Greetings Council,

I want to welcome all our new and returning Council members. The SRC-B acts as an advisory body to provide recommendations and a diverse perspective to State Services for the Blind’s programs and services. Your participation in not only the Council meetings but also our committees and taskforces is very much appreciated. You all help in making us a better organization, and we thank you.

# Evolve: VR Updates

For new members to the Council, Evolve: VR is a multi-year systemic change process to improve our service delivery in the VR program. We have a framework we call MAPP: Mindset, Awareness, Process, Personnel, and Performance. Under each of those areas, we have several strategies we are working on. The entire plan is posted on our website, where you can read the various things we are tackling. The philosophy of Evolve: VR has expanded to many of our other units at SSB.

The Workforce Development Unit team will be meeting the Innovation Lab later this month to begin tackling our current referral and intake process. We have had a more centralized model for about the last ten years, and we are looking at either refining that centralized model or exploring other methods. That first point of contact is one of the most important contacts we have with people entering into our program, and we want to have that be the most positive experience possible while quickly getting people into their first planned services.

In November, we quietly launched a pilot electronic interest form on our website. VRS originally launched their version, and they received several inquiries for services from people with vision loss. We decided we needed to have one as well that we can direct folks to. Since that very quiet launch, we have received well over 100 interest forms for both WDU and SSU. We now have moved from a quiet pilot to having our interest form prominently displayed on our website.

# Rulemaking Update

We finalized our internal review of Rule 3325, which governs our VR and Older Blind programs. We had a few areas that need our General Counsel’s Office weigh in to ensure some of what we are proposing isn’t contradictory to other state and federal laws. Once they finish their review, we can initiate the approval process to begin rulemaking. At such time, we will be launching our Rulemaking Committee applications so stakeholders can advise, guide, and provide feedback on the proposed changes.

Some of the proposed changes include:

* Streamlining and cleaning up our definitions
* Aligning with the updated Federal requirements, including adding in pre-employment transition services
* Removing any burdensome signature or paperwork requirements whenever possible
* Updating and expanding our eligibility criteria
* Eliminating customer financial participation
* Lengthening the time a person has to appeal a decision
* Clearing up contradictory and confusing policies and timeframes
* Making everything plain language

# Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund Updates

Hope all is well! ERAF is continuing to catch the attention of different entities in other places in the country. I was recently contacted by a few people from Cornell University, and they invited me to speak on May 1 virtually at the EARN Small Business Webinar on Disability Inclusive Resources for Small Businesses. So, there will be entities in different states, as a part of this initiative is to show different practices done by different states nationwide. In addition to this initiative would also have a profound reach to the types of businesses we’re looking for here in Minnesota.

# Dan Gausman Innovation Award

At our recent All-Staff, Jon Benson announced the first annual Dan Gausman Innovation Award, with Dan being the post-houmous first recipient. In the future, the award will be given to a nominated staff person who took risks to implement innovative and unique services or programs that benefit the people we serve. In the spirit of Evolve: SSB, we want to celebrate when staff try something new, even in the face of hurdles and barriers.

# Administrative Updates

## Staffing Update

You all may have read my recent email announcement about our new SRC-B staff liaison. We welcome Nyia Vang, who will start on April 17th.

After 47 years of state service, Chris Johnson, our fiscal coordinator, retires on April 5th. She will be taking one month off and then returning to us under a post-retirement option on May 14th. A PRO is essentially a short-term work assignment that allows retired staff to return to state government to work on special projects. Chris will be working on the fiscal aspects of the Communication Center Software System replacement project. She will also be documenting all of our fiscal policies and procedures.

## Community Partnerships

Updates on our Strategic Planning goal of improving communications with our Community Partners include:

* Our new Community Partner newsletter titled the “*Partner Post”* will be debuting its first edition mid-April.
* Work has begun on the Community Partners webpage redesign.
* The next Community Partners and SSB Staff Forum is Tuesday, April 16th from 10 AM to Noon. A reminder notice with the registration link will be sent out Monday the 8th or you can email Susan Kusz @ Susan.Kusz@state.mn.us or Jennifer Beilke Jennifer.Beilke@state.mn.us to have the registration link sent to you.

Updates on contracts:

* We are working to repost the RFP for the Master Contract of ATB and Employment Related Services.
* There are 3 new contracts in negotiations
* There is 1 current contract needing an assignment agreement. An Assignment Agreement is used when
* There is 1 contract amendment in progress and another amendment request for review
* We are working to complete an Equity Select contract for Pre-ETS podcasting and a corresponding Enterprise Accessibility contract for transcription/captioning to go along with that.
* We continue working on Joint Powers Agreements with Structured Discovery Centers in other states.

## Outreach

* The SSB outreach team continues to work on their goals for 2024. One goal is increasing awareness of the Communication Center. Not many people know that anyone with a difficulty reading print can access the National Library Service audiobooks. This includes people with reading disabilities like dyslexia, and physical disabilities or limitations that make it difficult to hold printed materials.
* Another goal of the outreach team is to promote SSB services in the northeast part of the state (the arrowhead). We are looking at media buys and advertising to help spread the word.
* Outreach is planning to share stories of success and uplifting public interest stories to publish in newspapers, or feature on news broadcasts not just in the Twin Cities but also putting an emphasis on small town and rural markets.
* Since the February council meeting, the outreach team has held vendor booths at two conferences, conducted presentations at St. Paul College and the Minnesota Social Service Association conference. We have also promoted SSB senior services with groups at senior living facilities and places of worship. There will be more conferences and opportunities to spread the word throughout the spring and early summer.
* In an effort to reach underserved communities, the outreach and communication team is working on getting materials translated into languages reflective of Minnesota’s immigrant communities. We are also looking at offering audio descriptions in these languages.
* Collaboration efforts are underway between the SSB outreach team and DEED VR outreach. We will be working together on a ‘Marcomm’ (marketing and communications) plan.
* The outreach team has ongoing collaborations with other state departments, particularly the Olmstead Implementation Office and the MN Department of Natural Resources. These collaborative projects focus on accessibility for blind and low vision Minnesotans.
* The team is looking to refresh our marketing materials. We have reviewed our printed flyers and brochures, are creating new banners for vendor booths at conferences, and are working on refreshing the SSB website to make it clean, clear, appealing, and easy to navigate. The goal is to complete the website refresh by end of summer, as the changes are happening one department and one page at a time.
* News, information, and other communications are being shared with 5,000 subscribers through the SSB monthly newsletter.

## Facilities

Our conference room upgrades are almost complete, and we plan to be fully ready by our June Council meeting. We were waiting on one electrical switch that allows us to “turn on” all of our functionality, and that switch is being installed at the end of this month.

We finished all the federal paperwork needed to do our cafeteria remodel. However, we now have all the state paperwork we have to navigate through. I don’t anticipate being able to start this project until after July 1st.

A small team of VRS staff will be moving into SSB around January 2025. The group, mainly comprised of their Deaf/HOH staff, will be taking one office and four cubes in the administrative side of our office building.

## Fiscal

(Almost) every year, SSB and VRS is part of a process called a Single Audit. Typically Unemployment Insurance (UI) and Disability Determination Services (DDS) are also included. A single audit is like a mini monitoring review of our vocational rehabilitation financials, but instead of the Feds, it is completed by our state auditors. Typically during these audits, they pull our federal reports, customer authorizations/payments, administrative invoices, IPEs, etc., and check for fiscal compliance.

This is the first time I have gone through an audit without a single finding!!! And if that’s not impressive, the auditors even said they have only ever seen this a handful of times.

# Program Services Updates

## Business Enterprise Program

We are working with the elected committee on a plan to update the BEP Policy and Procedure manual. We are hoping to complete this in 2024. I meet with committee chair Mike Colbrunn next week to discuss preliminary steps in this process. If you have ideas on revisions/updates, please let me know.

We have been researching the potential of reallocating the BEP technician position to a higher level so any work provided by BEP technicians could be performed by either staff member. We believe this will create more support for staff and provide greater continuity of overall services provided to BEP operators. During our exploration with HR into this possibility, it was determined we would need to create a new position in the BEP. We decided to utilize the open coordinator position to do this. We hope to post this position sometime in April.

We have created a PD for the PT administrative position which would support all things related to BEP bookwork(ledgers, payments, defaults…etc). We believe this will create more support for staff and greater continuity of overall services provided to BEP operators. The position request was submitted and is with HR in the auditing phase. We hope to have it posted in May/June.

We have notified MinnCOR that we will not be able to include language in the upcoming interagency agreement which would require BEP operators to pay a commission. The current agreement expires in September 2024. MinnCOR has indicated this will be challenging, but they believe we will be able to work something out.

We are working with elected committee on reviewing the current BEP training process to determine what is working and what needs to be improved. Elected committee member Alex Lee has volunteered to go through the current BEP training process to provide firsthand feedback on what aspects of this training he finds beneficial and what we should consider changing. If you have ideas on this, please let me know.

We are working with Kia Yang on developing a BEP assessment process as part of the Discovery phase in the BEP training process. In the past, we have used different SSB staff and/or UW Stout staff to conduct BEP assessments. Now that we have more qualified SSB staff to help us with different aspects of the assessment, we would like to tap into their expertise to create and administer a more comprehensive assessment to ensure BEP applicants have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become successful BEP operators. If you have ideas on this, please let me know.

We have submitted requests to DEED legal for feedback which we hope will help us better understand Exclusive Authority and Vending Stand as it relates to BEP statute.

## Senior Services Unit

May 15th is the Senior Possibilities Fair at SSB, which is being held in partnership with the NFB. Staff are currently covering Fergus Falls territories with Lauren out until June 1 on maternity leave. Char, Stacy, Gina, Barb and Amy are helping cover. We were approved to receive some one-time funds of $15,000 from SILC for our Aging Eyes program. We are looking forward to using those funds to provide more aids, devices, and trainings to our partners and their customers.

## Workforce Development Unit

### Data

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| --- | --- |
| Data Set | Count/# |
| Applications Received for Services | **177** |
| Individuals Being Served (**WDU** Open Cases) | **755** |
| Applicants (**WDU** Pending Cases) | **6** |
| Successful Closures | **35** |
| Unsuccessful Closures  | **53** |
| Total Closures- Month (March) | **16** |
| Applications Received- Month (March) | **18** |
| Average Caseload Size per Counselor **WDU** | **38** |

Kathy Enter, our Vocational Rehabilitation Technician in the SW region of Minnesota, officing out of the Mankato SSB office has retired on April 1st. This position is in the process of being backfilled. Eric Van Dam, a new Vocational Rehabilitation Technician will be starting on April 3rd, replacing Jeremy Hoke. Ruth Jamison will be WDU’s newest Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor yet, assigned to the SW Metro region, officing out of the St. Paul office. Her first day is April 16 and she will be replacing Alisha Otteson. The hard work of our VRTs and Counselors are so appreciated as they continue to serve our customers statewide as a smaller team until more colleagues are trained up and join their ranks.

## Pre-ETS

The posting for our Systems and Pathways Navigator position has closed, and Sheila will be working with HR on next steps in the hiring process.

We are hosting our first “Tools for School” event on Friday, April 12 at the University of MN Twin Cities Carlson School of Management. There will be various panels throughout the day, including a student panel where current students or recent graduates will take questions and share insights on their college experience and the technology toolkit they use; a professional panel where professionals who work with BVI students will chat about how they can help students gain technology skills needed for college; and a couple of technology panels dedicated to hardware, software, and mobile apps that college students need to know about. Our Peer Ambassadors will also be there to connect with students and share their experiences.

As summer gets closer, we are updating our resource for students and families about the various summer opportunities.

# Communication Center Updates

## Audio Services

Audio Services is thrilled to announce Molly McGilp is our new Communication Center librarian! Molly earned her Master’s in Library and Information Science from the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, and she brings a wealth of library and information specialist skills from her time with the Hennepin County Library system. Molly is your first point of contact in the custom recording process. Welcome Molly!

We also are currently in the process of recording a 270 page English – Somali Legal Dictionary. Our Workforce Development unit has a client who wishes to become a certified court interpreter. The book features the English word first, then the full interpretation and explanation of the word in Somali. Sometimes the Somali interpretations are more than a page long! Workforce Development hired a native Somali speaker from a local interpreting service, and we record in 2 hour sessions. We recently completed the letter E.

## Braille

[No update provided]

## Engineering/Radio Talking Book

For some time, I have been telling you that an update to the Radio Talking Book smart phone apps was coming out any day. I am happy to report that I am now telling the truth. We have released an update to the RTB apps for iOS and Android. The most notable improvement is the ability to speed up or slow down playback when listening to an archived program or newspaper. To download the apps, search for “Radio Talking Book” without the quotes and look for Minnesota – be careful there are several apps with similar names.

 We are working with HR and are in the process of hiring a replacement Electronics Technician Senior. That job was just recently posted today on our Careers website.

## Development Office

Angela has been partnering with one of our volunteer readers Stevie Ray on an upcoming improv comedy show for individuals who are blind and low vision. Stevie Ray’s Comedy Cabaret will be at the Chanhassen Dinner Theaters at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, May 4, 2024. This will not be the typical production that is audio-transcribed through headsets. The entire show will be designed for the blind, using verbal-only comedy; sighted individuals will also love it!

 FFY2024 Annual Fund (from 10.01.2023 to 3.31.2024) has resulted in just over a total of $116,122 which included 432 gifts from nearly 403 donors.  To date in FFY2024 we have not received any Endowment gifts.  Not included in this total is a $20,00 grant we received today from The Saint Paul and Minnesota Foundation.

As of 3.31.2024, the November Direct Mail Solicitation has resulted in 285 gifts totaling $22,752.

The April 2024 Planned Giving Newsletter will drop in mail boxes mid-April and is being sent to around 3,000 targeted donors.  The content of the newsletter focuses on importance of having a will or trust in place.