Greetings Council,

I hope everyone is enjoying an early spring, though I fully anticipate it will be short lived and March will make up for the lack of snow and cold weather in February.

National Governor’s Association Disability Inclusive Workplace Policy

Minnesota was one of six states to be accepted into the NGA Disability Inclusive Workplace Policy learning collaborative. There are five core members on that team, with me as the lead. Our goal is to create a statewide disability policy map that lays out every single policy we have here in Minnesota and where are the gaps. The plan is to then propose any Legislative changes that need to happen to help promote the employment of people with disabilities.

My Three 2024 Priorities

I have made it known that, in addition and as part of Evolve: SSB, I have three priorities I am going to be heavily focused on in 2024:

1. Marketing of the Communication Center
2. Developing an effective approach for serving individuals who are English Language Learners
3. Re-instituting internships at SSB

I think the first two are pretty self-explanatory on why these need to be a priority. The third may be less obvious. The obvious reason is we want to be actively recruiting folks to come work at SSB. But the more important reason is we need professionals entering the field of blindness and rehabilitation, whether that be as a Braille transcriptionist, contracted service provider, or something similar. Our profession is experiencing an incredible workforce shortage. And if we don’t have professionals providing these services, then our customers are not getting what they need.

# A Few Evolve: VR/Evolve: SSB Updates

**Evolve: Mindset.** Our focus in February is around changing the mindset of eligibility. Jon shared the following message to the WDU team, and I think it is worth re-iterating here.

Across the country, states have been focusing heavily on eligibility, including how to speed up the process and make it less restrictive. We have been looking at our eligibility policy and we have realized that we may be overlooking particularly important barriers to employment: negative social and cultural bias. We want you to know that these are legitimate and substantial impediments to employment on their own and should be taken into consideration as part of the eligibility process. We understand this may be a mindset shift, as we have typically looked at more tangible and functional barriers, such as adjustment to blindness (ATB), vocational training, and job seeking skills.

For example, a person may have completed ATB, is vocationally trained, and has the knowledge and ability to conduct their own job search, and yet encounters repeated closed doors when job hunting. This could likely be a result of negative social and cultural bias to blindness - in fact, we know from research that people who are sighted are likely to be hired over someone who is blind, even with similar qualifications.

As part of Evolve: Mindset, we want to remind you to look beyond just those tangible and functional limitations when determining eligibility. For those individuals who seemingly do not have any substantial impediments to employment because they have received the training and technology they need, carefully consider the social and cultural implications and barriers of an applicant being blind, low vision, and DeafBlind. We can help.

**Evolve: Awareness**. We have a dual track of active outreach planning going on: one focused on vocational rehabilitation and one focused on our Communication Center, which is my number one priority for 2024.

The planning around vocational rehabilitation is a joint effort between VRS and SSB. The reason we are doing this jointly is we can pool our resources for a much larger campaign, we can reach more people with the same messaging, and we can get ahead of those who apply for VRS services who should actually be coming to SSB. Our primary objective is to expand awareness of VRS and SSB and their services to both adults and youth from the wider population of Minnesotans with disabilities who could benefit from services to assist them in preparing for, finding, advancing in, and keeping employment.

Key Results:

* Increase the total number of applicants for services.
* Increase the number of applicants from underserved youth and adult populations.
* Increase the number of applicants from the fuller range of disabilities including disability populations who may not be familiar with VRS or SSB services.
* Increase the number of applicants/participants interested in career advancement.

The planning around our Communication Center is focused on reaching individuals who have never before used our CC services, which primarily includes those individuals with a print disability. There will be a heavy focus on educating school districts, as anecdotally we have heard that students with learning disabilities, autism, and physical disabilities have no idea our program is available to them. We also have are building connections with community organizations that focus on learning disabilities.

One thing we “quietly” implemented as a pilot was an online interest form for our services (not just VR, but SSU as well). Originally, our sister agency VRS launched this form on their website and they received a few referrals that were really meant for SSB. We responded to this by putting out our own comparable interest form. It has been just a few months, but we have already received over 100 inquiries. VRS has received almost 800.

# 2024 Legislative Session Overview

February 12th marks the start of the 2024 Legislative Session. May 20th marks the end, in this case it is sine die. This means the Legislature is done, done, done with no plans to reconvene. All active bills are also done, done, done. This session is typically ear marked for policy changes and bonding. There will not be many opportunities for programs to request additional funds. Therefore, in regard to SSB, we anticipate a fairly quiet next few months. However, we will track and follow closely any introduced bills that have implication on the disability community or our program.

# Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund Updates

# To date, we have received 32 applications​ and approved $57,708 in reimbursements. More continue to come in, as Ray McCoy continues doing multiple outreach events every week.

# Administrative Updates

## Staffing Update

I am hiring an executive aide to fill the vacancy left behind when Susan transitioned to the contracts team. This position will be an important person for the SRC-B. It is currently undergoing a job audit with HR, and while I hope to

## Community Partnerships

Susan has completed her staff ATB training, and the first project she has been tasked with is to update our Community Partner Handbook. She will be gathering a group of staff and community partners to get their feedback and insight.

The contracts team have developed their 2024 Community Partner Strategic Plan (working document). I wanted to share it with you all, so you know the projects and priorities we will be working on.

*Draft* Community Partner Strategic Planning

1. Goal 1: Ongoing and timely communication with our partners
   1. Strategy 1: Implement a monthly newsletter (March 2024 roll out is the goal)
   2. Strategy 2: Continue quarterly forums
   3. Strategy 3: Community partners webpage redesign
   4. Strategy 4: Update the community partner handbook
   5. Strategy 5: Implement an annual community partner satisfaction survey at the same time as the customer satisfaction survey
2. Goal 2: Reinstate ongoing community partner monitoring
   1. Strategy 1: Review and update the monitoring protocol
   2. Strategy 2: Develop the monitoring schedule and implement monitoring
3. Goal 3: Manage our contracts
   1. Strategy 1: Develop a SharePoint file management system to organize all the contract documents
   2. Strategy 2: Develop ongoing training for staff on all things contracts
   3. Strategy 3: Update our rate setting methodology documentation
   4. Strategy 4: Develop contracts check list
4. Goal 4: Develop new community partners
   1. Strategy 1: Develop a “how to be a new community partner” handbook
   2. Strategy 2: Develop an outreach plan for identifying potential new partners.
   3. Strategy 3: Develop and update our community partner standards & assessments (i.e. teaching demonstrations)

* We have 1 new P/T Master Contract in the negotiation and development phase.
* We are working on a P/T Master Contract amendment request.
* Since the temporary closure of Blind, Inc., we have been in contact with the Structured Discovery programs in the states of Colorado, Louisiana, and Iowa regarding contracting options.
* We are also in the process of establishing a contract with the South Dakota training center after an Engagement Request with Minnesota Community Partners was completed.
* Other contracts we are working on include the Equity Selects contract with our court reporter Kim Evavold, and the Pre-ETS podcasting with Jeff Thompson.

## Outreach

Outreach and Communications team has several projects in the hopper for 2024:

* Presenting and/or exhibiting at 7 conferences February – June
* Collaborating with the Communication Center to develop an outreach plan to increase participation in audio services, RTB, & braille
* Working on providing audio translations of SSB services to connect with Minnesota’s immigrant communities
* Enhancing communication with community partners through a newsletter and satisfaction survey
* Collecting feedback through the 2024 customer satisfaction survey in late summer
* Refreshing the SSB website for clearer navigation and ease of use
* Continuing regular communications with customers, vendors, and partners with monthly newsletters
* Sharing SSB Senior Services offerings with senior living facilities and Optometrists in State
* Partnering with the MN DNR to aid in their state parks and trails accessibility initiative

## Facilities

We currently have a lot of things in the works and coming down the pipeline.

1. Cafeteria remodel.
2. Security systems updates. Intercom systems. 5 new cameras. Card readers
3. Conference rooms A, B, C and D - updated with new equipment. The reprogramming should be done shortly.
4. Hired 4 new drivers. Waiting on the go ahead to offer a 5th. Barb Lowden, Mike perneil, Bradford Teslow and Dave Nelson.
5. First Aid/CPR/AED Training @ SSB (TBD)

## FFY 2023/FFY 2024 Review

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| FFY 24 pie chart. 66% is funding from federal, 30% is funding from state, 2% is funding from donations, and 2% is funding from third party sources. |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

**Budget and Expenditures by Program**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Program** | **Total Budget** | **Total Expenditures** | **Balance Less Expenditures** | **Current Spend %** |
| Admin | $ 1,508,393.90 | $ 746,871.81 | $ 761,522.09 | **49.51%** |
| Audio | $ 722,022.95 | $ 304,216.43 | $ 417,806.52 | **42.13%** |
| BEP | $ 1,562,673.50 | $ 641,977.54 | $ 920,695.96 | **41.08%** |
| Braille | $ 1,837,165.21 | $ 1,001,682.86 | $ 835,482.35 | **54.52%** |
| CC Admin | $ 517,227.00 | $ 271,652.35 | $ 245,574.65 | **52.52%** |
| Engineering | $ 975,417.50 | $ 398,183.78 | $ 577,233.72 | **40.82%** |
| RTB | $ 840,756.35 | $ 342,366.72 | $ 498,389.63 | **40.72%** |
| Senior Services | $ 3,110,553.60 | $ 1,629,273.90 | $ 1,481,279.70 | **52.38%** |
| Workforce Development\* | $ 13,436,985.00 | $ 6,092,731.31 | $ 7,344,253.69 | **45.34%** |
| Other AFS/MNIT | $ 271,802.50 | $ 37,149.84 | $ 234,652.66 | **13.67%** |
| **Grand Total** | **$ 24,782,997.51** | **$ 11,466,106.54** | **$ 13,316,890.97** | **46.27%** |

# Program Services Updates

## Business Enterprise Program

The BEP submitted its annual report to the Rehabilitation Services Administration in December. Here are some highlights from 2023:

**23 Businesses Served** – down 1 year over year. The business that closed was due to a retirement. The profits for this business were less than $15,000 annually. All locations which made up this business were absorbed by other BEP operators.

**$5.3 million in Sales** – This is up 12% year over year. About 8% less than the $5.7 million in sales the program report in the year leading up to the pandemic...we’re trending in the right direction.

**$55,430 Avg. Net Profit** – This is one of the highest net profit averages the program has ever had!

**Contributed Over $1,000,000 to Minnesota’s Economy**

* BEP businesses employed 19 individuals.
* Paid over $486,000 in wages
* Paid over $308,000 in state taxes
* Paid over $250,000 in program fees which are used to purchase equipment, parts, supplies and provide vacation benefits to all BEP participants.

## Senior Services Unit

Our two new staff folks are through with their adjustment to blindness training, their low vision training, and their job shadowing. They are up and running solo. This is a huge deal for us and eases the burden for the whole SSU gang. The new territories are situated in the SW Metro and the SE Metro ranging down to the Rochester area.

Our colleague Lauren Eliason in Fergus Falls will be out starting in early March. She’s having a baby.

Our partnership with the Mayo Clinic has run into several challenges. The optometrist who spearheaded the initiative has left the Mayo and the remaining staff are not as committed to making it run. We are meeting with them in mid-February to see if we can’t work out the details. The main issue has been information sharing in terms of the patient’s eye conditions and scheduling.

## Workforce Development Unit

Lindsey Hanson is developing a position description to hire an English Language Learning Specialist to add to the Employment and Training Team. This has been a huge need for many years, as we unsuccessfully close dozens of individuals who are New Americans. In addition, Blind Inc offered the only program in Minnesota that married ELL instruction with ATB. The Adult Basic Education programs only will accept individuals with a certain English level/CASAS score, and their curriculum is not adapted for someone who cannot access print or Braille. There is a huge gap, and we need someone who can not only provide instruction but develop relationships and curriculum with ABE programs so we can solve this long-standing issue.

The team is in the process of hiring two counselors (posting closed Jan 30, 2024) and one Vocational Rehabilitation Technician (posting closed Feb 1, 2024). These positions replace Anna Fowler, Alisha Otteson, and Jeremy Hoke. Anna took a position at DHS doing monitoring of lead agencies. Alisha took a promotion as a regional area manager at VRS. And Jeremy was promoted to Facilities Supervisor at SSB. This team is also planning to add one additional counselor and VR-Tech given the influx of applications we are receiving. There is also planning around having a lead counselor, who will potentially be embedded within the quality assurance, training, and data team. While details are still in the works, we anticipate this lead counselor would oversee future interns among other duties. We also are working with HR on reviewing the VR-Tech classification at SSB, as we believe these positions should be classed at a professional level versus at a clerical level. We are at the stage where we are updating the position descriptions and then HR will begin a job audit.

### Data

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Data Set** | **Count/#** |
| Applications Received for Services | **Since 7/1/23 - 143** |
| Individuals Being Served (**WDU** Open Cases) | **729** |
| Applicants (**WDU** Pending Cases) | **3** |
| Successful Closures | **Since 7/1/23 - 32** |
| Unsuccessful Closures | **61** |
| Total Closures- Month (January) | **21** |
| Applications Received- Month (january)20 | **20** |
| Average Caseload Size per Counselor **WDU** | **48** |

## Pre-ETS

* Our first two Peer Ambassadors will be starting their work with us soon. This concept grew from a multi-state program. The intent is to offer these work-based learning experiences to students in order to maintain a youth voice in student programming, as well as have students be a part of marketing programs and welcoming new students. Amy Arias-Esquivias is currently a freshman at the University of Minnesota–Duluth studying social work with a goal of working in the BVI field. Amy has shown skills in various areas over the years I’ve known her, with acting in high school plays being an area in which she has received recognition. This, coupled with her ambition and desire to connect with others, will be a great asset to our team! Maddy Major is the second Peer Ambassador, and she is an Armstrong High School junior taking PSEO classes at Normandale Community College. She has taken on some leadership roles in her studies at Armstrong High School and Normandale, has proven to be a strong self-advocate, and has engaged in various activities with SSB to build her skills and be set up for success as she pursues her career goals!
* We will be partnering with Wilderness Inquiry on March 16 for a winter event. More information coming soon!
* We will be piloting a First Gen program for those students who are first in their family to attend college. This program will develop community and harness self-advocacy as a tool to help students navigate new systems.
* On April 12, we will co-host a “Tech Tools” workshop with the University of MN, Twin Cities.
* Our Work Opportunities Navigators, Transition Coordinator, and Counselors are identifying summer internship opportunities for students and reaching out to help them apply where needed.
* As of Feb. 2, our student count is 182, which is a number not seen since before the pandemic began.

# Communication Center Updates

## Audio Services

Audio Services has been busy with a noteworthy increase of college textbooks for winter semester. Six students are keeping us busy recording subjects including Law, Psychiatry and Cognitive Therapy, Mental Health Counseling, and Yoga for students in the state of Minnesota.

We are also beginning to receive applications for service from K-12 disability and special education teachers who are recognizing our ability to serve sighted but otherwise print-disabled individuals. We hope this trend continues as we try to raise awareness of the services we can provide to the broader print disability community, including people with qualifying perceptual or reading disabilities and people with qualifying physical disabilities.

## Braille

Braille Services Provided to Minnesota Students 07/01/23 to 02/06/24

Number of students served: 38

Number of braille titles purchased from other states: 70

Number of braille titles newly transcribed by CC: 128

Number of braille titles reproduced and reused by CC: 154

Total number of braille titles provided: 352

Number braille pages purchased from other states: 96,353

Number of braille pages newly transcribed by CC: 7,532

Number of braille pages reproduced and reused by CC: 74,330

Total braille pages provided to Minnesota students: 178,215

Purchase Books: 115

Print Requested Books: 79

Library & Embossed Requested Books: 84

FY23-24 Total: 278

## *Radio Talking Book*

# of new books broadcast

* DEC 2023 – 21
* JAN 2024 – 22
* FEB 2024 – 18

In January we made a minor programming change: Snippets (Sundays at 6 a.m.) was replaced by The Curious Mind—*science and esoterica from Scientific American and other sources*. The Curious Mind’s current slot (Sundays at 1 p.m.) was replaced by a new program, Rolling Stone—*featuring readings from Rolling Stone magazine*.

An interesting data point: In SFY22, we had 15,908 hits on RTB. In SFY 23, it was 17,435. And already, only little over half way through the year, we have had 18,085 hits.

*Engineering*

We had hoped to release new versions of the Radio Talking Book apps for smartphones, iOS and Android, but are not quite there. There are some outstanding bugs related to font size, when it is increased, but we are close.

One staff member, Jeff Johnson, has resigned from state service. We are currently working on filling the position.

## Development Office

Angela is currently working on the next Planned Giving Newsletter which will arrive mid April to around 3,000 donors. The Planned Giving Newsletter is a targeted newsletter that is sent to current donors.

FFY2023 Annual Fund Total Gifts- $166,931.81 total raised from 630 gifts and 503 donors ($3,570 of this total was ear marked for the Senior Services Unit).

FFY2023 Endowment Total Gifts- $237,693.77 representing 3 gifts from two donors.