Greetings Council,

Happy to be here with you all tonight!

# What’s Happening Nationally

Today, the Senate Appropriations Committee marks up their Fiscal Year 2025 (FY) Labor HHS-Education appropriation legislation. A few national organizations, including CSAVR, have been engaging in Hill visits to protect our statutorily mandated inflationary increase to the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) State grants. At risk are:

**$415 million for the VR State Grants that was rescinded in the House FY 25 Labor HHS-Education Bill.**

**Annual inflationary increase for VR State Grants in the FY 24 cycle and beyond. ($287 million rescission (FY 24) & $415 million rescission (FY 25) was deferred for a grand total of over $700 million out to FY 26).**

**The authority for the Disability Innovation Fund that was eliminated from the House Bill (it was eliminated in FY24 and got put back in, but we want to ensure it gets in the Senate Appropriations Bill).**

This is a clear result of the VR agencies sending back millions of dollars. Congress is sending a message to us loud and clear. Another message was that the most recent DIF grant was open to many different kinds of organizations, not just VR. In a way, this was RSA challenging others to “do it better that VR”. We are at a precipice.

However, there is some good news happening that hopefully will change the course in time:

* RSA has started sharing stories from across the nation in hopes that the great work happening gets congressional attention. We submitted two stories of our own.
* Applications are trending upwards across the country. States that have historically sent back funds are no longer doing so (Ohio for one).

As a Council, you are able to reach out to state and federal lawmakers when I cannot, so I encourage you to consider what actions you may be able to take to influence Congress.

# Inclusive Worksite Training and Certification: HireAbility MN

The Taskforce for Eliminating Subminimum Wages issued recommendations for DEED to create an inclusive worksite training and certification for Minnesota businesses about hiring people with disabilities, creating inclusive workplaces, providing accommodations and universal design best practices.

This training shall expand and build from existing DEED resources like the “Disability inclusion: Bite-sized learning for employers” modules. There will also be consideration given to connecting the certification to the Minnesota Department of Human Rights workforce certificate.

VRS received funds from DHS to begin this work, and they are proposing a program they are calling HireAbility MN. There will be an overview provided at the upcoming Workforce Summit in Duluth.

# DIF Grant Application Update

Submitted on July 5th. 3x3: Three audiences, three objectives, and three tiers of service:

State Services for the Blind (SSB) proposes Evolve Employment, an innovative model to create a 21st Century workforce agency focused on the unique challenges of blind, low vision, and deafblind (BLVDB) individuals who acquire vision loss during their working years, including incumbent workers at risk for or experiencing recent job loss, New Americans, and individuals who have detached from the workforce for more than 27 weeks.

**Objective 1.** Offer a three-tiered portfolio of career services that includes universal, targeted, and intensive approaches for at-risk BLVDB individuals and businesses.

**Objective 2.** Create a Coordinated Team Approach to support individuals with acquired BLVDB in retaining and obtaining employment as part of Tier 2 and 3 services.

**Objective 3.** Enhance community partner and interagency collaboration for serving at-risk BLVDB individuals through specialized training and capacity and skill building.

Tier 1: Universal provides dual-customer outreach and engagement to individuals with BLVDB, establishing business and partner relationships and connecting them to needed services. SSB will design low-intensity mechanisms, such as a hotline, and marketing campaigns. A network of businesses, especially in the CST sector, will be developed to promote resources and support in recruitment, retention, advancement, accommodations, and accessibility.

Tier 2: Targeted retention services for businesses and individuals with BLVDB are achieved through a RCTA. SSB will enhance local capacity with a retention specialist, career navigators, a New American business engagement specialist, a CST sector specialist, and a benefit planning specialist. Existing staff (ELL Specialist and Employment Specialists) will be realigned.

Tier 3: Intensive services are devoted to individuals with BLVDB who are long-term unemployed or New Americans, primarily East African and Somali communities.

# Administrative Updates

## Community Partnerships

Contracts: 2 P/T Master Contract amendments have been recently completed or nearly done. Another amendment is in process and 4 others are slated to be done. 2 new P/T Master contracts are nearing the end of development and the Joint Powers Agreement with the Iowa Department for the Blind’s Structured Discovery Program has been completed/or will be shortly. We are also working on the annual agreement renewal with the Associated Press, looking to develop a Request for Proposals (RFP) for Person Centered Planning training in the WDU, and a (RFP) for an agency to conduct a Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA).

 Monitoring: Community Partner Contract Monitoring will be reinstated beginning in August/September. We have been updating the policy, protocol, and checklists to match changes in contract language. The plan is to start with a comprehensive ATB training facility and a community partner representing a single owner operator and then evaluate our process before rolling out the larger schedule.

##  Outreach

The outreach team continues to be busy spreading the word of SSB services throughout the state. Some outreach initiatives and plans we’re working on include:

* Collaborating on a Communication Center marketing ad for statewide radio broadcasts
* Meeting with eye clinic doctors, techs, and staff across the state
* Working on outreach to immigrant and underserved populations with SSB’s new ELL Specialist, Abbi Mayland.
* Continuing Communication Center outreach focusing on audio book access for a variety of physical and print-related disabilities.
* Strategizing a plan for RTB outreach
* Gathering ‘Stories of Impact’ to share SSB’s impact and customers’ successes
* Representing SSB with vendor booths at health fairs and conferences
* Presenting to senior centers
* Submitting proposals to speak at conferences
* Collaborating with DEED VR and other state agency’s outreach staff to expand our audience
* Working with the Community Partners team on their outreach and communication efforts
* Continuing progress on SSB website refresh
* Assisting with the SSB all-staff workshop and volunteer recognition dinner planning and presentations
* Sending out Bi-Weekly Bits newsletter to SSB council and staff
* Sending out monthly editions of The SSB Messenger newsletter to customers, stakeholders, council, & staff

# Upcoming Events include:

* State Fair
* Workforce Summit in Duluth
* NDEAM- Theme is Good Jobs
* White Cane Day
* NCSRC/NCSAB/CSAVR

## Facilities

Security updates have been completed. We have added additional cameras and door entry badge readers to the WDU/SSU areas.

Cafeteria remodel is underway starting August 5th. This project should take 3 to 4 weeks to complete.

After the cafeteria is complete. We will move forward with the WDU redesign. Natasha has a vision for how we can utilize the current space better. So, we are looking forward to getting that started.

Also, a small team of VRS staff are officially moving into the ASU area in November. We look forward to having them here @SSB.

## Fiscal

We are close to wrapping up this most recent state fiscal year, and we have finalized the budget for 2025. While we still have a few months left of the federal fiscal year, we are in great shape. For the VR program, we exceeded our 15% Pre-ETS reserve for FFY2023 (we have two years to do so) and are close to meeting it for 2024 already. We met our state matching requirements, and we will not be sending one dime back. We came in about 15% underbudget, which leaves some breathing room going into this coming fiscal year. Last year, we invested over a million dollars of program income from Social Security into our Senior Services Unit, and we hope to continue doing so each year. We have enough funds to sustain our current set up into this next year; however, we will not be adding any new staff not already accounted for.

# Program Services Updates

## Business Enterprise Program

The BEP has hired a PT bookkeeper, Jane Kelly. Jane comes to the BEP with a degree in accounting and several years working in accounting and administrative positions. Jane will primarily handle most of the accounting activity required in the BEP and provide back-up support to Kara Martin. Jane started on July 31st. BEP technician Keith Severson has accepted the position of BEP technical service coordinator. The BEP created this new position so any/all technical service provided by the BEP could be assigned to both technicians. Keith’s first day in his new role is August 14th.

The BEP is working with MinnCOR Industries on a new interagency agreement. This agreement outlines vending service requirements at the prisons where BEP operators provide the vending. The current agreement expires in September.

We have finalized interagency agreements with St. Paul College and St. Cloud State University. Commissions were eliminated from these agreements which is a big win for the program and the BEP operators at these locations. This agreement will serve as the template when negotiating new agreements at all Minnesota State locations. This change will save some BEP operators thousands of dollars each year.

The BEP is working with SSB staff to develop a comprehensive BEP assessment. Individuals interested in the BEP as a career will go through this assessment to ensure a thorough understanding of what is required to be a successful BEP operator and to identify specific training opportunities which would best benefit the individual as they work towards their goal to become a BEP operator.

The BEP finalized its annual fringe benefit policy. The new policy provides BEP operators with a annual reimbursement of $3,400 which can be used for medical expenses or retirement investments. The BEP also is working with the elected committee of blind vendors on a potential $4,000 vacation payout for each BEP operator.

We are working with our Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) partners to determine how best to provide initial stocks and supplies support to BEP operators. RSA released a technical assistance circular which raised questions about the process the BEP currently utilizes. Consistent with our mission to ensure all our activities comply with RSA guidelines, we wanted to research this issue further and will make any necessary revisions to our process, if required. RSA has reviewed the process and will hopefully provide their guidance soon.

The BEP is researching a potential vending and food service opportunity at Camp Ripley in Little Falls, MN.

## Senior Services Unit

3,467 to date with just shy of two months to go in our FFY24 reporting period, that number does not include the 58 people who are under 55 that we have also served

Working on a marketing strategy for NE Minnesota as referrals in that region have not been where they should be

The Unit will meet for a day-long meeting/training day at The Braille and Talking Book Library in September.

The Mayo partnership is in limbo. Two of the low vision doctors left this year and the one remaining, Dr Softing is retiring in September. There is some talk that Mayo may abandon their low vision optometry practice.

## Workforce Development Unit

Some WDU supervisors are being included in a Hay review to determine if they are in the appropriate classification and compensated accordingly. This DEED wide manager review is being conducted by MMB. It includes a job analysis that looks at the work performed, not the program content. This is part of a larger MMB effort to reduce the number of manager and supervisor classifications across DEED.

Jocelyn Rousey is a the new lnnovation Lab lead working on the referral and intake aspect of Evolve VR. We look forward to this helping to ramp up the pace of this work.

### Data

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Data Set | PY2023 | PY2024 |
| Applications Received for Services | 270 | 10 |
| Individuals Being Served (**WDU** Open Cases) | 931 | 784 |
| Applicants (**WDU** Pending Cases) |  | 7 |
| Successful Closures | 59 | 5 |
| Unsuccessful Closures  | 97 | 8 |
| Total Closures | 156 | 13 |
| Average Caseload Size per Counselor **WDU** |  | 52 |

## General Updates

* After working with the State of MN for over 40 years, our Pre-ETS VR Tech Debbie Sengbusch will retire on Oct. 5. Congratulations to Debbie who has been a steady and caring member of our team!
* WDU is thrilled to announce that on August 28, Zujeith “Luna” Lewis will be our Mankato VRT.

*Employment & Training Team*

* Abigail (Abbi) Mayland, our new ELL Specialist, will be finishing up her ATB training this week.
* *Pharmacy Training:* VRS and SSB partnered with CVS and Thryv Consulting the end of last year to develop a Pharmacy Technician Training program in the State of MN. CVS came to VRS/SSB and said that there was a huge need for Pharm Techs in MN. CVS pulled Thryv in since they have worked with VR agencies in other states to provide training for over 10 years. Thryv worked with the MN Board of Pharmacy to make sure all requirements were met for the training program. Dacia and I screened individuals for the 3 day a week 6 week program. The first class started in May. We had 9 individuals start (6 VRS and 3 SSB) and 9 finish! So far, 4 people have been offered employment as a Pharm Tech with CVS and a couple others are in the works. Positions can be part or full time and starts around $16.00 an hour. We are also working on making relationships with Walgreens, Coborn’s, Wal-Mart and other pharmacies to other more employment opportunities. We hope to offer more classes in the future.

*ERAF*

* Morgan Barrett, ERAF’s new Account Tech started on July 31st
* This quarter, the ERAF program has experienced an unprecedented surge in applications and reimbursements, marking a significant milestone in our efforts to support businesses. The total reimbursements for the final quarter amounted to $325,391.91 across 37 approved applications, contributing to an overall reimbursement total of $426,024.64 with 71 approved applications for the fiscal year. This remarkable growth highlights how the word about ERAF is spreading, and more businesses are recognizing the benefits of our program. During FY24, we observed a consistent upward trajectory in ERAF reimbursements, with each quarter showing substantial improvements.

## Pre-ETS

* Students are busy with activities this summer! In addition to programs mentioned in previous reports:
	+ Peer Ambassadors held their first in-person picnic on July 19, and 10 students came to the event!
	+ We are excited about our upcoming camping event with Wilderness Inquiry and Duluth Center for Vital Living Aug. 13-15 in the boundary waters!
* Our latest podcast with Blind Abilities features 4 students discussing their summer internships. You can find that podcast at <https://blindabilities.com/?p=8320>
* Our Pre-ETS staff will gather on Aug. 6 in St. Could for our annual retreat. We will hear from a cultural liaison from PACER to learn about additional ways to engage Somali students and families, participate in a World Cafe activity through DEED’s Innovation Lab, hear from young people about their journeys, and take time to connect with each other in person
* We have posted the position of Pre-ETS VR Tech and our outreach staff has sent the job announcement out to our lists. This position closes on August 5.
* SSB will be hosting a Career Expo in October to connect students with working adults. Please look for announcements for volunteers to help with this event. We’re looking for adults who are blind, DeafBlind, or low vision to talk with students about how they do their jobs. When we’ve done this in the past, it’s been successful because of our SRC-B and advocacy organizations who are willing to share their experiences. Shane DeSantis is coordinating this event, so please reach out to him if you are interested in helping.

# Communication Center Updates

## Audio Services

Audio Services is excited to introduce two new members:

Our new Audio Services Librarian is Molly McGilp. Molly started with us in February and has quickly picked up on our daily processes and procedures. She comes to us from the Hennepin County Library system and has already made some very valuable contributions! Interestingly, Molly also has experience working as a forester with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Our new Audio Quality Control Coordinator is Kris Tomes. Kris started with us in July and has already jump-started our e-text program. She comes to us with solid experience in the world of book publishing and e-publishing, most recently with Lerner Publishing in Minneapolis. Kris is a graduate of Bemidji State University, so any BSU alums be sure to reach out!

Molly and Kris are located in the Communication Center. Make sure to stop by and say hello, and Warmest Welcome Molly and Kris to the Audio Services team!

## Braille

Braille Services Provided to Minnesota Students

Kindergarten through Grade 12

From 07/01/24 To 07/31/24

* Number of students served: 24
* Number of braille titles purchased from other states:  **103**
* Number of braille titles newly transcribed by CC:  **0**
* Number of braille titles reproduced and reused by CC:  **0**
* Total number of braille titles provided: 103
* Number braille pages purchased from other states**: 80,664**
* Number of braille pages newly transcribed by CC:  **0**
* Number of braille pages reproduced and reused by CC:  **0**
* Total braille pages provided to Minnesota students: 80,664

## Engineering/Radio Talking Book

Engineering has a new Electronics Technician Senior, Isaac Hanninen. He is running the equipment for this meeting. He comes with years of experience.

The work of moving the Braille Unit to new management software continues to move forward. We hope to go live in the fall or early winter of this year. We are putting things in order to move Audio Services and the RTB into the same management software, starting later this year. We will also be writing new DAISY book recording software and middleware to hook it all together.

Intermittent broadcaster Hope Boos has had to resign due to a move. We will be posting the position soon.