Greetings Council,

Happy June! I am so excited that we have almost every single seat filled for our Council. I am looking forward to this next year as we work together to get things done.

DIF Grant Application

The U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) issued a notice inviting applications for the FFY24 [Disability Innovation Fund- Creating a 21st Century Workforce of Youth and Adults With Disabilities Through the Transformation of Education, Career, and Competitive Integrated Employment Model Demonstration Project.](https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/04/09/2024-07502/applications-for-new-awards-disability-innovation-fund-creating-a-21st-century-workforce-of-youth) SSB in coordination with the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston and Lanterna Consulting, is applying for this grant. RSA estimates grant awards may range from $8-$10 million and are for a five-year duration.

SSB proposes Evolve: Employment, an innovative model that creates a 21st Century competitive integrated employment (CIE) workforce agency for blind, low vision, and deafblind individuals. This project will advance CIE outcomes for blind, low vision, and deafblind individuals who are most at risk for underemployment or unemployment, and it will include an emphasis on individuals who acquire a vision loss later in life and New Americans.

Evolve: Employment will combine and test a multi-faceted dual-customer business engagement model that includes:

* Expanding and refining the internal organizational structure and service delivery approach of SSB’s Employment and Training team that align with person- and business-centered 21st century career services.
* Increasing service provider skills, experience, and capacity for providing career services to blind, low vision, and deafblind individuals that align with the Good Jobs Now principles and Drive for Five sector partnerships.
* Launching a business-focused outreach campaign that changes the perceptions and stigmas of vision loss, while offering resources and support in the areas of recruitment, retention, advancement, accommodations, and accessibility.
* Incorporating advanced technology and training that supports individuals in obtaining occupations in demand, as well as supports businesses in hiring and retaining those individuals.

Improving and expanding partnerships with those stakeholders that are vested in and committed to competitive integrated employment of people with disabilities, especially and including those with vision loss.

New English Language Learner Specialist

SSB has an accepted offer for an ELL specialist; however, we are unable to announce until the final HR paperwork is complete. This position establishes programs and services that support the vocational success of English Language Learners (ELL). This involves complex, highly responsible professional work in a specialized field with individuals who are blind, low vision, and DeafBlind in State Services for the Blind’s (SSB) Workforce Development Unit (WDU).

This position will be responsible for leading the English language instruction to adult customers who require these services to successfully complete their Individualized Plan for Employment and career goals. Through a collaborative and coordinated approach, the incumbent will develop and adapt curriculum, provide consultation and English instruction using accessible teaching techniques to support their language skill development and ability to achieve their goals for competitive, integrated employment, independent living, and community integration.

LUNA Testing at SSB

MOHX-Games out of Eau Claire, WI, has proposed testing a new piece of technology they created call LUNA Vision at SSB this summer (at no cost).

LUNA is a cutting-edge app designed especially for people who are blind or visually impaired, transforming the way they interact with their surroundings. It is designed to see the world for you, constructing a real time map that it then translates to 3D audio tones and auditory cues for guidance and assistance. It is important to note that it is meant to be used as an additional tool used in conjunction with the white cane, and it is not meant to replace it or negate the need for O&M skills.

It is able to detect over 80 unique objects natively and has a nearly unlimited ability when internet is enabled. It also is able to speak in 57 different languages. LUNA assigns tones to objects, persons and animals in your environment allowing you to visualize their size, distance and direction. You can tell LUNA to highlight specific objects, persons or animals to help guide you to them, as well as scan them to determine size. Our system lets you "see" with your ears. It builds maps as you move, remembering where objects, structures and furniture are so you can easily navigate the area later. In locations mapped with IMMERSAL everything is already set for you. Ask LUNA anything about the location and let it navigate you to wherever you need to go. Our 3D spatial audio will help you identify and avoid walls, objects and other persons, as well as warn you of obstacles such as stairs, curbs and more. The onboard AI can read anything from signs, websites or books. All you have to do is say "Hey LUNA, could you read this for me"?

MOHX would like to first implement this technology into the SSB building and get feedback from staff as well as visitors. After refinement they would like to try this in additional buildings. The end goal is to have a robust system to help those with vision loss to get information and navigate safely and along the best routes inside supported locations.

The test system will use our technologies to locate the user through the use of the camera on their cellphone. The system will have a map of the location as well as any information that may be helpful (FAQs and things that someone may ask employees). This can serve as am agency representative to handle some basic tasks and guide users to the right staff to take care of their needs. Once a user opens the app, they will be asked to point the camera of their phone to the front of them. Once their location is known, they can ask any questions and request navigation to locations such as offices, common areas or restrooms. The system will guide them by creating a path and placing tones along this path. The user can hear the tone through 3D spatial audio and turn to face the tone, then walk to the tone. Once the user gets to the first tone an audio effect plays and another tone along the path becomes audible. They will continue walking to these points until they arrive at their destination. The system will also be able to read signs and describe what they would be seeing if requested. The system will also recognize and place unique tones on objects, walls and people, allowing them to walk to these or avoid them.

This will be a stand-alone app for testing and can be used by anyone entering a building. Our main app, which I had covered in the overview in the last email, has many more functions and automatically integrates with any location that is scanned.

# Evolve: VR Updates

Jon and the WDU counselor supervisors meet with the Innovation Lab team to review progress and next steps for collecting data from a sample of customers regarding their intake experiences and planning listening sessions with counselors as we continue to explore how best to manage the referral, intake, and orientation process.

# Administrative Updates

## Community Partnerships

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

* Our new Community Partner newsletter titled the *“Partner Post”* debuted April 15th and May’s version went out on the 7th.
* Work has begun on the Community Partner’s webpage redesign.
* Work has begun on updating and restarting the Contract Monitoring process.
* The next Community Partners and SSB Staff Forum is Tuesday, July 9th from 10 AM to Noon. You can now register for upcoming Forums on the SSB website under the Forums tab on the Information for Our Contracted Community Partners page. Materials from previous Forums will also be available here. If you would like a direct link sent to you, please email Susan Kusz or Jennifer Beilke.

Updates on Contracts:

* We continue working towards improvements and reposting the RFP for our Master P/T Contract of ATB and Employment Related Services. The focus is on streamlining the process, reducing barriers, and ensuring accessibility.
* There are 3 contracts in negotiations
* There are 4 contract amendments in progress
* There are another 3 requested contract amendments
* The Equity Select Contract with Jeff Thompson for Pre-ETS podcasting has been completed and the Enterprise Accessibility Master Contract with EdChunk to provide the transcripts of the podcasts is nearing execution.
* For the Structured Discovery Centers (SDC) of Louisiana Center for the Blind and Colorado Center for the Blind, which are not run by their state or state VR programs, we are now able to use them.
* We continue working on Joint Powers Agreements with the South Dakota Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and the Iowa Department for the Blind.

## Outreach

The Outreach Team has been busy since the last council meeting. We had vendor booths at the Charting the C’s conference in Alexandria, at the Celebrate Aging Expo in Detroit Lakes, and a Community Health Fair in St. Cloud. We’re currently working on several outreach initiatives:

* Connecting with eye care professionals across the state to inform them of SSB services for their patients.
* Continuing work on the SSB website refresh.
* Boosting visibility of the Communication Center audio offerings to organizations that provide services for people with print-related disabilities.
* Working to expand outreach to the arrowhead (Northeastern Minnesota) and rural Minnesota communities with a media campaign.
* Collecting ‘Stories of Impact’ from SSB customers – conducting interviews and writing narratives.
* Collaborating with the Olmstead Implementation Office and the MN DNR to assist with their accessibility initiatives.
* Sending out The SSB Messenger monthly newsletter.
* Coordinating with DEED’s outreach team and DEED VR to boost our outreach efforts.

## Facilities

## Fiscal

The fiscal team has been diligently working on multiple tasks as we approach the end of the sate fiscal year and prepare for the new one.

* Purchase requests: the team has been busy reviewing and approving hundreds of purchase requests for the new state fiscal year. Ensuring the correct accounting structure and codes are being use.
* Budget preparation: we are working on setting the budgets for the new fiscal year. This includes analyzing historical data, forecasting expenses and reviewing our grants and state appropriations.
* Year-end cleanup: as part of the year end process the fiscal team is reviewing expenditures and open encumbrances. This is to ensure the correct projects are being use, clean any mismatches and stay within budget.

# Program Services Updates

## Business Enterprise Program

We have posted a PT administrative position and a FT technician position. As part of our evolve BEP initiative, these positions will create greater continuity of service for BEP operators and stakeholders. We hope to have both positions hired by the end of July.

We continue to work with the elected committee of blind vendors on a plan to update the BEP Policy and Procedure manual. We are hoping to complete this in 2024. Committee Chair Mike Colbrunn and I meet this week to discuss next steps in this process.

We have finalized an interagency agreement template with Minnesota State Colleges and Universities. BEP operators have long paid commissions to Minnesota State locations as part of past agreements. I am excited to say the commission requirement was eliminated as part of our negotiations. This will save some BEP operators thousands of dollars each year.

We have notified MinnCOR Industries that we will not be able to include language in the upcoming interagency agreement which would require BEP operators to pay a commission. MinnCOR is the department we work with related to our BEP vending businesses at state prisons. The current agreement expires in September 2024. MinnCOR has indicated this change will be challenging, but we are hopeful we will be able to work something out as we did with Minnesota State.

We continue to work with our elected committee on reviewing the current BEP training process. SSB staff, who assist the BEP in its initial assessment with individuals interested in the BEP as a career, will be visiting Mike Colbrunn’s business in Mankato later this month to learn more about what a BEP operator does. We are hoping to utilize this information to revise how we assess potential BEP applicants and how we can better provide training to BEP students.

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 recently 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.

## Senior Services Unit

Summer is the busiest time of the year for SSU. Those snowbirds are back and more seniors are willing to get into their training while the weather is nice. As usual, Olmstead County continues to be very busy as is Dakota County.

We have a few folks out on medical leave. Amy McClellan from Duluth is recovering from surgery and will be back at work in a few weeks. Lauren Eliason is enjoying her last week of parental leave this week. She has been enjoying her time with baby Millie. Angela Christle in Rochester will be out indefinitely. She has experienced additional vision loss and has some work to do to gain the skills she needs to return to work. In the meantime, Brent Benson of WDU is helping us cover SE Minnesota.

The recent Possibilities Fair was a big success. We had about 30 attendees who heard from our distinguished speaker who is the NFB of Texas President. We had information booths as well which participants visited and collected valuable information. We had a lot of NFB of MN volunteers and a few of us SSBers were there as well. We owe a big thank you to Judy Sanders who along with Ed Lecher organized the event. What a great partnership! Thanks also to Rob Hobson, Michell Gip, Charlene Guggisberg, Barb Klein and Jeff Behl. Catherine Durivage from the Library was also there.

## Workforce Development Unit

### Data

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| --- | --- |
| Data Set | Count/# |
| Applications Received for Services | **243** |
| Individuals Being Served (**WDU** Open Cases) | **775** |
| Applicants (**WDU** Pending Cases) | **6** |
| Successful Closures | **55** |
| Unsuccessful Closures  | **87** |
| Total Closures- Month (May) | **12** |
| Applications Received- Month (May) | **25** |
| Average Caseload Size per Counselor **WDU** | **54** |

*Staffing*

ERAF: This quarter we have 23 approved applicants (35 total), with a total of $189,535.26 in approved funding thus far. For the year, 57 approved (84 applicants total), total of $285,167.99 approved. Accounting Technician has been posted internal.

WDU is re-posting for a counselor position as a recent hire chose to separate from SSB. We are considering posting for two positions as this would add capacity to the unit. Our case numbers have been climbing this past year and we are nearing 800 customers.

We have been monitoring successful closures on the Program Year (July through June) now. We hope to have at least 60 by the end of the month.

A high point is that we have three customers graduating from a Pharmacy Training program whose accomplishment will be celebrated at SSB in the next week. This is a vocational area where we have not seen a lot of interest so we are very excited about this.

## Pre-ETS

* Jada Johnson started on June 5 as our Multiple Systems and Pathways Navigator. She will be working with students with multiple can complex disabilities and their families. She will be partnering with counselors, IEP teams, and county service providers to help find work experiences and community resources as students move from school to their next chapter.
* Our peer ambassadors were featured in a Blind Abilities podcast where they shared upcoming opportunities for students. <https://blindabilities.com/?p=8267>
* Our Transition Coordinator, Shane DeSantis, gave the commencement address at Minnesota State Academy for the Blind on May 31.
* Our student numbers continue to climb with the latest count (as of June 4) at 207.
* Students in the Summer Transition Program come to SSB on June 24 for mock interviews, career exploration, and learning about our Communication Center.
* We are partnering with Wilderness Inquiry and Duluth Center for Vital Living to offer a two-night camping experience Aug. 13-15.

# Communication Center Updates

## Audio Services

Audio Services has chosen a finalist for the Audio Quality Coordinator position. We are working with DEED Human Resources on making an offer. The position evaluates and coaches all of the Communication Center’s volunteer readers and ensures our quality meets National Library Service standards.

Roberta Kitlinski has decided to retire from SSB and enjoy “non-work” life. We will miss her dearly and we wish her all the best! A personnel transaction request to find her successor has been opened with DEED Human Resources. Roberta’s last day with us is June 21st.

## Braille

Braille Services Provided to Minnesota Students

Kindergarten through Grade 12

From 07/01/23 To 06/06/24

* **Number of students served: 40**

* Number of braille titles purchased from other states:  **73**
* Number of braille titles newly transcribed by CC: **201**
* Number of braille titles reproduced and reused by CC:  **159**
* **Total number of braille titles provided: 433**
*

Number braille pages purchased from other states**: 106,068**

* Number of braille pages newly transcribed by CC: **11,964**
* Number of braille pages reproduced and reused by CC:  **74,690**
* **Total braille pages provided to Minnesota students: 192,722**

## Engineering/Radio Talking Book

The Engineering Unit has hired Isaac Hanninen as our new Electronics Technician Senior. He comes with loads of experience, including with some of the new equipment we are using in our conference rooms. He starts work on Thursday June 20.

As you may recall we conducted a RFP, request for proposal, to replace our DAISY recording software, and other components we use in the Conmmunication Center. We were not completely happy with the results, so we have been working with MN.IT on alternatives. They created a prototype recording program, as a proof of concept, and we have decided to have them develop the software we will need. We are currently finishing up moving the Braille Unit to KLAS, and plan on going live this fall. We will start writing specs and developing software for Audio Services and the RTB after July 1.

## Development Office

-The Annual Fund – as of 5.14.24 in FFY2024, I have raised $135,282 from 457 donors who gave 508 gifts.

-Breakdown of some of the gifts by constituents in FFY2024- 286 from current or past CC Customers, 22 CC current or past Volunteers; 16 Foundations; 17 SSU Customers and 8 Community Orgs

-The Endowment Fund- as of 6.03.24 in FFY2024, a few gifts are in process and hope the check will arrive before the year end of 9.30.24

-I am currently working on the August Planned Giving Newsletter which will focus on Wills as August is National Will Planning month.

-The April Planned Giving Newsletter has resulted as of 5.14.24 in a combined total of 60 gifts for $14,416