

A decorative background pattern consisting of a grid of squares. Each square is divided into two halves by a vertical line. The left half of each square is a light gray semi-circle, and the right half is a dark gray semi-circle. The squares are arranged in a staggered pattern, creating a complex geometric design.

**State Rehabilitation
Council for the Blind**

2024

ANNUAL REPORT

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Letter from the Chair

December 2024

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,

On behalf of the State Rehabilitation Council-Blind (SRC-B), we, Judy Sanders, Chair, and Corbb O'Connor, Immediate Past-Chair, are pleased to present this annual report, highlighting the significant work of our committees. Following this letter, we offer a brief overview of our council along with our mission and vision.

At each of our meetings, Director Jerde provided in-depth updates on SSB's progress in strengthening services. Her letter in this report outlines some of the notable achievements, including a successful outreach campaign promoting the Communication Center's services for individuals with print-related disabilities.

In line with that campaign, we are honored to feature a profile of Steve Jacobson, who has led the council's Communication Center Advisory Committee. Steve's exceptional leadership exemplifies the productive collaboration between consumers and SSB, a cornerstone of the SRC-B's mandate.

The remainder of the report is comprised of reports from our committees. We express our sincere gratitude to all individuals who have generously contributed their time and expertise to these committees and the council as a whole. The vitality of our council is a testament to the invaluable contributions of blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans to our state's prosperity.

Yours Sincerely,

Judy Sanders, Chair
Corbb O'Connor, Immediate Past-Chair

State Rehabilitation Council-Blind: What, Who, and Why

The State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind is a federally mandated group that is appointed by the governor of each state. Its rules are under the jurisdiction of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA.) Our council serves as advisors to Minnesota State Services for the Blind.

When all vacancies are full, we have 17 members. They live throughout the state, and they represent various occupations or are retired. The one thing they have in common is that they have had contact with SSB as a client or they are employed or volunteer by an entity that is a community partner with the agency.

This council meets every other month to review what is happening at SSB and to offer advice regarding current issues that affect customers and staff of the agency. However, the strength of the council comes from its committee structure. Anyone is welcome to apply to the council and seek membership on one or two of the committees. The chair recommends and the council approves committee membership for one-year terms beginning on September 1 and ending on August 31. Through these committees, the council can demonstrate effective advocacy on behalf of blind citizens throughout Minnesota.

Below you will find a brief review of each committee's accomplishments for the past year. Everyone is encouraged to share ideas or comments. Comments can be shared by contacting Nyia Vang, at nyia.vang@state.mn.us.

Learn more about the work of the council by visiting the [SRC-B page](#) of SSB's website.

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.

Letter from SSB Director Natasha Jerde



Dear Governor Walz,

Asking questions, raising concerns, providing a new perspective, or, even, offering encouragement and positive feedback – all of these are part of the work of an engaged advisory council. This year, the State Rehabilitation Council-Blind, whose mission is to guide the work of State Services for the Blind, has been an invaluable partner as we've intensified our efforts to bring the highest quality services to the customers we're here to serve. Our goal is to be a catalyst for success in all its myriad forms, from landing a great job with a good salary, to learning those skills and techniques for staying active, to getting books and materials in accessible formats in order to reach that next academic milestone. This year, the council and its committees have provided valuable critiques and suggestions for the new initiatives we've launched, and have continued to monitor and advise on our goals.

Three significant areas of focus in which the council's guidance has been especially helpful are:

1. Improvements to our 2200 location to better serve customers and support staff.
2. The launch of our newly awarded Disability Innovation Fund grant called Evolve Employment.
3. Promotion of our Communication Center services.

A Better Place to Work, Train, and Serve

In 2024, we implemented our plan to overhaul our St. Paul location. At each step along the way, the council received reports on our progress and offered feedback on our plans.

- Accessible, flexible, and user-friendly AV technologies installed in our conference rooms allows us to conduct hybrid meetings, including council meetings.
- Installation of a fully functional kitchen with laundry facilities means that our daily living skills trainers have a tailored-made space to teach customers the tools and techniques for staying independent.
- New, modular shelving in our Braille section offers capacity to better catalog and distribute the books and materials we produce and purchase.
- A potential re-model of our staffing areas will transform our old "cube farm" into a space that meets the needs of a mobile staff who do their work from home offices, on the road, and in the office.

A Bold Bid to Change the Employment Landscape

These infrastructure improvements support us in our goal of providing higher quality, better targeted, and timely services to our customers. Critical to that goal is our multi-year, multi-pronged initiative to evolve our workforce services. Because of that commitment and our bold roadmap for improving the landscape for employment for blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans, SSB was pleased to be awarded a five-year grant from the Department of Education for a project called "Evolve Employment."

At its October meeting, I outlined the key components, structure, and goals of Evolve Employment to the council. Evolve Employment is designed to provide specialized career services, build retention, address employer misconceptions, prepare customers for jobs in in-demand fields, and support new-American job seekers. The initiative targets unemployment and under-employment of blind, low vision, and DeafBlind

Minnesotans who recently experienced vision loss, have been unemployed for an extended period of time, or are New Americans, especially from the Somali communities in St. Cloud and the Twin Cities.

Members of the council will be invited to serve on the steering committee for the initiative. In addition, a newly formed council task force will review progress and report to the council. Evolve Employment has been designed to take a big swing at significantly advancing employment outcomes for Minnesotans with a vision loss who have been unable to connect with a good job that's right for them. The goal is to serve 800 individuals and 500 businesses in the next five years. I invite readers to learn more about [Evolve Employment](#) on our website.

State Services for the Blind is also the proud hosting agency of a pilot program called the Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund (ERAF). This program creates a central fund where small to mid-sized Minnesota employers can request reimbursement for expenses related to providing reasonable accommodations for job applicants and employees with disabilities. The ERAF's purpose is to encourage employment of people with disabilities by reducing any perceived or real financial barriers. ERAF was recognized by the National Governor's Association as a model disability employment policy and have encouraged other states to consider implementing something similar. Since its inception, we have provided almost \$700,000 in accommodation reimbursements, ranging from accessible espresso machines at a coffee shop to ergonomic workstations at a digital accessibility firm. You can learn more at our [Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund](#) website.

Reading within Reach

The founders of our Communication Center understood that having access to textbooks, newspapers, and other print materials is a critical building block to success in school, on the job, or in the community. Those pioneers were determined to remove barriers for Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, and low vision. 75 years on, we now understand more fully how motor and neurological disabilities can also be barriers to accessing print, and our services can make a big difference for these Minnesotans too. Over the summer, I introduced the council to our [radio ad campaign](#) which ran on more than 900 stations across Greater MN, promoting our Communication Center services for any Minnesotan with a print disability.

This campaign was part of a larger strategy to ensure that all those who can benefit from our services know that they are there. These efforts yielded a 10% increase in BARD applications over last year. The council marked our progress and reviewed our work through the Communication Center Advisory Committee.

A Strong, Simple Value Proposition

In the world of marketing, a "value proposition" is a concise statement that makes a compelling case for choosing a product or service. This past year, I shared with the council my own value proposition for SSB. Our goal is to make sure that people know the difference we can make, and that getting connected to our services is timely and positive. As we have embarked on an ambitious plan to more fully make good on this value proposition, I want to thank the members of the council for their ideas, their critiques, and most of all, their commitment to making Minnesota a great state for blind, DeafBlind, low vision, and print disabled citizens.

Respectfully Yours,
Natasha Jerde, Director, State Services for the Blind

Steve Jacobson, a Champion for Full Accessibility

“When I first attended State Rehabilitation Council-Blind meetings and subsequently joined the council,” Steve Jacobson recalls, “I realized my knowledge and interests closely dovetailed with the Communication Center’s mission. That’s why I joined the Advisory Committee.”

Indeed, the Communication Center is fortunate to have Steve’s exceptional skills, wise guidance, and consummate leadership on the advisory committee, where he now serves as chair. His rich background, keen interests, and unwavering commitment to excellence have significantly contributed to the committee’s success and advanced the Communication Center’s mission. Regarding his service, Steve says, “We have a responsibility to use what talents we have to repay those blind people who have cleared the way before us and to make things better for blind people who come after.”

A Minnesota native, Steve graduated from the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind (formerly the Minnesota Braille and Sight Saving School) and Augsburg College (now University). He enjoyed a long career as a programmer at 3M and continues to consult for them in retirement. Steve and his wife Nadine raised two daughters, who are now accomplished professionals.

Since the early 1970s, Steve has been actively involved with the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota, holding several leadership positions within that organization. In his leisure time, Steve is an audiophile who maintains reel-to-reel tape recorders to transcribe old radio programs and music.

Reflecting on their journey, Steve and Nadine can trace the important role the Communication Center has played in providing accessible formats. Their experiences highlight the breadth and depth of the Communication Center’s services:

- **Education:** Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, Steve relied on volunteers coordinated by the Communication Center to transcribe textbooks into braille. Today, the Communication Center’s braille section, supported by dedicated volunteers, produces most K-12 braille textbooks in the state.
- **Higher Education:** As a college student, Steve was responsible for securing accessible textbooks in braille or audio as he pursued a degree in mathematics. This experience honed his advocacy skills, which he later applied throughout his career. “You had to be clear about your needs and coordinate every aspect of acquiring materials on time,” he recalls. “While circumstances have changed, students can still benefit from developing these self-advocacy skills, which are essential in the workplace.”
- **News and Information:** Steve remembers the transformative impact of the Radio Talking Book network, which provided access to newspapers, current books, and magazines. “Listening to the daily news was a novelty and a valuable tool for a student like me,” he says. “The uncensored nature of the broadcasts ensured true equal access.”
- **Career:** Throughout his career, Steve relied on the Communication Center to transcribe programming language manuals and other materials into audio or braille, depending on his specific needs.
- **Personal Pursuits:** Nadine, a competitive Scrabble player, benefited from the Communication Center’s braille transcription of the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary.



- **Leisure Reading:** The Communication Center has recorded numerous books, including “Degrees of Freedom: The Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1865-1912” by William Green, which Steve enjoyed last year.

Drawing on his experiences as a Communication Center patron, Steve has significantly shaped the work of the Advisory Committee. He played an important role in promoting the transition from analog to digital recording formats, educating consumers about the changes. He also contributed to testing apps to enhance the Radio Talking Book user experience. Moreover, the committee has closely followed advancements in 3D printing and its potential applications for tactile graphics and braille production.

Throughout his decades of service to SSB and the Communication Center, Steve has been a tireless advocate for full and equal access to information. He is, as well, a true champion of braille. “Electronic braille has modernized braille and expanded options for students,” he explains. “However, hard copy braille remains essential. We must continue to educate parents and others about the benefits of braille for student success.”

In 2024, SSB launched a campaign to raise awareness of the Communication Center’s services. Through radio ads, presentations, and outreach to educators, librarians, and other stakeholders, the campaign highlighted the Communication Center as a valuable resource for all Minnesotans with print disabilities. The SRC-B has closely monitored the campaign’s progress, and the Communication Center Advisory Committee has provided steadfast support, guidance, and advocacy to strengthen access in Minnesota. Under Steve’s leadership, the committee has ensured that more Minnesotans can access print in the formats that best suit their needs.



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 2024

Committee members were Steve Jacobson, Chair; Catherine Durivage, Diane Dohnalik, Ryan Strunk, Lynn Johnson, Tom Heinl, Frank Eller, Rocky Hart, and Catalina Martinez for the first part of the year.

The work of this committee is made much more effective 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 presentations from all sections at each meeting, the staff prepares and distributes 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. We appreciate the staff effort to produce these reports for us.

This committee held four virtual meetings during the 2023-2024 term. In an effort to understand the services provided by the Communication Center and make recommendations, the following topics were covered in depth at each meeting:

- 11/29/2023 – Get an overview of the services provided by each section of the Communication Center, and its structure to assist in the orientation of new committee members and to update other members. Also, create a list of topics for future meetings.
- 01/17/2024 – Learn about and explore the future of the Radio Talking Book Network which provides local reading material and newspapers. This service has evolved greatly over the past few years from a radio-based service to one that uses several modern technologies such as smart speakers and smart phone apps. Dave Andrews outlined the development process and also asked for input from the committee on new features that could enhance service.
- 3/26/2024 – We learned about the processes of selecting books by the Braille, audio, and Radio Talking Book sections of the Communication Center as well as by the Minnesota Braille and Talking Book library.
- 6/24/2024 – Dave Andrews described and demonstrated NFB Newslines, which is a national service that makes newspapers and magazines available using synthesized speech and other display methods. The Communication Center administers this service in Minnesota. It has evolved from a dial-in service into a service that can be accessed using a number of modern technologies.

The Communication Center provides significant services to blind Minnesotans of all ages. In particular, through its contract with the Minnesota Department of Education, it plays an important role in the education of blind children through the provision of braille textbooks and other educational materials. Additionally, blind and print-disabled adults can access local newspapers and read books by local authors because of the services of the Communication Center. This committee hopes to play a positive role in the provision of these services.

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.

Respectfully Submitted,

Judy Sanders, Chair

Who are SSB's Community Partners?

For purposes of this committee, the community partners are those who contract with SSB to provide instruction to any client of SSB.

Everyone who completes their training or who leaves a program before they finish is asked to fill out a survey evaluating the lessons. The survey is voluntary and is administered by an outside provider.

During the past year, this committee has been discussing how we might increase the number of people who fill out the survey. It is important for us to know if the instruction they are receiving makes a positive difference in their lives.

Our committee submitted a letter to the SRC-B with recommendations that we suggested be shared with SSB for action.

In the coming year, we hope that there can be further discussion about how to increase the value of this survey.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND GOALS AND PRIORITIES COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Charge

This committee exists to facilitate the SRC-B's partnership with SSB in carrying out specific duties contained in federal regulations for the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. These duties include:

1. Conduct a review and an analysis of the effectiveness of and consumer satisfaction with:
 - the functions of the Department of Employment and Economic Development;
 - the 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	PY2020	PY2021	PY2022	PY2023
Quarter 2 Employment Rate After Exit	37%	36%	39%	54%
Quarter 2 Median Wage After Exit	\$4,872	\$7,348	\$7,326	\$6,424
Quarter 4 Employment Rate After Exit	37%	35%	35%	48%
Credential Attainment			34%	37%
Measurable Skill Gain (MSG) Rate	25%	34%	41%	54%

The Performance Accountability Measures represent SSB separately from general VR.

Part II Customer Satisfaction Survey Review

The customer satisfaction survey for PY2023, conducted near the end of the program year, covers customers served during the period from January through June 2024. Full results will soon be available on the DEED web site.

The Committee reviewed the CSS results for PY2023.

SSB Customer Satisfaction Survey

PY2023 Summary Results

Summary	PY2020	PY2021	PY2022	PY2023
Q1: Satisfied with time it took to receive an answer	83%	84%	90%	83%
Q2: Satisfied that counselor (staff) understood customer's needs	77%	83%	90%	87%
Q3: Satisfied that customer given enough info to make good choices on employment plan	75%	75%	84%	79%
Q4: Satisfied that customer had an active role in decisions about services	84%	87%	90%	86%
Q5 Satisfied that services helped plan for/maintain employment	72%	73%	80%	77%
Q11: Overall satisfaction with services provided	76%	80%	87%	81%
Q12: Extent to which services have met expectations	71%	69%	79%	86%
Q13: Comparison with "ideal" set of services	72%	68%	77%	72%

SSB's results on the Customer Satisfaction Survey are also computed by the Minnesota Department of Economic Development utilizing the Minnesota Customer Satisfaction Index (MnCSI). Simply put, this index summarizes overall satisfaction with services by applying a formula to the responses for Questions 11, 12, and 13 on the survey. Using the MnCSI makes it possible to compare the customer satisfaction ratings of SSB with those of other agencies in Minnesota and with industry in general.

Customers Served	PY20	PY2021	PY2022	PY2023
Average MnCSI Scores	68.9	72.0	78.2	74.7
N size	144	150	154	122

Q6 *Have you received any Assistive Technology from State Services for the Blind? This could be hardware or software.*

Responses	PY2020	PY2021	PY2022	PY2023
Yes	64%	58%	56%	60%
No	30%	35%	30%	35%
Don't know / Unsure	5%	7%	14%	5%
N Size	174	179	185	141

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	PY2020	PY2021	PY2022	PY2023
Very prepared	50%	55%	54%	45%
Somewhat prepared	35%	31%	32%	39%
Not very well prepared	8%	8%	8%	8%
Not at all prepared	6%	4%	4%	5%
Don't know/Refused	2%	2%	2%	2%
N Size	109		101	84

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	PY2020	PY2021	PY2022	PY2023
Very useful	69%	76%	81%	73%
Somewhat useful	26%	16%	14%	23%
Not very useful	1%	0%	0%	0%
Not at all useful	3%	2%	2%	2%
Don't know/Refused	2%	6%	6%	6%
N Size		102	101	101

Additionally, the committee reviewed results from the three questions added to the survey in 2020 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.

Responses	PY2020	PY2021	PY2022	PY2023
In person meeting	10%	7%	10%	16%
Phone call	44%	45%	40%	35%
Email	29%	30%	30%	35%
Online meeting (e.g. Zoom, WebEx, Skype platforms)	17%	18%	21%	15%
N Size	163	174	177	135

Q8b How satisfied are you with the non-traditional method you used with SSB to receive your services?

Responses	PY2020	PY2021	PY2022	PY2023
Very satisfied	34%	38%	44%	39%
Satisfied	47%	50%	42%	49%
Dissatisfied	12%	5%	6%	6%
Very dissatisfied	4%	3%	2%	1%
DK/Refused	3%	4%	6%	5%
N Size	147	157	158	114

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. [The committee reviewed verbatim responses, which ran the gamut of discussing both the conveniences and the challenges of remote vs. in-person meetings.]

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 finding a job, 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 improvements, and process issues.



Part III Review of Goals and Priorities – Program Year 2023 July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024

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; 2023 – 2024 Goals, Priorities, and Strategies

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 continued working on designing a model for better, more coordinated employer services across our department but there has been no additional progress towards developing a Client Relationship Management (CRM) Tool.

We also have not been able to create the Employer OneStop hub as we envisioned, since the Department resources were instead put towards improving the CareerForceMN.com platform.

We had identified a new avenue to accomplishing both items, which included leveraging a new labor exchange system that was being designed.

Several partners within DEED expressed interest in obtaining a CRM, such as Salesforce, to better track contacts with businesses. While we had Commissioner's Office support, we did not have consensus across all partners and were unable to use Salesforce as a tool for tracking the employer relationship side of our work.

We underwent a digital transformation project, which included a new labor exchange system, and then we determined if the new labor exchange, which integrated with CareerForceMN.com, would meet our needs instead. We felt confident that the digital transformation work within DEED will allow us to better engage with businesses and track those contacts. In addition, we believe that instead of creating a new system, modifications could be made to our existing CareerForceMN.com, and will act as the hub we envisioned. SSB has been on the steering committee for this entire project, which allows us to provide input and share feedback.

SSB continued to 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.

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:

We had continued progress towards reaching negotiated targets and employed several strategies for improvement.

Our Quality Assurance Specialist continued to conduct in depth reviews of the MSGs and credentials claimed after each semester, while also flagging staff of potential MSGs that had not yet been claimed. We use our case management system for reports that staff can pull to confirm the accuracy of enrollments and verify who is eligible for an MSG or credential and does not yet have one 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 was provided to counselors and vocational rehabilitation technicians on MSGs and credentials. The training sessions are stored on our YesLMS platform for staff to revisit as needed.

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:

- Continued look at full system integration between our case management system and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). If this is not possible, we will be creating a process that ensures we are using NSC information to claim as many credentials as possible.
- Providing continued training and support to staff on how best to manage the work of requesting MSG and credential documentation in a way that is more efficient and effective.

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, low vision, 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, low vision, 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 Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund (ERAF);
 - 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:

SSB has provided training, education and consultation to hiring managers throughout the State on the Connect 700 policy and program. Additionally, we have worked to increase awareness of the state Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund (ERAF). All strategies in this area are considered complete.

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 and supervisors.

Review:

We have enhanced our case review process by integrating the review tool 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. The reviews are conducted monthly by the Quality Assurance specialist and one supervisor on a rotating basis. Next steps are to create reports and dashboards that can be used to share review results with staff.

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

- 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:

Progress has been made in this area, however, we are not as far along as we wanted to be. Our data analyst returned from an extended leave of absence, and we hired a second data analyst, so we are more prepared to tackle this project in the coming year. 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.

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 continue progress in our intentional and targeted outreach efforts toward underserved and underrepresented communities; however, there is still more to be done. The following activities highlight this progress:

- SSB counselors expressed language barrier difficulty with many customers. SSB has hired a new English Language Learning Specialist to improve communications with our customers for whom English is not their first language.
- SSB hired a second Marketing and Outreach Coordinator, which has increased our outreach efforts across all demographics.
- The State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee is tasked with helping SSB reach and serve more individuals from BIPOC communities.
- The customer satisfaction survey tracks satisfaction by age, gender, race, and ethnicity. 2024 demographic results will be available in late December. Analysis of these results will help drive outreach goals for 2025.
- The outreach team is collaborating with DEED's Office of Public Engagement (OPE) and the Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity (ODEO) to increase our visibility at community fairs and events.
- In 2024, the outreach team held exhibitor booths at 19 conferences, resource expos, and health fairs reaching Minnesotans across all demographics.
- Exhibitor booths were held at 3 tribal health fairs in 2024.
- SSB partnered with DEED's OPE to vend at the West Metro Asian Fair.

There is a continued need to increase outreach and service to new Americans and refugees. SSB has been awarded a Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). This grant will fund SSB's new Evolve Employment initiative. One of the four targeted population for Evolve Employment is new Americans. As this new program develops, SSB will put an emphasis on outreach efforts to this population. This includes working with DEED's Office of New Americans and brainstorming how best to reach new Americans and refugees perhaps through community groups and faith-based organizations.

Last year, it was identified that many staff lack cultural awareness, especially when it comes to how we describe our services and the purposes of our program. SSB's new English Language Learning Specialist is working on ways to improve language barriers. While we have been considering "community liaisons" to serve as a cultural bridge between SSB staff and the communities, no progress has been made on that.

DEED's Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity (ODEO) hosts monthly Diversity Spotlight trainings where all employees are given the opportunity to learn about a particular diversity topic. While these training sessions are open to all, they are not mandatory for employees to attend. Moreover, these sessions are geared towards cultural understanding and not particular to engagement. In 2023, we considered implementing the ABC's of Cultural Competence to SSB staff, but no progress has been made toward that goal, yet.

There is further work to be done on training, outreach, and service of minority populations. We will continue to advance these efforts with collaborative work between relevant departments at DEED such as OPE, ODEO, and the new Office of New Americans. We should also consider what efforts we can make internally at SSB.

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 these factors, we will begin to develop strategies to address how better to ensure successful outcomes.

Review:

Some preliminary work had been done as data was pulled around unsuccessful closures. The committee reviewed this data, and it was also a focus of an SSB Objective and Key Results (OKR) group. It was an opportunity for SRC-B committee members to learn more about the Vocational Rehabilitation process and the reasons that cases might be closed unsuccessfully.

In the area of longitudinal studies, there are several national published studies in this area. The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, Mississippi State University and Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals are two we have identified. We recommend at this time to review these studies and findings rather than conduct one internally. If there is a need for an internal study at a later date, we will move that forward.

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's Staff Trainer has improved the existing onboarding training, creating a robust and comprehensive onboarding for all new WDU staff, and continues to update the training per survey results from counselors and techs who have gone through onboarding. Counselor and VR-Tech training plans have been built along with plans geared more toward the other roles in WDU and other units that require a less comprehensive training. SSB has also mandated that all new employees take all seven modules of MNIT's Accessibility Word Document Training. Only the first two modules are required by DEED Learning Manager, but we find immense value in requiring all seven.

The Staff Trainer publishes annual training plans to ensure unit staff are receiving the training necessary to continue to do their work and develop in their roles. This includes monthly Counselor Only Training Sessions (COTS) 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. In 2024, the SSB Staff Trainer has also been involved in monthly Buyer/Payer meetings to offer Technician Only Training Sessions (TOTS).

Additionally, there is a training newsletter that goes out weekly and identifies both internal and external training opportunities that may be valuable to unit staff. This newsletter includes Technology Tips to offer technology insights, such as using AI, tips on Outlook, OneNote, OneDrive, and other Microsoft applications so all staff feel confident using their computers effectively and efficiently.

YesLMS platform has been around for a while and we are consistently updating new courses to the site, along with updates to our purchased courses, and new ones arriving monthly. CEUs are available for many courses. We often record the COTS session or other trainings and upload them to YesLMS as well. The entirety of VR Counselor and Technician Onboarding is live on YesLMS. When a new counselor or tech arrives, the Staff Trainer adds them to the YesLMS platform to auto-enroll in their onboarding modules, as well as attend other courses purchased from Mississippi State University, including:

- Common Adult Eye Conditions
- How to Read an Eye Report
- An Overview of Anatomy and Physiology of the Eye
- Adjustment and Acceptance of Blindness and Low Vision
- Introduction to Blindness and Low Vision

New for 2025:

We have a lot in the works for 2025, one major item is Person-Centered Practices (PCP) training for all staff, with a few select staff being chosen to be Champions to the PCP approaches and helping mentor and train new staff. The Staff Trainer is currently working with SSB's Contract Specialist to prepare and send out an RFP for the project. We are looking for a comprehensive training program on PCP basics, structured Champion training, and updating our resources and documents to be more in line with PCP practices and more.

We are also working on an Ethics training and Workforce One (WF1) Privacy and Data Security assurance training.

The WDU Operations Manual is being updated, as it was last done in 2021. This is a resource manual for techs working through the WF1 system.

With fee schedules returning, the Staff Trainer and their supervisor are working on setting up training for staff reminding them how to calculate school with fee schedules and maximum contribution amounts with real-life examples.

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)

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

Review:

The key takeaway from the 2024 Customer Satisfaction Survey (CSS) is the continued decline in participation. The 2024 CSS yielded only a 19.9% response rate as opposed to 31.6% response in 2023. Strong emphasis needs to be placed on steps we can take to increase the rate of participation. Ideas to implement include earlier outreach and notification, and direct conversations with SSB Counselors and Techs.

The results of the 2024 CSS were reported in November, and a comprehensive review of the responses by SSB leadership and the SRC-B has yet to occur. A cursory look at the survey results shows that improvements could be made in the areas of:

- Issues related to finding, searching, and getting training for a job
- Improving communication and contact between staff and customers
- Staff needing a better understanding of customers; listening to customers
- Length of time to get services; time between approval and service start

Percentages in overall satisfaction of expected services and services delivered slightly declined in a year-to-year comparison. However, consideration must be made for the 12% drop in survey participation.

Currently, SSB caseloads are at an average of 45 per counselor, and we have no counselor vacancies.

The data from the 2024 CSS will continue to be reviewed and monitored on an ongoing basis with the intent to seek opportunities for improvements in the areas we fall short.

6. Timely communication in internal controls via caseload reviews

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 (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 using screen reading software) 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:

In 2024, we have remained consistent and not seen any overall trends or changes in this area. Counselors are primarily 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 are mostly 'compliant', with occasional 'mostly compliant' and 'non-compliant' ratings.

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.

Chairperson: Patrick Vellia

REPORTS BY MONTH

January 2024

Date: January 9, 2024

- Trevor Turner stepped down as chair. No chair for this meeting.
- Question about summer program internships now that Blind Inc. services are on hold. SSB summer internships discussions have started with Shane, SSB Transition Coordinator, and SSB Navigators.
- Hannah Edwards, SSB Staff, willing to provide support to Summer Transition Program (STP) for DeafBlind students.
- Intervenor & Support Service Providers (SSP) roles.
 - Intervenors in the school setting, under guidance of a certified teacher provide support throughout the day. The model is to “do with, not for”. Intervenors attempt to step back and allow for some independence.
 - SSP – supports a self-determining adult and provides access to their environment.
- DeafBlind individuals need support with providing access to the work community with soft skills training, modeling and opportunities to practice these skills in real time. DeafBlind young adults need more time and training to learn vocational skills with training in place.
- Other states (Illinois) have a Vocational Access Service Provider role that can assist individuals on the job. How can this be created? Where can staffing be found? For individuals that need supported employment, do long term county services fund this kind of service? SSB Employment Specialist, Hannah, provides similar support in her role. Is this something that SSB can provide, a Vocational Access Service Provider?
- Talked about putting all committee notes, agendas, etc. in one place. Suggestions: Google Drive, Microsoft Teams, Microsoft OneNote.

April 2024

Date: April 9, 2024

- Committee recommends Patrick Vellia be appointment as the DeafBlind Committee chair to replace Trevor Turner.
- Ann Mayer put the SSB Survey Letter into plain language.
- Share Point is set up for the committee members to access DeafBlind committee documents, agenda, and notes. Currently unable to use any other programs at this time such as SharePoint, Microsoft Teams, OneNote, Dropbox™, Google Drive.
- Need to create a spreadsheet to list when documents were last updated and to keep information on SSB website up to date.

August 2024

Date: August 13, 2024

- Patrick Vellia confirmed as DeafBlind committee Chair.
- New DeafBlind Committee Member - Hannah Harriman.
- Documents last updated in 2023.
- MN DeafBlind Association (MDBA) information is up to date on SSB website.
- Keep the current information on SSB website.
- Create a script or document explaining DeafBlindness that can be shared with SSB counselors and SSB customers to educate the difference between the spectrum of DeafBlindness. This could be a possible script that turns into a video. This can provide more exposure to DeafBlind culture. Rocky would be happy to help lead this project. Different members on the committee can share their life experiences.

October 2024

Date: October 8, 2024

- Rescheduled to November 12, 2024

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

This committee has re-launched as of December 2024. We look forward to offering details of our work in the 2025 SRC-B report.

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.

Samantha Flax, Committee Chair

During this year the committee focused on these items:

- Promoting a greater diversity in job and career options for WDU customers
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities for both committee members and SSB staff
- Working on advancing greater opportunities for students who are not on the college track

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.

– Submitted by Judy Sanders

In November of 2023, the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota (NFBM) invited Minnesota State Services for the Blind (SSB) to partner with NFBM to host a Possibilities Fair. SSB accepted the invitation and asked the Senior Services committee to represent SSB in planning the event. The NFBM and SSB had already coordinated such events several times and were rewarded by the response of blind seniors.

What is a Possibilities Fair? It is an opportunity for seniors who are either new to blindness or who never had the chance to know that blindness need not hold them back.

Our committee, along with NFB members, planned the day by choosing exhibit tables to demonstrate various skills. Subject matter included: learning to use a long white cane, becoming familiar with tools used in the kitchen, and taking advantage of exploring assistive technology. Participants would have the opportunity to talk with other blind and low vision people like themselves and instructors would teach the skills at the exhibit tables.

Before lunch, the participants and exhibitors were treated to an address from Glenn Crosby, President of the National Federation of the Blind Senior Division.

This was the first time that SSB served as host for this activity, allowing everyone to become familiar with SSB staff and learn what SSB could teach them. They also became acquainted with blind people who were living the lives they wanted. The lunch, provided by the NFBM, gave time for all to engage in conversation.

In the future, our committee will explore other ways to broaden the reach of SSB services to those who need them.

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.

– Submitted by Samantha Flax

Over the past year, the transition committee met every month. We would like to hear an update from SSB staff and then the committee members would have the opportunity to provide feedback.

We encouraged activities that promoted independence and elevated expectations. SSB had several activities for transition age students including the summer transition program, a college readiness event, and preparations are underway for a career fair.

We also discussed how SSB could compensate for the fact that transition services do not start until age fourteen. We had more participants on the committee this year who were recipients of services which provided a valuable perspective.

SRC-B COUNCIL MEMBERS

The members of Minnesota’s State Rehabilitation Council-Blind, serving as of December 2024 are:

Connie Berg, Diane Dohnalik, Frank Eller, Sue Fager, Samantha Flax, Ryan Haenze, Hannah Harriman, Tom Heinl, Robert Hobson, Thea Kramer, Patricia McGee, Jeff Mihelich, Corbb O’Connor, Jennifer Points, Justin Salisbury, Judy Sanders, Ryan Strunk, and Patrick Vellia.



*Back Row, left to right: Robert Hobson, Jeff Mihelich, Corbb O’Connor, Patrick Vellia, Patricia McGee
Front Row: Sue Fager, Samantha Flax, Judy Sanders, Thea Kramer*



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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 2024, the total amount of federal grant funds used for these services is \$ 10,410,449 (78.7 percent). The state match appropriation is \$ 2,817,600 (21.3 percent).

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DECEMBER 2024