written and verbal information in their primary language.**

# SRC-B Committee Reports

## **Staff and Training Recommendations**

- 1. Provide annual training for all staff who interact with SSB customers regarding how to procure translation or interpreter services.**
- 2. Require all SSB staff to complete the Intercultural Development Inventory to help assess the current level of cultural competence within the agency.**
- 3. Implement a comprehensive cultural competency training program for all staff members who engage with customers, ensuring that they gain the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively recognize and address cultural differences.**
- 4. Employ a culture navigator dedicated to assisting customers and their families throughout the vocational rehabilitation process.**

Respectfully Submitted,

*Yadiel Sotomayor, Briley O'Connor*

## **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.

**Members:** Chair - Daniel Ashman, SSB. Staff Liaison - David Smith. SSB Members - Lindsey Hanson/Sara Kreiling. Members - Kathleen McGillvray, Michael O'Day, and Sara Thiewes. SRC-B Chair - Corbb O'Connor.

**Meeting Dates:** In continuance of prior years, the Committee unanimously supported maintaining meeting remotely. The Committee was scheduled to meet 6 times bi-monthly; however, two meetings were cancelled due to scheduling conflicts and one meeting was not able to be held as the Committee was undergoing transition between sitting chairs. The meetings attended were held in January, March, and May, 2023.

**Activities:** The Chair reviewed the charge of the Employment Committee for all new members as well as delivered a high-level overview of the prior year's meetings and overall agenda. As the previous

year focused on reviewing the deliverables of a job exploration and development class; of which, the attendance historically was low, the Chair proposed that the Committee move in a direction that supported the Committee's charge. With unanimous consent, the new initiative and agenda for the Committee was focused more on following the data trends for counselor caseloads, as well as developing tools which could survey counselors to better determine areas in which the Committee could support and provide feedback in.

Dave Smith, SSB staff liaison, provided to the Chair monthly Workforce Development Unit (WDU) data sets on all counselor caseloads and closure rates (successful and unsuccessful), which the Chair then disseminated the pertinent information to the Committee for review. The Chair created a spreadsheet which tracked the data categories identified by the Committee as pertinent; through which, data trends could be better analyzed quarterly and yearly for more relevant feedback to the Committee and counselors. The Committee used the data trends to develop a rough questionnaire for all counselors and their supervisors to complete. The questionnaire was intended to analyze the workflow from consumer intake through closure (successful and unsuccessful) inclusive of overall time and resource allocation of a consumer's case; counselor workload inclusive of known and/or perceived barriers as well as overt consumer challenges, ipso facto addressing unsuccessful closures; and supervisor and administrator interactions. The Committee further began to assess surveying methods which SSB uses to collect the aforementioned monthly WDU data sets with an intent to increase return rates and create a more representative data sample.

The overarching purpose of the questionnaire and survey was two-fold: one (1) create a centralized anonymous bank of updatable data that identified individual measures of success as well as departmental deficiencies, and two (2) collaborate to address said deficiencies, specifically in closures, with SSB's Objectives and Key Results (OKR) 2: Analyze successful and unsuccessful closures (employment outcomes) to identify service gaps and needs.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Daniel Ashman, Immediate Past 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.

In the early days of this fiscal year we were discussing how we might increase interest in new senior customers. We explored doing mailings to ophthalmologists and optometrists so that they could encourage their blind patients. While we were drafting a brochure we noticed that SSB's customer base was growing.

One of the reasons for this increase was that the Mao Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota offered SSB office space once a week. One of SSB's counselors is on site to visit with potential customers. The results are exciting. We are predicting that around 4500 people will have been served through our Senior Services unit this past year.

And what of our future? SSB, with the help of this committee, is partnering with the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota and BLIND, Incorporated to hold another "Possibilities Fair". This is an event that will introduce blind seniors and their families to what opportunities are available to enhance a blind person's independence.

We look forward to sharing other ways to reach out to the ever growing blind senior population of Minnesota.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Judy Sanders, Chair*

**Other committee members:** Jan Bailey; Theresa Gfroerer; Jeff Thompson; Tom Heinl; Linda Warren; and Barbara Klein. Edward Lecher served as committee staff.

## 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.

### Committee Members September 2022 - August 2023

- Wendy DeVore - Committee Chair
- Shane DeSantis - SSB Representative
- Kristin Oien
- Ryan Strunk
- Joya Musa
- Deborah Leuchovius
- Logan Stenzel

The Transition Committee met four times during this time period:

- 11.28.2022
- 01.13.2023
- 03.23.2023
- 05.12.2023

### The committee worked on the following:

**Successful & unsuccessful Outcomes:** The committee explored the factors that contributed to unsuccessful and successful placement outcomes for Transition students during the time period of 1/05/2021-12/27/2022 and pre-COVID FY 2019. Based on the data, the committee recognized the higher number of positive outcomes in 2023. Shane DeSantis stated this is partly because many students have great employer relationships. Students are also earning high wages. Now that SSB is fully staffed, counselors can continue to engage with students, families, teachers, and their teams to improve outcomes. Staff will also be able to create more programming opportunities, which in turn will increase greater outcomes.

**College Enrollment / Disenrollment:** The Transition Committee wanted to explore the disenrollment rate of SSB students after their first year of college. The SSB data specialist has been tasked with finding data showing how many SSB clients who are college students have completed their first year. If they did not complete their first year, the Transition Committee is interested in exploring why. Gathering this data is a complicated process.







# State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

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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 2022, the total amount of federal grant funds used for these services is \$9,296,238 (78.7 percent). The state match appropriation is \$2,516,008 (21.3 percent).

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Equal opportunity employer and service provider.

**JANUARY 2023**