

m EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STATE SERVICES FOR THE BLIND



2022 ANNUAL REPORT

The mission of State Services for the Blind is to facilitate the achievement of vocational and personal independence by Minnesotans who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind.



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Director's Report, State Services for the Blind, 2022

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

Change, as they say, is the only constant; but positive change – that results in a closer alignment with our mission, makes a difference in the lives of the customers we serve, and adapts to new circumstances and opportunities – requires planning, creativity, and commitment from everyone involved. One word for that kind of transformational change is “innovation,” and in these pages you’ll read about many of the innovative practices and ideas we’ve put into place in 2022, and the impact those changes have made for our customers.

A focus on equity has been a critical part of the changes we’ve been working toward in this past year. As part of the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), we’ve used a goal-setting model called Objectives and Key Results (OKR.) These OKRs will shape our strategies to more fully serve blind, DeafBlind and visually impaired Minnesotans from all backgrounds. I’ll share more about each of our five equity OKRs, and you’ll read about the impact of that work in the lives of our customers in the pages to follow. Our mission extends to every Minnesota resident who is blind, DeafBlind, has low vision, or who has a print-related disability. If we are not reaching some of those Minnesotans, then our work is incomplete. Our focus on equity helps us to better serve all of our customers.

Evolve: VR

Our Workforce Development Unit (WDU) team has embraced the term “evolve” as a way of implementing positive change. For WDU, evolving represents letting go of processes and policies that are no longer useful, and developing new ways of working that match our customers’ needs and circumstances.

The field of vocational rehabilitation across the country is at a turning point. “Simply put,” as we write in our strategic plan, “In order for VR to be a national leader in increasing the workforce participation rate of people with disabilities in this country, we need to rethink our model and improve our performance. Not doing so will surely result in the dissolution of vocational rehabilitation as we know it.”

Our strategic plan, which we call Evolve: VR is a multi-year, multi-faceted change initiative. Our goals are ambitious, but, we believe, necessary:

- Having a program that results in job-seekers finding rewarding careers that offer good wages and opportunities to advance up the career ladder
- Providing services that are easy to access, do not require applicants to go through complex processes, and encourage people to reach their full vocational potential
- Creating the best VR program in the country, one that people want to work for and work with

2022 was our year for laying the groundwork for Evolve: VR, including drafting the plan and getting feedback from staff, our consumer council (the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind), community partners, and customers. At the end of this year, we began introducing the plan and setting out a timeline. You can read about our Evolve: VR plan on our homepage at mnssb.org, where it will be regularly updated.

Evolve: Highlights

- Evolution, our watchword for strategic, sustainable change, is not limited to our Workforce Development services. All across SSB, we made changes to better serve our customers. Here are some highlights:
- Our Senior Services team worked diligently with the Low Vision Center at the Mayo Clinic in order to place a staff member there once a week to meet with seniors newly diagnosed with vision loss. Now, seniors have a more seamless connection between their clinic and the practical supports we provide.
- With a \$1.8 million commitment, our Business Enterprise Program (BEP) is installing new, multi-featured vending machines to appeal to a new generation of customers. Because fewer workers are in buildings where our small business owner/ operators have vending services, our BEP team intensified its work to develop new partnerships in high-traffic locations.
- Our Communication Center began distributing Braille eReaders to customers. These electronic braille displays allow for the direct download of braille books, providing versatility and portability to our braille readers. Electronic braille displays bring braille into the digital age and help preserve the viable future of braille. In addition, the distribution of these e-readers

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

gives access to digital braille to customers who would not otherwise be able to afford the devices.

- Our Communication Center also laid the groundwork for an update to our data and cataloging systems. This upgrade to our software is a critical component in expanding and adapting our services to meet our customers' evolving needs for access to books and information.

We Succeed When Our Customers Succeed

Numbers, of course, are no substitute for stories. Each of the 3600 seniors served in the Senior Services Unit, and the 834 customers served in our Workforce Development section, has their own unique and valuable story. The same holds true for the thousands who have used our Communication Center to access the materials they need in a format that works for them. Even so, I'd like to highlight a few numbers as a reminder of the stories of personal success and accomplishment that each of these numbers represents.

- **\$87,600** – the median annual wage for our customers who found fulltime employment. We've long held the goal of assisting customers in finding good jobs at a family-sustaining wage. Our program has been highlighted by our federal partners for the breadth and quality of the jobs our customers found in 2022. Among those positions are: software engineer, psychotherapist, chaplain, Administrative Hearing Officer, and programmer.
- **38,501** - That's the number of times a book produced by our Communication Center was downloaded through BARD, the reading app of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled. Truly our Communication Center has been a leader in adding books to this national catalog. This means that the title produced by our staff and volunteers, including titles in Hmong, Somali, Anishinaabe, Karen, Finnish, and Dakota have a reach far beyond Minnesota.
- **699** - That's the number of braille titles provided to Minnesota students this year. We know that braille is a building block to literacy and to future success.
- **\$49,000** - Is the net profit one of our Business Enterprise Program (BEP) small business owners earned in a single month in 2022. The challenges facing these business owners have increased since the shutdown of 2020. Yet, with ingenuity, perseverance, and strategic planning, as shown by this record-breaking sales number, these businesses continue to

provide a viable livelihood for these hardworking BEP operators.

- **3,599** – Is the number of Minnesotans served by our Senior Services team. Only California, a state with seven times our population, served more blind, DeafBlind, and low vision seniors.

Advancing Equity

We're here to serve every Minnesotan who qualifies for our services. If an individual who could benefit from our services doesn't know about them, or meets barriers in accessing them, then we've fallen short of our mandate. These obstacles particularly affect Minnesotans living with the pernicious effects of racism. In 2022, we developed five objectives to bring us closer to the goal of serving "One Minnesota."

I outlined these objectives to our staff at an all-staff meeting in 2021, and staff and council members volunteered to serve on teams that would take the lead in implementing each of these objectives. I'm proud that the work of reaching our equity objectives has been employee-led, and that our equity goals are shared across our agency, by our council, and by DEED senior management. These five equity goals are highlighted throughout this report. Here is a brief overview of each. As I mentioned above, we have been using a framework called Objectives and Key Results (OKR), so we've referred to each goal as an OKR.

OKR1: Increase access for people with a print impairment who speak other languages by transcribing print materials into accessible formats.

The languages identified as part of this OKR include Hmong, Karen, Somali, Anishinaabe, and Dakota. Not just in Minnesota, but across the country, there is a dearth of titles in accessible formats in languages other than English. This is especially true for languages with a stronger oral than written tradition, and for languages, like Dakota, that are endangered. Later in this report, you'll see the important strides we've made to build a more extensive catalog of accessible titles in languages that are widely spoken here in Minnesota.



OKR2: Analyze successful and unsuccessful closures (employment outcomes) to identify service gaps and needs

This team began their work by sifting through data to identify patterns and trends for customers who had their case closed for reasons other than successfully reaching their employment goals. Now the team is more closely studying employment outcomes by age, race, county, and education level, and finding out how these demographics correlate with successful or unsuccessful closures.

OKR3: Foster an ongoing relationship with the Veterans Administration throughout Minnesota to increase SSB's exposure

This team has begun the work of establishing regular meetings with the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, carefully examining the referral process, and strengthening connections with the St. Cloud and Fargo/Moorhead VA.

OKR4: SSB's Customer Satisfaction Survey will incorporate demographic information (e.g., age, race, ethnicity) so that we can analyze the quality of services provided.

We regularly survey our customers in our Senior Services and Workforce Development sections in order to improve our services. This team has been revising our survey to yield more useful results to help us identify gaps in our services. Of course, a higher response rate yields better data, so they've also taken a hard look at implementing small changes to increase the response rate.

OKR5: Develop a comprehensive talent recruitment plan that actively promotes job openings to under-represented communities.

This team has carefully examined barriers to recruitment and hiring. They've taken a practical approach to addressing issues within our scope to change, such as reviewing and expanding where and how we publicize openings, and more. We're committed to developing an SSB workforce that is as diverse as the customers we serve.

SSB: 100 Years Young

In 1922, a state-appointed commission studied the needs of blind persons in Minnesota. One year later, legislation was passed, and State Services for the Blind was established. It is not an overstatement to say that the achievements of blind, DeafBlind, and visually impaired Minnesotans since then -- the advances made, victories won, and barriers shattered -- is both sobering and awe-inspiring. It's also a reminder as to why our commitment to positive change is critically necessary. Good jobs at a family-sustaining wage, skills and resources for older adults to live independently in the community, technology that works for everyone, access to worldwide information in accessible formats, and most of all, the end of discrimination and stereotypes: all these things are possible. As we celebrate the centennial of our founding, we're re-dedicating ourselves to our mission: "To facilitate the achievement of vocational and personal independence by Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, or visually impaired."

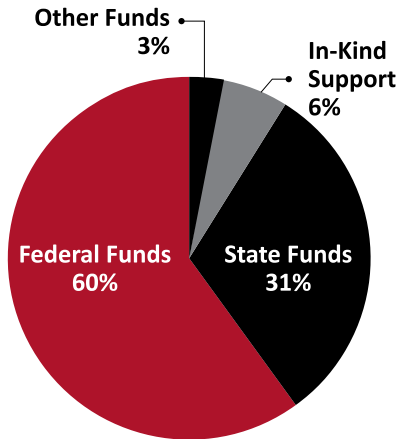
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Natasha'.

Natasha Jerde, SSB Director

SSB FINANCIALS

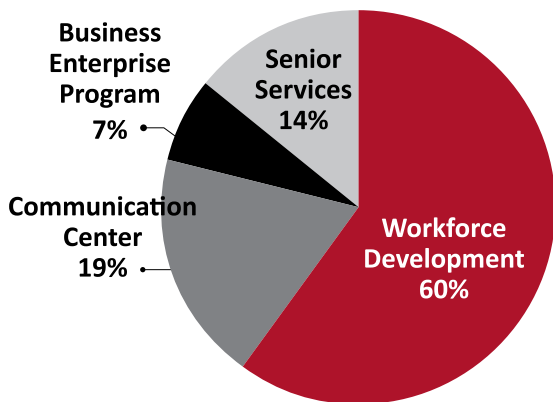
SSB Funding Streams

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2022

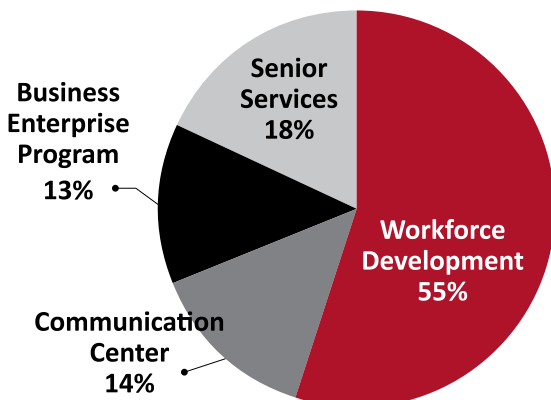


SSB Funding Distribution

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2021



FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2022



SSB Expenditures

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2021 AND 2022

Federal Funds	FFY 2021	FFY 2022
Basic VR	\$8,503,904	\$10,136,507
Supported Employment	\$17,192	-
Independent Living	\$27,038	\$58,770
IL-Older Blind	\$1,371,035	\$1,425,103
Special Education Agreement	\$696,126	\$694,870
Total Federal Funds	\$10,615,295	\$12,315,250

Total State Funds	\$6,538,004	\$6,379,898
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Other Funds	FFY 2021	FFY 2022
Gifts/Bequests	\$166,491	\$203,688
Dept. of Commerce - Telecommunications Access	\$67,719	\$98,759
Aging Eyes	\$599,322	-
Communication Center	-	-
Business Enterprises	\$495,126	\$412,317
Total Other Funds	\$788,657	\$714,764

In-Kind Support	FFY 2021	FFY 2022
From Volunteers	\$652,000	\$1,150,320
Total All Funds	\$18,593,955	\$20,560,232

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT UNIT - State Fiscal Year 2022

834 Customers Served

82 who received employment outcome

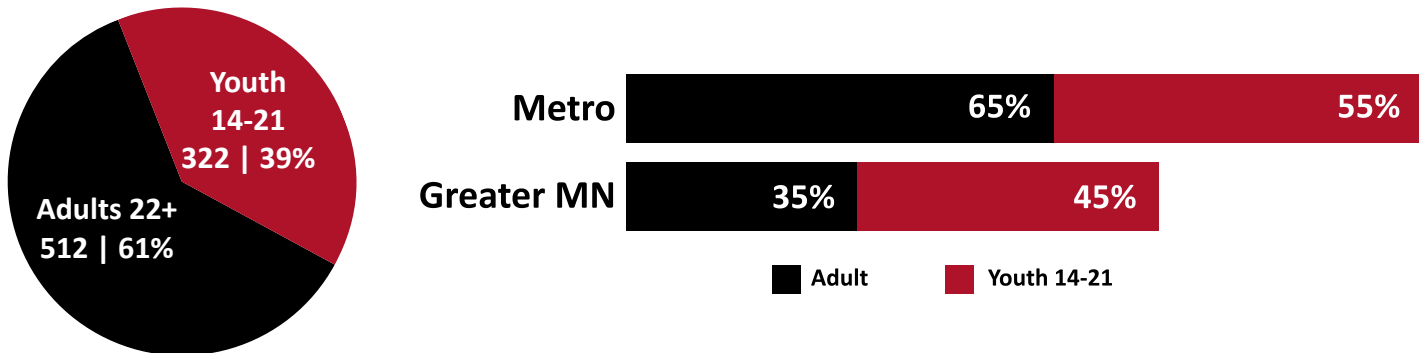
\$656 Average weekly salary of all closed as employed

Vision Impairments of Customers Served

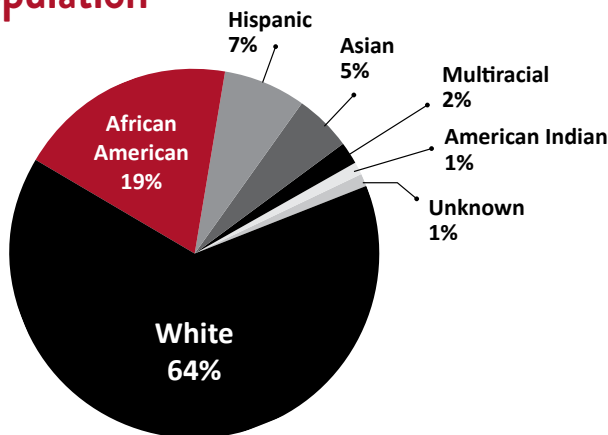


Note: These totals do not include customers who exited prior to providing specific demographic information.

Preparing Adults and Youth in all Regions of the State for Employment



Serving Minnesota's Diverse Population



Achieving Equity

DEED is working to address disparities and achieve economic equity for all Minnesotans by identifying and breaking down barriers to employment and business opportunities. Data on the populations served are valuable for program development and policy decisions. This program targets individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or DeafBlind.



OKR2: Analyze successful and unsuccessful closures (employment outcomes) to identify service gaps and needs

Customers served by the Workforce Development Unit at State Services for the Blind who find competitive, gainful employment usually have their cases are closed after 90 days

of successful employment. This is called a “successful closure.” However, some job-seekers do not achieve their employment goal, for a variety of reasons. When their cases are eventually closed, it is considered an “unsuccessful closure.”

The OKR 2 workgroup began meeting in March of 2022. They have been studying the reasons for unsuccessful closures in order to eliminate obstacles to employment and create more positive outcomes for Workforce Development customers. Group members have been examining SSB data on case closures going back to 2019; the information is sorted by reason(s) for unsuccessful closure, as identified by the rehabilitation counselor.

There are a number of reasons that a case is closed without an employment outcome: according to rehabilitation counselor Anna Fowler, facilitator of the OKR 2 workgroup, the most common is that the customer can simply no longer be located or contacted. She estimates that this accounts for 20-30% of unsuccessful closures.

Another major reason for unsuccessful closure is that the customer is an English language learner: it can be difficult, especially outside the Twin Cities area, to find rehabilitation service providers who speak other languages. This limits a customer’s ability to access training in daily living skills, cane travel, or adaptive computer technology, all of which are important for employability. It can also be challenging to find rehabilitation materials and resources in languages other than English.

In addition, some customers simply decide that they are no longer interested in vocational services, for whatever reason, which leads to case closure.

Other factors in unsuccessful closures can include a customer’s family issues, health problems, or legal involvement.

The OKR 2 workgroup is also studying customer demographic data to determine how it affects employment outcomes. From the data analyzed, the workgroup did not see an association between any race or ethnicity and successful closures. Age, however, can affect a customer’s ability to find employment, as age

discrimination is sometimes an issue. Educational level is by far the most important element in successful or unsuccessful outcomes: in general, the more education a customer has, the easier it is for them to achieve their employment goals. In addition to demographic factors, the workgroup has found that customers who have a positive and cooperative working relationship with their counselor are often more successful in finding employment.

The workgroup presented its findings on unsuccessful closures to SSB management in February 2023.



OKR3: Foster an ongoing relationship with the Veterans Administration throughout Minnesota to increase SSB's exposure

State Services for the Blind's Workforce Development and Senior Services units work with veterans of all ages. A close and cooperative relationship with Minnesota VA facilities is very important to ensure that veterans with visual impairments have access to a full array of services. In addition, it is vital that Minnesota veterans who have vision loss know about the training, adaptive equipment, and other resources provided by both SSB and the VA.

"If you're a vet in Minnesota, and you're experiencing vision loss, it should be simple and seamless to connect with all the resources available to you," says Stacy Shablott. Stacy, the coordinator of the SSB Aging Eyes Initiative, is also the facilitator of the OKR 3 workgroup. This workgroup was assigned to study SSB's relationship with the three major VA facilities serving Minnesota and identify areas for improvement.

The Senior Services and Workforce Development counselors based in St. Cloud and Bemidji have regular contact with the St. Cloud and Fargo/Moorhead VA facilities, respectively. However, due to its size, administrative structure, and the number of counselors serving the Twin Cities metro area, relationships with the Minneapolis VA Medical Center have been somewhat more challenging.

Both the VA and SSB have valuable services to offer Minnesota veterans. Typically, the VA has more funding available to provide visually impaired veterans with adaptive equipment. It can also refer veterans to intensive rehabilitation training at facilities such as the Hines VA Blind Residential Center in Chicago. On the other hand, SSB staff can get to know veterans individually and provide more specialized services and resources. They can also arrange in-home or local rehabilitation training for veterans who are not able to travel out of state to a residential facility.

The workgroup's accomplishments include:

- Completing a gap analysis to identify additional VA resources that could be provided to veterans served by SSB
- Designating two regular SSB contact persons for Minneapolis VA staff: Ed Lecher in Senior Services and Emily Zaccardi in Workforce Development
- Arranging educational briefings about VA services and the referral process for current and future SSB counselors
- Establishing twice-yearly meetings with Minneapolis VA personnel
- Updating the SSB website with current information and resources for veterans

The workgroup has completed its assignments and made a final presentation to the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRCB) in February.



OKR4: SSB's Customer Satisfaction Survey will incorporate demographic

information (e.g., age, race, ethnicity) so that we can analyze the quality of our services.

Each year, SSB surveys the customers in its Workforce Development program to understand what's working and where it can improve. As it strives to better serve under-represented communities in Minnesota, these survey results yield valuable insights. The focus of the fourth OKR group was to take a closer look at how the survey is conducted and make recommendations for refining the survey questions and improving the response rate.

"When there are gaps in our data there are gaps in our knowledge," director Natasha Jerde told SSB's staff as she introduced this equity objective. "We can only improve our services when we have a clearer idea of where we're doing well, and where we're not. Survey data can be one useful way to understand whether we're meeting the needs of specific communities."

The OKR 4 team had to work within the parameters of the survey itself: for continuity and accuracy, some questions could not be changed. In addition, there are legal considerations governing the survey. The team spent time exploring the background of the survey and the requirements that shape it in order to make improvements.

The team made two recommendations that were incorporated when the survey went out in August of 2022. First, they added questions to solicit more accurate demographic information. Second, the team added a text reminder to follow up with customers who hadn't completed the survey. This year, the

survey response rate was just over 30%, which matches previous years; it is a high response rate for a survey of this type.

"We learned a great deal about data and data collection," said SSB Senior Services counselor Lauren Eliason, "We believe the changes we were able to make will help us better understand the people we serve."

"It's part of the process of continuous improvement," added Susan Kusz, an SSB program administrator who co-facilitated the workgroup with Lauren. "This work is part of refining what we do in order to better meet the needs of our customers."



OKR5: Develop a comprehensive talent recruitment plan that actively promotes job openings to under-represented communities

Kotumu Kamara: Building a Stronger State of Minnesota Workforce

In high school, Kotumu Kamara loved playing with data – discovering the ins and outs of statistics, exploring the details, and learning how to organize numbers to reveal useful insights. Now, in her new job as the affirmative action officer at the Minnesota Department of Health, investigating data is a skill she draws on. Kotumu helps the department chart a course forward to build a workforce that more fully reflects the diversity of our state. Equipped with this information, she works in the areas of recruitment and retention and promotes the state's affirmative action plan.

Laying the groundwork for a more diverse SSB workforce has been the goal of the fifth of our equity working groups. This group was tasked with

identifying barriers to employment at SSB and recommending action steps to reduce them. “There are some things about applying for a job with the state of Minnesota that are challenging and that we can’t address on our own,” says vocational rehabilitation counselor Rob Hobson, who heads this group, “but we’ve identified the changes that we can make to get our job announcements out to more people, provide guidance for applying, and examining our own biases in the hiring process. We know, in working with job seekers who are blind, DeafBlind or visually impaired how tough it can be to navigate through the state’s online application process. We know that this can be difficult for other populations as well, and we’ve been taking a hard look at the things that are in our purview to change so that the process can be more equitable.”

For Kotumu, who uses screen reading software, the application process for her position at the Department of Health presented some accessibility challenges. Fortunately, she has internal reserves of determination, adapt ability, and persistence. “I’ve learned that you always have to be developing new skills, and finding new strategies for doing things,” she says.

Kotumu grew up in Liberia and Guinea before coming to this country. At the University of Minnesota, she earned her bachelor’s degree in international studies with a minor in social justice. She went on to earn a master’s degree in education in human resource development. Before coming to the Department of Health, Kotumu had a distinguished career as an English language instructor for blind and low vision immigrants. As a volunteer with SSB, Kotumu chaired the Minority Outreach Committee for the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B).

Her position at the Department of Health brings together her education, her skills and experience, and most of all, her passion for helping to increase Minnesota’s diversity. But landing that job wasn’t easy. The barriers presented by the state employment website required tenacity and ingenuity to overcome.



Kotumu Kamara

Her position at the Department of Health brings together her education, her skills and experience, and most of all, her passion for helping to increase Minnesota’s diversity. But landing that job wasn’t easy. The barriers presented by the state employment website required tenacity and ingenuity to overcome.

SSB’s employment specialists also know that applying for jobs with the state of Minnesota can be difficult for customers. “Even though there are some barriers we won’t be able to change right away,” says Rob Hobson, “we are taking a hard look at the things

we can change so that we attract a more diverse applicant pool for openings at our state agency, and do what we can to make applying for those jobs easier for everyone. The State of Minnesota certainly needs more employees of the caliber of Kotumu.”

Riss Leitzke Shares Tools for Building Competence and Confidence

“People tell kids with disabilities that they can’t do this,” says Riss Leitzke, program coordinator with Wilderness Inquiry, “They can’t go hiking, or fishing, or canoeing, or be active in the outdoors.”

But, as Wilderness Inquiry’s mission states: “Everyone belongs in the outdoors.” As Riss says, “Those kids need to know that there is always a path. If there’s a barrier, you figure out how to take down that barrier.”

One of the core components of SSB’s programs for students is building skills for self-advocacy, so that students can assess their own needs and goals, and find the right strategies for getting what they require. That’s why SSB connected with Riss and the Wilderness Inquiry team to design a program to build self-advocacy skills. On a sunny day in August, a group of ten blind, DeafBlind, and visually impaired Minnesota students gathered at Lake Phalen in St. Paul for a day of canoeing, connections, and learning.

As a former SSB customer, now with their own budding career, Riss had a special connection with these students. Having developed their own strong skills in self-advocacy, problem solving, and living and working as a successful DeafBlind person, Riss has a lot to offer.

Riss explains that, as a young adult, they would never have guessed that they would end up with a career in outdoor adventure. “It was a really long road for sure,” Riss remembers, “As a kid, I hated the outdoors. The



Minnesota students canoeing on Lake Phalen

outdoors was just bugs and grass, and dirt and all kinds of things.”

Then Riss signed up with a friend for a work-study program with the Minnesota Conservation Corps. Bringing together deaf and hearing students, the program hires young people from all backgrounds to do environmental work in state and national parks. “I didn’t want to be there, but by the end of the first week, I began to think ‘Hey, this isn’t that bad.’”

The work included cutting trails, clearing brush, building benches, and swamping out muck. It was hard work, but it gave Riss their life’s passion and a career path.

Now, in their job with Wilderness Inquiry, Riss works with local organizations and community groups. They share a love of the outdoors with people with disabilities from all walks of life. They worked with SSB staff to define goals and develop and promote the program.

“We learned how to do things, and then we got to do them on our own,” says Tunmi Jubril, a senior at Tartan High School in Oakdale, Minnesota, “It was helpful, because you had to speak up and ask questions, and learn how to ask for help and also how to do things on your own.”

Tunmi, who enjoys music, reading, programming, and games, went on the trip to connect with others, but found that the program was helpful too. “I would do it again for sure,” he said.

That kind of positive response helps Riss know that all the hard work of planning and coordinating is worthwhile. They hope that all the students who attended the canoeing event came away with some new connections, a greater sense of confidence, and maybe even a deeper appreciation of all that the outdoors has to offer.



Riss Leitzke

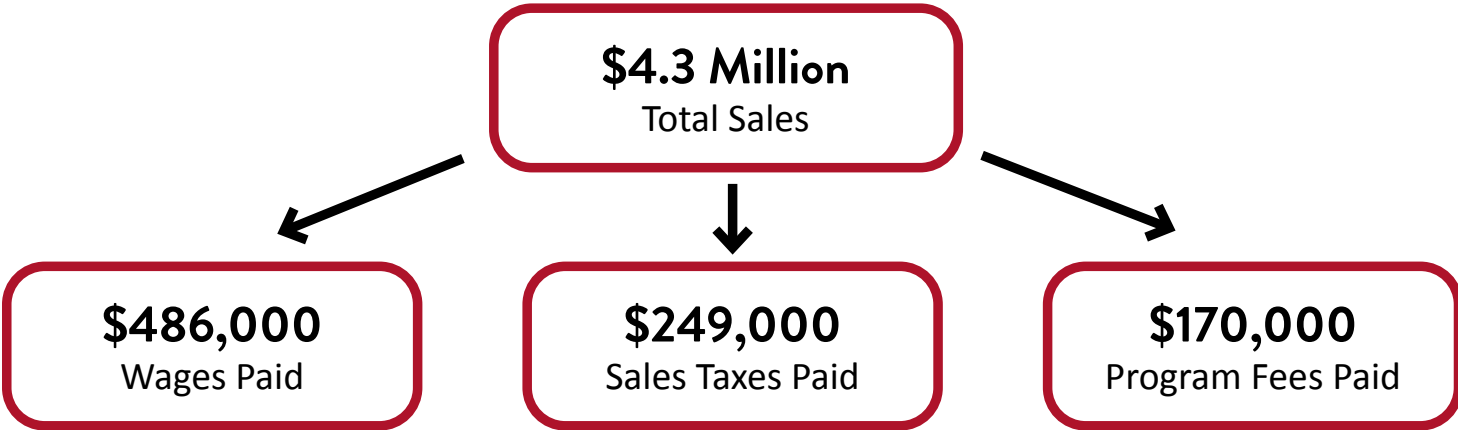


BUSINESS ENTERPRISE PROGRAM

Federal Fiscal Year 2021-2022

- 26 business operators served
- 27 individuals employed by BEP operators
- 26 businesses in 145 locations in 46 cities across the state
- \$41,225 Average Net Profit

BEP Contributed \$900,000 to Minnesota's Economy



Mike LaVigne Looks Back on 45 Years with the Business Enterprise Program

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP), part of State Services for the Blind's Workforce Development Unit (WDU), provides profitable vending machine business opportunities to qualified, licensed, legally blind Minnesotans to broaden their economic opportunities. The BEP provides training, certification, technical support, and management services to these self-employed vending business owners. The BEP originated with the Randolph-Sheppard Act, federal legislation passed in 1936.

Mike LaVigne, of Moose Lake, is the second most senior of the 25 BEP operators operating vending businesses in Minnesota.

Mike, who is legally blind and has mild cerebral palsy, started his career with BEP about 45 years ago, when he was employed at a grocery store in Virginia, Minnesota. He was offered a job operating vending machines and running the cafeteria at the Mankato Rehabilitation Center. He ultimately spent 22 years working at the rehabilitation center. Mike's next

stop was Mankato State University (now Minnesota State University, Mankato); for 15 years he operated campus vending machines that served the students and faculty. Mike and his late wife, both outdoor enthusiasts, decided to move to northern Minnesota to be closer to recreational opportunities and settled in Moose Lake.

Mike's current business involves operating the vending machines at two locations: the Minnesota Correctional Facility – Moose Lake and the Minnesota Sex Offender Program – Moose Lake. He has two part-time employees who assist him. On a typical workday, Mike gets a ride to the facilities from his son or a friend. He is checked in by corrections staff, then goes to his storeroom to pick up supplies. He fills

the vending machines, orders products, and collects money twice a week. Mike's vending machines stock "anything that will fit", including pop, candy, chips, frozen sandwiches, meat products, and cheese. According to Mike,

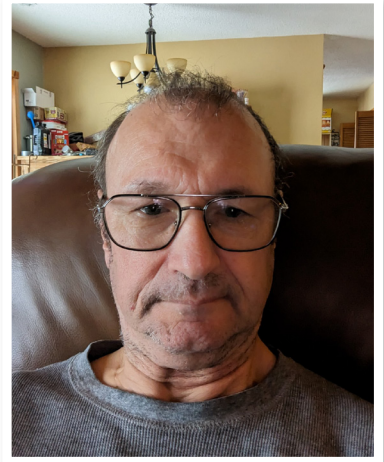
his biggest sellers are pop, candy, chips, and eight-ounce packages of cheese, since inmates are able to do limited cooking in the microwaves in the facilities' break rooms.

Mike's business is very successful: he is one of the top three BEP operators in Minnesota in terms of income. Mike says, "I enjoy working...I know what I'm doing and I'm earning good money. I'm happy that the BEP program exists: otherwise I'd probably be... earning minimum wage."

Operating vending machines has changed over the years; Mike says jokingly that in the old days, he could repair them with "baling wire and duct tape." Now most vending machines are computerized, but he can still fix most problems himself. BEP staff at SSB assist Mike with more complex machine repairs, provide him with parts for repairs, and help with other business-related issues.

When he's not on the job, Mike likes to watch all kinds of TV shows, including science fiction, dramas, and comedies. He is also a movie buff and is looking forward to *Avatar: The Way of Water*. In addition, he enjoys outdoor activities like camping and kayaking.

Mike hopes to retire in the near future. He and BEP are actively looking for a BEP operator to eventually take over his business. If you or someone you know is interested in learning about the BEP and this opportunity, please contact John Hulet, BEP director, at john.hulet@state.mn.us or 651-539-2284.



Mike LaVigne

SFY
2022 **3,599**

CLIENTS SERVED BY THE SENIOR SERVICES UNIT

Private residence (house or apartment)	2,423
Senior Living Retirement Community	641
Assisted Living Facility	433
Nursing Home/ Long-term Care facility	99
Homeless	3

The Independent Living (18-54) does not connote where the person lives. It connotes that they were served not as seniors but as younger people who are unable to participate in WDU programming. That number this year is 99



Providing Services to Help Seniors Choose Where to Live

SENIOR SERVICES UNIT PROFILE

Senior Services Team connections: Highlighting Minnesota veterans

The customers served by SSB's Senior Services Unit include many Minnesota veterans with vision loss. The OKR 3 workgroup, as mentioned above, is striving to coordinate and streamline services to veterans. It is also exploring better ways to inform veterans about the resources available to them.

Doug Ellingson, of Bemidji, Bob Johnson, from Otsego, and Dave Lavrenz, of Big Lake, are three of the veterans served last year by the Senior Services team. Though each of their experiences of vision loss has been different, what these three remarkable men share is a practical, down-to-earth view of their circumstances. "You just have to take a systematic approach to things," Bob says, a view echoed by Dave and Doug,



Bob Johnson

"There's just certain things in life you got to learn to live with."

At Purdue University, Bob Johnson had a college roommate who was blind and used a dog guide. Bob learned early on that vision loss isn't a barrier to accomplishing goals. Bob attended Purdue on the GI Bill following a stint in the Air Force. After graduating with a degree in mechanical engineering, he worked in Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan before coming to St. Paul, where he worked at Whirlpool for more than three decades. Bob and his wife have two children, and now, three great-grandchildren. Throughout his life, he has been active in Scouting as well as local politics.

Now, Bob brings his engineer's common sense to living with vision loss. Over the last several years, Bob's vision has deteriorated significantly due to macular degeneration.

But the tools and training from SSU counselor Barb Klein and other staff have made it possible for Bob to do the things he cares about. These include playing bridge, working on his computer, and reading.

Dave Lavrenz says of his time in the Navy that his lucky break came through learning welding in his job as a ship fitter. Later, back home in Minnesota, Dave earned a living as a welder, including prototyping Tonka Toys. But farming would always be Dave's first love.



Dave Lavrenz

Born on a farm in western Hennepin County, in his early years, Dave attended a one-room school with just three other children. His family eventually moved to Osseo, where Dave continued to farm with his mother and father until he left for the Navy. When he returned home to Minnesota, he met his wife Virginia, and they raised three boys together.

Dave and Virginia built a house on a farm in Big Lake. In the late 1970s, Dave went into farming full time. As Dave will tell you, farm life is hard, especially financially, but he insists, "There's nothing greater."

Dave eventually left farming and retired from welding. He says that the VA has been wonderful for him, including supporting him during his vision loss due to macular degeneration.

Services from both SSB and the VA has made it possible for Dave to live well with vision loss. The VA provided aids and devices, including glasses to watch television. Meanwhile, SSB assistive technologist Mark Dahlberg helped Dave learn to navigate his computer. "Mark is absolutely an angel," says Dave, "There's no question about it."

"You can do this, Dad," was all the encouragement Doug Ellingson needed to make the decision to attend the four-week training program at the Hines VA Blind Rehabilitation Center in Chicago.

Doug had been gradually losing vision over the last decade because of retinal dystrophy, a genetic condition. Apart from a four-year stint in the Navy, Doug has lived in Bemidji all his life, and like many in the region, he's been an active outdoorsman. But vision loss has caused him to change the way he does things. "It can be so doggone frustrating just pounding a nail in or drilling a hole; I just have to tell myself to calm down and take the time."



Doug Ellingson

Before attending the Hines Center, Doug connected with SSB. SSU counselor Gina Bergeron and skills trainer Charlene Guggisberg provided practical support to help with basic activities and resources. "They were incredibly motivating," Doug remembers.

But it was the intensive training at the Hines Center that gave Doug the experience and focused training he needed to feel empowered and confident. With daily classes in orientation and mobility, technology, shop, and daily living skills, Doug returned home with the tools he needed to thrive. What's more, the VA was able to provide him with resources and equipment so that Doug could fully take advantage of assistive technology.

"The Hines Center was truly a game changer for me," Doug says, "I can't say enough good about it."

Often, the VA can provide resources that SSU staff cannot. On the other hand, SSU staff work with vets in their homes and provide that personal touch, helping connect them with all the services available. "It's why this goal of improving our partnership with the VA is so important," says director Natasha Jerde. "Our vets deserve every benefit and resource available to them, and we're here to ensure that the connection between SSB and the VA is strong and dynamic so every Minnesota vet living with vision loss has the opportunity to live well."

Audio Services, Radio Talking Book, and Engineering provided in 2022:



Item	2022
Streams-Newsline-archives	552,558
Players dispersed	3,743
Audio books placed on BARD	200
Audio books downloaded from BARD	38,501
Equipment Repaired	942
New books recorded and broadcast by Radio Talking Book	135

*All figures are from the CCSS Database for January 1 to December 31, 2021/2022

Braille Services provided to K-12 Minnesota Students in 2022



Braille

43 Minnesota students served



Braille Titles - 690 total

104 Purchased from other states

262 Newly transcribed by the
Communication Center (CC)

324 Reproduced and re-used by CC



Braille Pages - 224,732 total

135,976 Purchased from other states

14,488 Newly transcribed by CC

74,268 Reproduced and re-used by CC

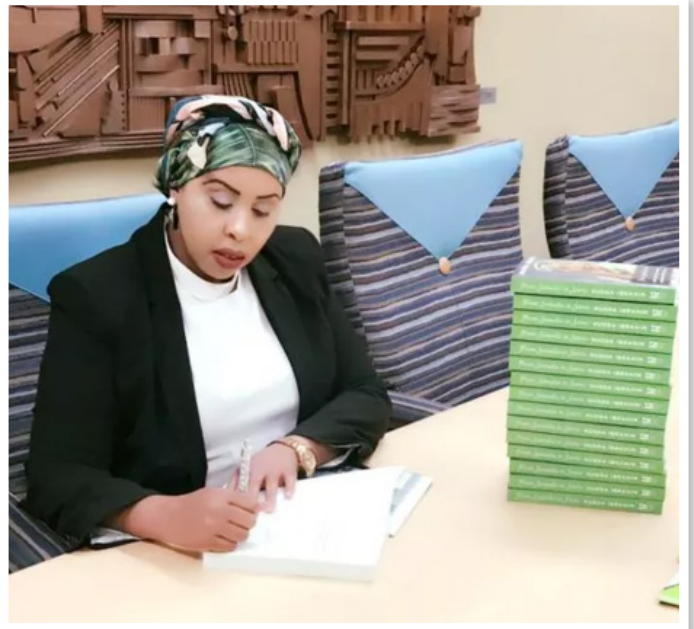
OKR

OKR 1: **SSB's Communication Center will increase access for people with a print impairment who speak other languages by transcribing print materials into five alternative languages. Languages targeted will include Hmong, Karen, Somali, Anishinaabe, and Dakota**

The Audio Services unit in the Communication Center does custom recording of all types of printed materials sent in by qualified customers. Highly skilled volunteers record textbooks, leisure books, magazines, and anything else that is not already available in audio format. Volunteers have recorded cookbooks, family histories, romance novels, appliance booklets, and countless other items. For some time, the Audio Services unit has been exploring ways to expand its scope even further and provide materials in languages other than English, particularly languages that are widely spoken in Minnesota. This project ties in with OKR 1 as described above. Audio Services librarian Dan Gausman has played a key role in identifying books to record and reaching out to potential recording volunteers.

The first non-English book, *Follow the Blackbirds*, a book of poetry partly in the Dakota language, was recorded by the author, Gwen Nell Westerman, the Poet Laureate of Minnesota, in November of 2021.

Also, in November of last year, St. Cloud-based author Hudda Ibrahim recorded *What Color is My Hijab?*, a children's book, in both Somali- and English-language versions.



Author Hudda Ibrahim

A Karen-language collection of short stories was recorded in April 2022 by three of the five authors who contributed stories.

Most recently, in August 2022, Minnesota author Kao Kalia Yang recorded the Hmong-language version of her children's book *The Most Beautiful Thing*.

All of these books, as well as many other Audio Services unit recordings, have been posted on BARD (Braille and Audio Reading Download), a National Library Service-sponsored website which enables patrons with print disabilities all over the U.S. to access materials in Braille and audio formats.

In addition, the Audio Services unit has helped make SSB materials more accessible to non-English speakers by recently recording SSB information brochures in Russian, Hmong, and Spanish.

Future Audio Services recording projects include *Ilmakorinta Habboon*, a Somali-language version of a book titled *Better Parenting: A Guide for Somali Parents in the Diaspora*, as well as books in Ojibwe and other key languages.

Behind the Mic or in Front of an Audience, RTB Supervisor Joseph Papke is a Man of Many Talents

Radio Talking Book (RTB), part of State Services for the Blind's Communication Center, is an online radio service which broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It provides listeners with print

disabilities access to a wide variety of newspapers, books, and magazines. Volunteer readers around the state broadcast metro-area and Greater Minnesota newspapers live each day. They also pre-record books, which are broadcast on RTB in serial form each week, as well as weekly special-interest magazine programs. These magazine programs cover a wide variety of topics, including politics, gardening, the arts, celebrities, religion, and many others. In addition to the volunteers, a staff broadcaster is on duty whenever the building is open.

Joseph Papke is the new supervisor of the RTB unit: he replaces former supervisor Scott McKinney, who retired in August. Joseph brings extensive RTB experience to the position: he previously served as an intermittent (on-call) staff broadcaster for over 15 years.

In addition to his radio work at the Communication Center, Joseph is very active in the Twin Cities theater community, as both an actor and director. He is the founder and artistic director of Classical Actors Ensemble (CAE.) CAE, established in 2010, is a theater group which specializes in producing plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries in a readily accessible and audience-friendly manner. In addition to their more traditional indoor productions,

CAE puts on free outdoor performances each summer in local parks. Each spring, CAE actors visit area schools to give students a first-hand introduction to theater.

Most recently, Joseph played the iconic villain Iago in CAE's fall 2022 production of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

A New Brighton native, Joseph attended Minnesota State University Moorhead and later earned an MFA from the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington D.C. He did post-graduate training in Knight-Thompson Speechwork, a specialized study program for voice teachers and coaches that focuses on pronunciation, phonetics, and dialects.

Besides his work with CAE, Joseph has served as a dialect coach and assistant director at the Guthrie Theater. As an actor, he has performed at the Penumbra Theater, the Old Log Theater, the Park Square Theater, and the Chanhassen Dinner Theater. For two years, he was the director of theater at Lakeville High School.

Joseph's enthusiasm for theater extends to his home life, too: his two-year-old son, Marlowe, is named for Christopher Marlowe, a famous English playwright of the 1500s.



Joseph Papke

The Engineering Unit: Unsung Hero of the Communication Center

At the far end of the Communication Center, down the hallway that runs past Radio Talking Book headquarters and the mailroom, hangs a sign that says, "Engineering." Who works in the Engineering Unit? And why is it so important?

The SSB Engineering Unit is responsible for the entire technology infrastructure of the Communication Center. "Any technology that the Communication Center uses, we keep running," says Dave Andrews, Engineering Unit supervisor.

In addition to Dave Andrews, the Engineering Unit staff consists of electronics technicians Jeff Johnson and Ed Stofferahn, as well as engineer Joe Niffen.

One very important role of the Engineering staff is to put the final touches on all books and other materials recorded by volunteers in the Audio Services unit.

The recording volume is adjusted as needed, all excess pauses or silences in the recording are edited out, and ultimately, the book is duplicated in the format the customer prefers. Then, the book or other material is ready to send to the customer who requested it.

Similarly, once a recorded book has been completed by volunteers and designated for posting on BARD (Braille and Audio Reading Download), a website sponsored by the National Library Service, electronics technician Ed Stofferahn removes extraneous digital elements and puts copyright protection software in place: this ensures that only authorized patrons with a print disability are able to access the recordings.



Engineering Unit staff: L-R Ed Stofferahn, Jeff Johnson, Joe Niffen, Dave Andrews (seated)

The Radio Talking Book service has five sites in Greater Minnesota that broadcast local newspapers (Duluth, Fergus Falls, Mankato, Rochester, and St. Cloud): engineering staff resolve any technical issues that affect broadcasting. If they can't fix the problem remotely, they will travel to the actual broadcasting site.

Closer to home, engineering staff are responsible for repairing and trouble-shooting any day-to-day issues in the Communication Center recording booths.

In addition, they have replaced some of the older computers in the booths with newer models and will be installing more in the near future. Over the next year, they will be distributing new machines to volunteers who record at home.

A Passion for Braille: Volunteer Transcriber Barb Miller

Volunteers play a vital role in all parts of the Communication Center, and the Braille Unit is no exception. Columbia Heights resident Barb Miller has been volunteering as a braille transcriber since retiring 15 years ago.

However, Barb's connection to braille goes back much further, when a *Reader's Digest* article about braille first piqued her interest. She received tutoring in transcription from Volunteer Braille Services in Golden Valley, and ultimately was certified as a braille transcriber by the National Library Service, a branch of the Library of Congress. She became acquainted with Mary Archer, a former SSB Braille Unit supervisor, and began assisting her in teaching a transcription class through Fridley Community Education. Barb went from helping Mary to eventually teaching the class herself.

The demands of a career as an executive secretary to several prominent Minnesota politicians, and later, in a law firm, meant that for some time Barb was simply too busy to continue working with braille. However, after retirement, she met up with Mary Archer again and decided to resume volunteering. Barb started out doing binding of braille volumes, then went on to transcription.

The biggest change that Barb has seen in her years of braille transcription is the streamlining of technology. She began her transcribing career using a Perkins Brailier, a typewriter-like machine. Mistakes were very difficult to erase on a Perkins. "One in the drawer, and ten on the floor" was a common saying among transcribers, meaning that, for every correct braille page, there were ten others that had to be discarded due to errors. Nowadays, Barb produces braille much faster and more efficiently on a computer, using a software called Braille 2000.



Barb Miller, volunteer

She has transcribed a wide variety of materials into braille, including short books for elementary school readers, full-length books for adults, and even a washing machine instruction manual!

Volunteering of many kinds has played a major role in Barb's life: in addition to braille transcription, she delivers for Meals on Wheels, is the financial secretary for her church, and formerly served on the Columbia Heights Library Board.

When asked what she likes best about transcribing braille, Barb replied: "I don't know exactly...it gives me something productive to do." She enjoys working with the Braille Unit staff, and most of all, finds great satisfaction in having produced countless volumes of braille material over the years.

The hard work and dedication of volunteers like Barb, and many others, enables the Communication Center to achieve its goal of making print accessible to thousands of Minnesotans.

2022 VOLUNTEER MILESTONES

Meet Our Multi-Talented Volunteers

We appreciate each of our volunteers. Here are those who achieved a milestone in 2022:

5-Year Volunteers

- Aguilar, Olivar Mario
- Anderson, Greg
- Anderson, Jim
- Berezovsky, Bonnie
- French, Cindy
- Herron, Linda
- McCarty, Cathy
- McCarty, Sean
- Olson, Barbara
- Piszczek, Esther
- Smith, Stephen
- Stoffel, Dolores (Loly)
- Sutton, Deborah
- Vavrosky, Laura
- Warfield, Irvin
- Wiklund, Clifford
- Wilson, Mary
- Wippler, Diane
- Wolf, Don

10-Year Volunteers

- Cochran, Susan
- Emery, Sharon
- Gerlach, Donald
- Hebert, Steven
- Joshua, Courtney
- Juntunen, Michelle
- MacRae, Dorothy
- Miersch, Janell

- Miersch, John
- Savage, Bernadette
- Spangrud, Marlin
- Speich, Thomas
- Stratioti, Cindy
- Whitledge, Jane
- Williams, Bruce

15-Year Volunteers

- Barry, Patricia (Trish)
- Danbury, Peter
- Eastwold, Paul
- Freimuth, Melanie
- Gergen, Dan
- Hanson, Bruce
- Hoffman, Kendra
- Houx, Oliver
- Klasen, Ann
- Klingsporn, Ken
- Lindskog, Jodi
- Lockwood, Janice
- Lyon, Thomas
- Olson, Heather

20-Year Volunteers

- Belfiori, Carol
- Wilmesmeier, Barbara

25-Year Volunteers

- Laurent, Cindi

30-Year Volunteers

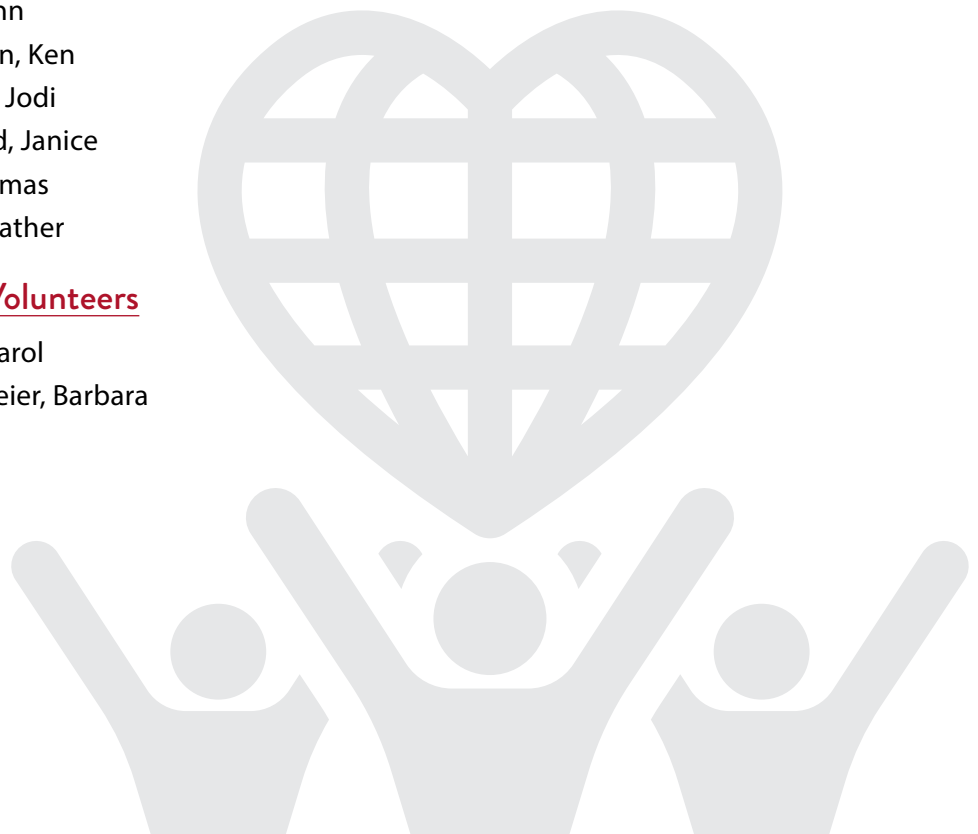
- Aspnes, Chip
- Miller, Glenn
- Zimmerman, Eileen

35-Year Volunteers

- Aune, Timothy
- Sadoff, Daniel

40-Year Volunteers

- Olson, Pat
- Perry, Katy







HOW YOU CAN HELP

Every Minnesota resident who can benefit from State Services for the Blind should know about our services. Please help spread the word that SSB provides blind, visually impaired, and DeafBlind Minnesotans the resources and tools to achieve equality, independence, and access. In addition, the SSB Communication Center enables those with print disabilities (conditions that make it difficult to hold a book or read standard print) to access news, textbooks, leisure books, and a wide variety of other written materials.

- As we've shown in this annual report, SSB's Communication Center is funded through multiple public and private partnerships. Our work as "Minnesota's Accessible Reading Source" depends upon the generosity of our volunteers and financial donors.
- If there's a senior citizen in your life who is losing vision due to macular degeneration, glaucoma, or some other condition, we're here for them. The Aging Eyes Initiative partners with community programs and organizations throughout Minnesota to help seniors adjust to vision loss. Email us at aging.eyes@state.mn.us, call us at 651-539-2276, or visit us at www.mn.gov/deed/ssb/seniors/aging-eyes.jsp.
- When you visit your ophthalmologist or optometrist, ask if he or she knows that SSB has the knowledge, services, and resources to help patients with vision loss to live well after their diagnosis.
- If you are an employer, talk with our business relations team about finding the candidate who can be your next great hire. SSB has a pool of job-seekers with skills and experience to fill a diverse range of positions.
- If you or someone you know has difficulty reading standard print and/or handling a book due to vision loss, dyslexia, or a physical impairment, learn more about the services available through the Communication Center by calling 651-539-1425.
- Check out the wide range of volunteer opportunities available at SSB by visiting us at www.MNSSB.org.

**SSB is now part of GiveMN,
which you can visit at
mn.gov/deed/ssbdonate**



State Services for the Blind is a program of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

2200 University Ave. W. #240 | St. Paul, MN 55114

651-539-2300 | Toll Free: 800-652-9000

www.mnssb.org