Greetings Council,

It is great to be here with you all. Before I go into my updates, I want to take a moment to recognize our colleague Dan Gausman, who passed away unexpectedly on November 9th. Dan was a man of ideas, and many of the projects I have shared in past Director’s reports came from those ideas. The work we have been doing with materials in other languages has been so successful because of Dan. The DSM-V project happened because Dan said we would make it happen. His memorial on Monday was standing room only, and that just shows what an impact he has made on so many people.

# National Governors Association Disability Policy Action Lab

At the end of October, I attended the NGA Disability Policy Action Lab in DC. I joined a few others from the Governor’s Workforce Development Board’s Disability Equity Committee, which I am the staff liaison for. As a result of that action lab, we are developing a disability policy landscape map that outlines all the current disability-related policies that exist in the state and identifies areas of need, contradiction, or overlap. We then have plans to introduce policies or Legislation that would address those areas. NGA is now offering a chance to participate in a longer-term learning collaborative, so we formed a core team and are applying for it. The core team includes the GWDB DEC chair Josh Berg, Senator Hoffman, Nicauris Heredia with the Governor’s Office, David Dively with MCD, and me as the team lead. If accepted, we will then be convening a larger team of state and local partners that can help us act.

Evolve: VR Updates

Evolve continues to be the roadmap for our vision and strategy. I presented a “one year later” update during the leadership forum at CSAVR, and Jon and I will be sharing that same update with staff next week. When you sit down to list out all the progress that has been made and how much is still left to go, it can be both exhilarating and defeating all at the same time. Some days we take two steps forward and one step back, other days we take three steps back. Our biggest, most obvious success has been all the progress made with Awareness. We have had more media hits this past year than I ever remember. We have a DEED Media Specialist who has taken an interest in what we do, and in fact, I just took her on a tour of SSB on Tuesday. Our Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund is gaining traction, not only here in Minnesota but from other states who are interested. Now I don’t know if this is correlation without causation, but later on in my updates, I will share that we finally have seen a notable spike in how many people we are serving in WDU.

# Administrative Updates

## Community Partner

Yesterday, Susan Kusz transitioned into her new role as Assistant Contracts Specialist. She will be working closely with Jennifer Beilke on a variety of things, including facilitating the background check process, maintaining the SharePoint and website for community partners, and coordinating contract monitoring. Susan will continue to assist the SRC-B until we are able to hire for the replacement. We anticipate by the April SRC-B we will have a new SRC-B Staff Liaison.

Master Contracts:

* 3 Master Contract Amendments were executed
* We currently have 1 request in for Master Contract amendment
* There is 1 contract in negotiations
* Jennifer is working with an individual who went through our AT Certification process and intends to submit an application and proposal for contract.

Other Contracts:

* Now that our Court Reporter has become a certified Targeted Vendor, we can develop an Equity Select contract
* We are planning to do another contract for the Blind Abilities Podcasts
* We are looking into the possibility of a contract with the State of South Dakota for ATB services with their training facility. This could be used when customers are geographically closer to South Dakota and MN partners are not able to meet the needs of the customer.

## Outreach

Yesterday, we welcomed Lisa Rodgers to the SSB team and our second outreach coordinator. Yes, indeed we will have two Lisas. In addition to working closely with Lisa Larges on outreach events, she will be our new Combined State Plan Coordinator. Lisa is joining our call today, so I will turn it over to her to introduce herself.

A few other updates from outreach:

The January/February edition of the The Women Today in Duluth will be featuring a story about Judy Breuer. Judy is a patron of our National Library Service and was the person who requested the DSM-V. Our media team within our Department had shared the story with a few media outlets, and one picked it up.

Lisa Larges, Anna Werner, and I presented at the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council last month. Lisa and Anna shared about the work the Communication Center has been doing that supports language revitalization for Dakota and Ojibwe. We hope that presentation helped us gain traction in finding native speakers of those languages to read for us. We also hope to be able to compensate them for their time, as their time is incredibly valuable and limited.

## Facilities

Interviews begin next week for a new facilities supervisor, and we welcomed Patrick Lang as our new mailroom coordinator.

Because of some unavoidable delays, the installation of new equipment in our conference rooms had to be delayed from December to January. We had already moved this meeting to virtual before we learned there was going to be a delay, and there wasn’t enough notice to bring it back to hybrid and order food.

A small team from Vocational Rehabilitation Services are looking to sublease some space over in our administrative services area. If all works out, they would move in around October 2024.

We are in the process of receiving revised and updated quotes for the cafeteria remodel. Since the feds have approved our establishment activities, we can now (finally) move forward. Once we get that sent off, our next phase is the Program Services remodel. That will involve taking down a number of cubes and adding modular offices that staff can check out and use. It will also include adding more storage for SSB.

# Program Services Updates

## Business Enterprise Program

The BEP is working with its Elected Committee of Blind Vendors to update its policy and procedure manual. We hope to have this ratified by the end 2024.

The BEP worked with its Elected Committee of Blind Vendors to provide another$3,000 vacation payment to each BEP operator for the 2023/2024 state fiscal year.  The BEP dispersed $130,000 in support funds to BEP operators last fiscal year.

BEP staff are working collaboratively on collecting information for the annual RSA 15 report. This is due by December 29th and provides a snapshot of all fiscal and program-related activities.

The BEP was working with one of its BEP operators on a possible bid for a military dining contract in the State of Wisconsin. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, the time it was going to take to get a special SAMS.Gov account (it takes several weeks) did not match with when the bid was due. This would have been a first for the Randolph-Sheppard community – one state bidding on a business opportunity in another state. Wisconsin was not able to provide a bid during this bid cycle and supported Minnesota in its effort to create a business opportunity for a Minnesota BEP operator. However, we are positioning ourselves so that if another opportunity like this comes along, we will have everything ready to go.

The BEP is working with one of its BEP operators on the potential of creating a commissary business at (2) Dept. of Human Service MSOPs. This service is currently under contract with a 3rd party vendor until 2026. The BEP hopes to be able to exercise its priority when the current contract expires.

## Senior Services Unit

• Jessica Kopp and Melanie Dailey are in there second week of ATB training. They should be ready to be independent in the field by early February after low vision training and job shadowing

• We finished the year serving 3,617 seniors and 79 IL consumers

• The Mayo collaboration is still having some growing pains after Vivien Yip left the Mayo. That and the other Doctor is retiring in the spring. We may have to regroup and re-evaluate without those two in-house champions, but Jessica (our new staff) is an OT and she will be assigned Mayo and has a chance to revive things

• In Bri’s stead, Ed is working through the process of getting four drivers hired

## Workforce Development Unit

### Pre-ETS and Transition Quick Hits

## We hosted a virtual College 101 program on Monday, December 4 with over 37 people registered.

## Our Transition Coordinator and Work Opportunities Navigator are reaching out to students who are eligible for various summer internship opportunities.

## In January we will hold a virtual meeting for those students interested in attending a Frist Gen program, which is a program designed for students who are the first generation in their family to attend college.

## We will be partnering with Wilderness Inquiry in February to offer a winter activity to students. More info to come!

## We are planning with people from University of Minnesota Twin Cities for a "Tools for School" day, which will focus on assistive technology learning and skills.

### Data

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Data Set** | **Count/#** |
| Applications Received for Services | **92** |
| Individuals Being Served (**WDU** Open Cases) | **702** |
| Applicants (**WDU** Pending Cases) | **12** |
| Successful Closures | **25** |
| Unsuccessful Closures | **37** |
| Total Closures- Month (**November**) | **6** |
| Applications Received- Month (**November**) | **26** |
| Average Caseload Size per Counselor **WDU** | **44** |

# Communication Center Updates

## Audio Services

Audio Services is deeply saddened to announce the passing of our friend and colleague, Dan Gausman, on November 9th. Dan was so many things in addition to being our librarian and information specialist, too many to mention here. He will be remembered for his endless patience, quirky sense of humor, and his fierce devotion to making printed materials accessible to all.

Audio Services Page Counts and Data Overview for Federal Fiscal Year 2023

* Number of accesses of NFB Newsline: 656,082
* Number of NLS Equipment and accessories circulated: 3,963
* Print pages transcribed (recorded): 34,791
* Print pages previously recorded and redistributed: 12,333
* Print pages transcribed and/or redistributed as E-Text or Large Print: 110
* Print pages digitally structured for recording by Audio Services and Radio Talking Book: 100,508

The day before Thanksgiving, Lisa Larges, Anna Werner, and I presented at the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council. We shared the work we have been doing to increase access to materials in the Dakota and Anishinaabemowen languages, and how we are hoping to support the Language Revitalization initiative that launched here in Minnesota. We also hoped to connect with native speakers, as we cannot continue to produce materials if we don’t have anyone to read for us. We are investigating ways we can pay for their time, as native speakers are being tapped into by many agencies, not just our own.

We recently recorded and uploaded to BARD three brochures in English and Spanish by the National Eye Institute of the National Institutes of Health:

* El Glaucoma. (Glaucoma)
* Las Cataratas. (Cataracts)
* La Retinopatia Diabetica. (Diabetic Retinopathy)

Special thanks to Communication Center volunteer and retired Spanish instructor Andrea Bell!

We welcomed award-winning author, educator, and motivational speaker Dr. Artika Tyner to record her children’s book Justice Makes a Difference. Dr. Tyner is the Associate Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion at the University of St. Thomas. She is committed to training students to serve as social engineers who create new inroads to justice and freedom.

## Radio Talking Book

Long time intermittent broadcaster, MaryBeth Redmond, has transitioned to full-time broadcasting. She and Michael La Fleur will rotate as the a.m. broadcaster with Michael taking the lead Sunday through Thursday and MaryBeth broadcasting Fridays and Saturdays as well as recording other programs and processing books for air.

We also hired and have been training Hope Boos, a new intermittent broadcaster and excellent reader.

*Engineering*

We, SSB, have placed just over 1000 audio books on NLS BARD. The Braille and Talking Book Library has placed over 300 more Minnesota-related books there.

We are still close to releasing new versions of our RTB iOS and Android apps. We have discovered a few glitches, through testing, so need to fix them prior to release. Work continues on moving the Braille unit to the new KLAS software.

Staff Updates

## Since January 1, 2023, we have welcomed 19 new staff, bringing our entire staffing level to 150 people (give or take one or 2). At least 9 of those positions were not back fills but instead newly added positions made possible by a healthy budget and an increase in our appropriation.

The complete list is as follows:

* Alexis Robinson, Job Coach, WDU *New*
* Arthur (Ray) Mccoy, ERAF Project Coordinator, (Employment Reasonable Accommodation Fund) *New*
* Beth Hatfield, Metro Area Driver
* Brandon Herring, Broadcaster, RTB
* Brynn Lee, Assistive Tech Trainer, SSU
* Cheryl Lavrenz, VR Tech, WDU
* Darcie Koecher, ERAF Account Technician *New*
* Debra Jensen-Hobson, VR Tech, WDU
* Evan Gardner, Low Vision Assistive Tech Trainer, WDU *New*
* Jennifer Fischer, VR Tech, WDU
* Jennifer Pelletier, Orientation and Mobility Instructor *New*
* Jessica Kopp, Counselor, SSU *New*
* Lisa Rogers, Outreach Coordinator, ASU *New*
* Melanie Dailey, Counselor, SSU *New*
* Michell Gip, Orientation and Mobility Instructor *New*
* Patrick Lang, Central Services, Mailroom
* Stephen Bakke, Broadcaster, RTB
* Thomas Conry, Broadcaster, RTB
* Woinitu Estifanos, Assistant Fiscal Coordinator, ASU

We also had a few staff take promotional opportunities within SSB. Those staff include Brent Benson, Jeremy Hoke, and Susan Kusz.

We do have a few positions coming down the pike that have not yet been posted but are floating in the HR pool, including a second data analyst, a multiple systems and pathways navigator serving students, a part-time account tech to support Kara in BEP, and a creation of a lead VR-Tech role.