



EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

STATE SERVICES FOR THE BLIND



2023 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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2023 was the year we honored our 100 years of history and planned for our future.

In 1923, Louis Armstrong released his first recording, Harry Houdini freed himself from a straitjacket while hanging upside down, 5 pounds of Gold Medal flour cost 27 cents, and a four-bedroom house was about \$7,000. One hundred years later, Minneapolis mayor, Jacob Frey, renamed the city 'Swiftapolis' when Taylor Swift came to town, your 5-pound bag of Gold Medal flour cost about \$5, and the median price for a home in Minnesota soared toward the \$350,000 mark.

On June 22, 2023, Governor Tim Walz issued a proclamation celebrating that day as "One Hundred Years of State Services for the Blind Day." As with all such anniversaries, our centennial milestone afforded the opportunity to take stock of the extraordinary progress achieved by Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, low vision, or print disabled, and to chart our development as an agency in supporting those achievements. More importantly, even as we took time to look back on how far we've come in 100 years, we used those remembrances as a catalyst to strengthen our services as we look ahead toward where we are going. I'm very proud that in this centennial year, we have laid the groundwork to evolve with the rapidly changing times. Mindful of the road we've traveled across a century of progress, I will share some of the highlights from 2023 against the backdrop of history.

Employment: Then and Now

Then

The 1923 legislation, through which SSB was established, sought to improve the education of blind children and improve the living conditions of blind adults in Minnesota. The section on employment reads, in part,

"The Board shall endeavor to secure for the adult blind of the state and youths of legal working age such vocational training, labor and employment as may be adapted to their respective capacity, and shall, so far as may be feasible, aid such persons in securing any provisions which may be made by the school for the blind or other state agencies for the betterment of their lot."



Chisholm broom making shop

At that time, one of the few opportunities for people who were blind or low vision was to work in specific professions such as chair caning, or broom making, as pictured here from a shop in Chisholm.

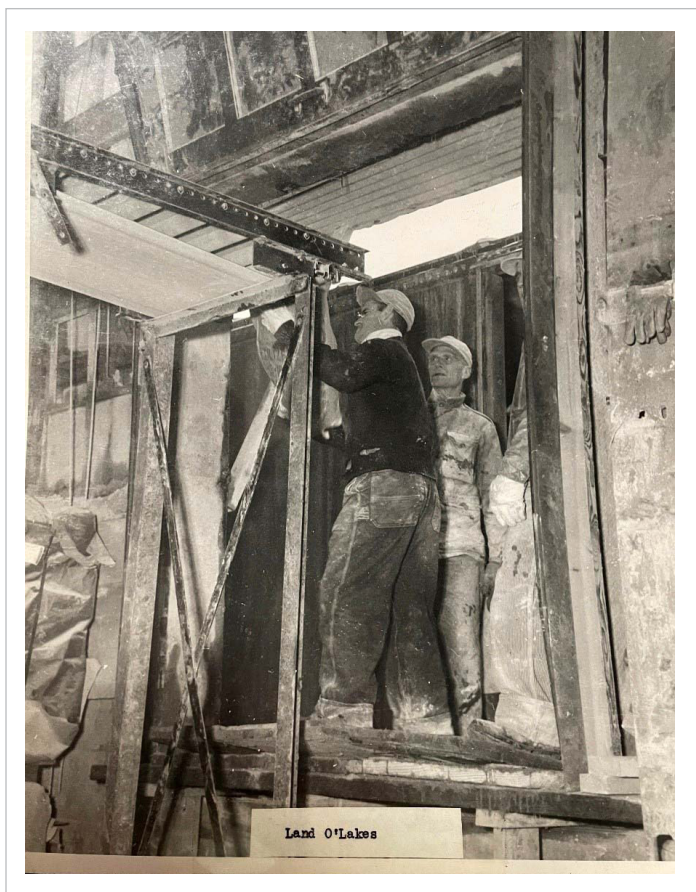
In 1926, the state agency that would become SSB hired its first staff - Mrs. Emily C. Gaffney. From that point on, we began connecting blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans with tools, training, and resources as they pursued their goals for finding work.

In those early decades, the barriers to employment were enormous, especially because of societal prejudice and misunderstanding. But over time, SSB customers proved their worth as skilled and valued employees. Our SSB archives include a letter from the early 1950s in which a Land O'Lakes supervisor commends the skills of two employees who were blind and worked on an assembly line: "We are well pleased with the work and attitude of these men. They are on the job every day and as far as production of work I would say a little above standard."

Now

Looking at our successful employment outcomes in 2023, it's hard to over-state the advances made by people who are blind, DeafBlind, and low vision, including thousands of SSB customers who have come through our doors in the last century.

This year, the average hourly wage for fulltime work for our customers who found jobs is \$23.14. Of our 75 successful employment outcomes, four are earning over \$40 per hour, and 16 are earning above \$25. What's more,



Picture of Land O'Lakes Employees

the number of customers in our Workforce program has increased significantly and is now back to pre-pandemic levels. This tells me that more blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans are ready to take that next step in advancing their employment goals.

Another notable takeaway from our employment outcomes is the breadth and diversity of jobs that our customers have landed. Not so long ago, many blind, DeafBlind, and low vision people were virtually excluded from many entry level jobs because the right accommodations weren't available to make those jobs accessible, or because our society didn't yet recognize that there could be nonvisual ways for doing these jobs. This is significant because those entry level jobs provide the opportunity to gain the work experience necessary to advance to higher paying jobs.

At the other end of the spectrum, only a few years ago, it was rare to have significant numbers of blind, DeafBlind, and low vision individuals in high-paying professions. Looking at the jobs our customers found in this past year shows how radically this landscape is changing. Several customers are working in fulfillment centers – jobs that require speed, accuracy, skill, and stamina. Others are working in trades, in healthcare, in customer service, and food production. Our customers are also finding lucrative and rewarding positions in the law, medicine, chiropractic professions, accounting, and social work.

Preparing Young Adults for Their Future: Then and Now

Then

A report from the Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1908-09 includes the detail that a graduate of the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind went on to be the first blind person to earn a doctorate, a degree earned from Yale University.

While there has long been emphasis on education for students who are blind, DeafBlind, or low vision, concerted efforts to assist young adults in the transition to life after high school is a fairly recent development. Here in Minnesota, the State Academy for the Blind opened in 1866. Nearly 150 years later, in 2014, the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act included provisions that significantly strengthened our mandate to support young adults.

Now

2023 brought another year of robust programming to help students build skills for working, living independently, and self-advocacy. A "College 101" event and a canoe trip with Wilderness Inquiry were two such programming highlights. We partnered with the Minnesota Department of Education for our annual Summer Transition Program, and, for the first time, brought in Sky's The Limit Communications to offer more in-depth training for our young adults. Our counselors and two work opportunities navigators helped students find jobs and valuable work experience. In 2023, 41% of our total Workforce customers were between the ages of 14 and 21, and I am excited and hopeful for their futures.

Small Business Owners: Then and Now

Then

Passage of the Randolph-Sheppard Act in 1936 opened the way for blind entrepreneurs to establish vending businesses on federal properties. In 1941 Minnesota appropriated \$2,500 for the program. It wasn't until 1947 that the legislature opened state properties rent free for Business Enterprise small-business owners to vend "soft drinks (excluding 3.2 beer), food, candies, tobacco, souvenirs, notions, and related merchandise." The photo here shows a vendor from those early years.

In any recounting of the history of the Business Enterprise Program, surely the shutdown of 2020 because of the global pandemic will feature as a pivotal moment. Not only did the small-business owners in our BEP weather this crisis, but subsequently they've needed to re-tool in the wake of the decline of in-office work. That's why our BEP is truly the comeback story of 2023.

Now

In this last year, the average net profit for the 23 BEP businesses was \$54,420. One blind operator made BEP history by earning a net profit of \$49,000 in one month alone. The program purchased 200 new vending machines



Harry Weinbold, owner of a Business Enterprise Program stand at a Rochester, MN post office.

to replace and upgrade current stock. What's more, we've aggressively pursued expansion to new locations to help overcome the drop in sales due to less traffic in office buildings. In addition, this last year, staff and business owners traveled to Tennessee to learn firsthand about other business models within the Randolph-Sheppard program.

Serving Seniors: Then and Now

Then

Back in 1951, Emily Gaffney, who, at that time, had been working at SSB for 25 years, wrote an article titled "Home Teaching for the Blind". Within the article, she stated:

"We all know that there is no one so boring as a person without interests; and the first task the home teacher should undertake is to teach the blind person how he can carry on with former activities, even though he cannot see. A useful and a happy person-whether blind or sighted-is welcomed everywhere. One who enjoys reading should be provided with a talking book machine and taught how to read and write braille. Elderly people or those who have a poor sense of touch may find it impossible to learn to read with their fingers. Typing should be taught, for in this way a person can carry on correspondence with former friends and business associates. Pencil writing also is taught, and all blind people are encouraged to continue signing their names on checks and legal documents. The individual who enjoys card playing is strongly urged to learn braille so that he can use a deck of cards marked in braille. Blind people are shown how to use a dial telephone; they are taught how to make change, how to fold bills so that they can recognize them."

Now

Attitudes and language may have changed since Emily Gaffney's time, and she would never have begun to imagine the amazing changes brought about by technology. Still, the underlying principles of sharing practical tips and tricks for doing everyday tasks non-visually remains the same. Last year, our Senior Services team was out doing just that, helping more than 3,600 Minnesota seniors living with vision loss. We continue for the second year at the Mayo Clinic, providing both convenience and hope for seniors at the point of care. A budget increase allowed us to add two new senior services counselors to our staff, a critically important expansion for this in-demand service.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

The Communication Center: Then and Now

Then

The first photo here, from the inaugural broadcast of the Radio Talking Book (RTB) back in 1969 is a reminder of the innovative spirit that has always been at the heart of our Communication Center. C. Stanley Potter, who founded the Communication Center in 1953, had a saying, "Good enough is never good enough." That spirit has animated our work in the 70 years since.

Now

The second photo, from September of 2023, commemorates the visit, last fall, from Assistant Secretary Glenna Gallo of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services within the U.S. Department of Education. Assistant Secretary Gallo came by our office on her visit to Minnesota as part of the Back To School: Raise the Bar Bus Tour with Secretary Miguel Cardona.

During her tour of the Communication Center, Assistant Secretary Gallo got a glimpse of some of the innovative work happening in 2023. We continue to expand access to RTB through updates in our mobile apps, cultivate new partnerships for recording books in languages important in Minnesota communities, upload books to the National Library Service (NLS), and produce braille textbooks for Minnesota students.

Our staff, volunteers, and our SSB community were shocked and saddened by the deaths of two vital Communication Center staff members this past year, Tony Lopez and Dan Gausman. In November, we further carried out work begun by Dan as two staff members and I made a presentation to the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council in pursuit of our goals to transcribe materials in Dakota and Anishinaabe languages.



Governor's Press Conference announcing the inauguration of the Radio Talking Book in the fall of 1968. From left to right: William Kling, Minnesota Public Radio; Father Coleman Barry, St. John's University; Governor Levander; Frank Rarig, Jr., Hamm Foundation; C. Stanley Potter, Minnesota State Services for the Blind.

Inaugural broadcast of Radio Talking Book. 1969



Assistant Secretary Gallo pictured with SSB and DEED staff during her visit to Minnesota in September 2023.

Now and Tomorrow: What's Ahead?

In 2022, we launched Evolve: VR, a multi-year, multi-faceted initiative to reimagine our work in the 21st century. Though, as the name suggests, this initiative was launched with a focus on our employment services, the ethos of evolution has expanded to encompass all our programs. As I conclude this report, here are some highlights from our progress toward our evolution goals in 2023:

Staffing: To better serve our customers, especially in Greater Minnesota, we hired two travel (orientation and mobility) trainers, two job coaches, and a low vision specialist. We were also able to expand senior services to meet the ever-growing demand. We added a second outreach coordinator, and backfilled open positions within the Communication Center.

Media: We were featured in multiple news outlets in stories that showcased our employment services, accessible transcription, and student profiles.

Improvements for our Employment Customers: We ended "Order of Selection" – a process that required that we prioritize customers; we removed the cumbersome process of customer financial participation. We're now back to pre-pandemic levels of open cases in our Workforce unit.

Community Partners: We streamlined the processes and improved communications with the partners we contract with to serve our customers.

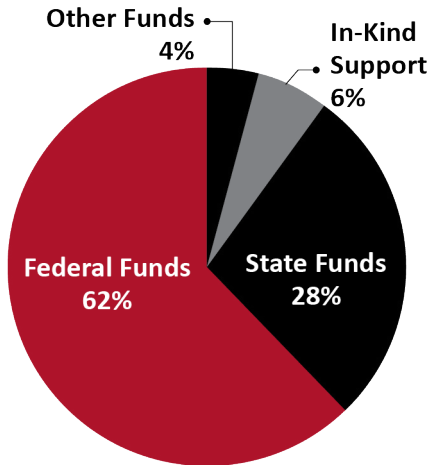
Literacy for All: We continued our drive to serve all Minnesotans who have a disability that makes reading print difficult, including people with reading disabilities and Minnesotans whose primary language isn't English.

Natasha Jerde, SSB Director

SSB FINANCIALS

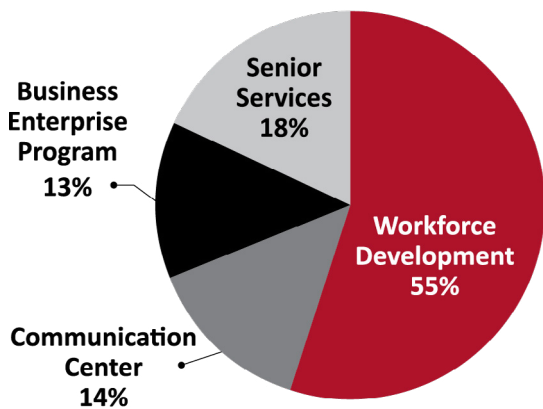
SSB Funding Streams

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2023

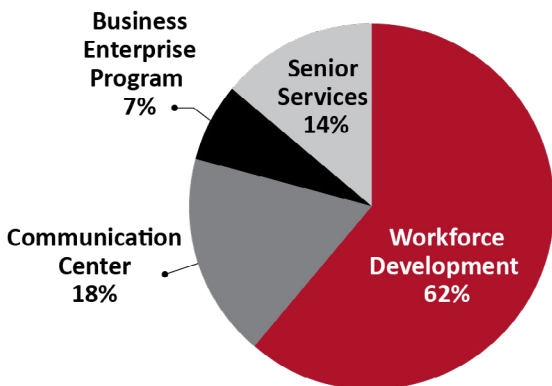


SSB Funding Distribution

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2022



FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2023



SSB Expenditures

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2021 AND 2022

Federal Funds	FFY 2022	FFY 2023
Basic VR	\$10,136,507	10,429,592
Supported Employment	-	-
Independent Living	\$58,770	67,721
IL-Older Blind	\$1,425,103	1,701,082
Special Education Agreement	\$694,870	689,101
Total Federal Funds	\$12,315,250	12,887,496

Total State Funds	\$6,379,898	5,903,917
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Other Funds	FFY 2022	FFY 2023
Gifts/Bequests	\$203,688	283,950
Dept. of Commerce - Telecommunications Access	\$98,759	\$283,950
Aging Eyes	-	-
Communication Center	-	-
Business Enterprises	\$412,317	366,151
Total Other Funds	\$714,764	934,050

In-Kind Support	FFY 2022	FFY 2023
From Volunteers	\$1,150,320	1,207,836
Total All Funds	\$20,560,232	20,933,299

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT UNIT - State Fiscal Year 2023

861 Customers Served

75 who received employment outcome

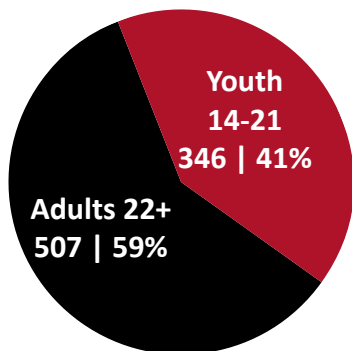
\$656 Average weekly salary of all closed as employed

Vision Impairments of Customers Served



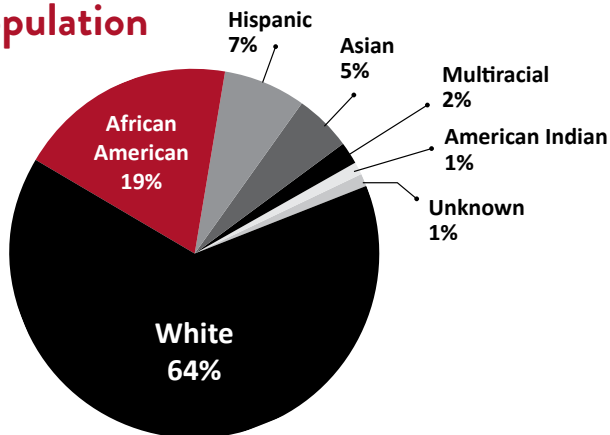
Note: These totals do not include customers who exited prior to providing specific demographic information.

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



Age	Count	Region	Percent
Youth 14-21	160	Greater MN	19%
Youth 14-21	186	Metro	22%
Youth 14-21	4	Out of State or Private	NA
Adult 22+	334	Metro	39%
Adult 22+	173	Greater MN	20%
Adult 22+	4	Out of State or Private	NA
Total	861	All	100%

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.

Jojo Blatner Sets Course for Independence Through Braille

Jojo Blatner Sets Course for Independence Through Braille

“A lot of people give up,” Jojo Blatner reflected from her home in Burnsville, “But I can’t give up.” Jojo prefers not to be pictured here.

It’s true that many people facing similar circumstances might choose to give in to frustration and apathy. But not Jojo. As a deaf woman in her fifties and facing vision loss, Jojo is focused on building new skills for independence. “No, I’m not really discouraged,” she says, “I feel challenged.”

Learning braille is one challenge that Jojo sought out and is pursuing. After getting connected with SSB, her counselor, Lindsay Escalera, arranged for her to receive braille instruction from Kia Yang, a rehabilitation trainer at SSB.

“Jojo is super determined,” Kia says, “And that motivation makes all the difference.”

Why learn braille? Well, for Jojo it’s a cornerstone of her goal for greater independence as a DeafBlind person. She knows that learning braille may help her in finding a job and performing many ordinary tasks in her daily life. Along with teaching several other blindness skills, Kia teaches braille so that SSB customers can easily label and identify kitchen equipment and household items, take notes, read emails, connect to their smartphone using an electronic braille display, and of course, read.

Jojo has a special love for Archie Comics. She even has an Archie doll and a collection of Archie Comics magnets. Though it is no longer easy for her to see the comic strips, Jojo wants to add more reading back into her life. She hopes that by learning braille, she can expand her reading horizons.

Jojo grew up in Rochester, Minnesota and moved to the Twin Cities for work. Her career history includes employment at Shopko, Taco Bell, Holiday Inn, and United Way. In her United Way job, she gained experience doing office work, which she found was something she enjoyed.



“I want to learn what I can do as a DeafBlind person,” Jojo states.

“I want to find a job that I can do, and I know that learning braille will help me get there.”

“It’s hard being deaf and going blind,” explains Jojo, “But, I accept that things change. What’s important is learning, and doing new things so I can be independent.”

Jumpstarting Journeys for Young Adults

In 2023, as SSB marked 100 years of serving Minnesotans, we took the opportunity to highlight the future by focusing on some of the young adults in our pre-employment and transition services program.

“While it’s always important to look back and take stock of where we’ve come from,” said SSB Director Natasha Jerde, “Here at SSB, we’re very focused right now on using the lessons of the past to shape a better future.”

“As we look ahead,” Jerde says, “We want to continually evolve so that every Minnesotan who is blind, DeafBlind, low vision, or has a print disability knows they can turn to us to jumpstart their journey to meet the

Jumpstarting Journeys for Young Adults

goals they set for themselves. The young adults we serve always inspire me as they set their goals and then head out to accomplish them.”

Amy Arias-Esquivias, Joshua Olukanni, and Kat Wilkes are three SSB customers whose journeys exemplify the opportunities and possibilities opening up for blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans.

Amy graduated from Osseo High School and began her studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth this past fall. Amy explains that the things which make her nervous about college are also the things that excite her: “I’m nervous about course work and about the social aspect. But I’m excited to be challenged, and to be on my own and meeting new people.”

Amy’s many achievements include landing a leading role as Morticia in Osseo High School’s production of *The Addams Family*. Her accomplishments as a blind actor were highlighted in a story on FOX 9 news. Amy says that she relished the chance to play a more sinister character. Theater is something Amy hopes to continue as a sideline as she pursues a career as an Orientation and Mobility instructor.

Joshua Olukanni spent the summer working in Human Resources for Hennepin County after being selected as one of the county’s Urban Scholars. Josh, who is earning his degree in Human Resources Management, used part of his time as an Urban Scholar to interview Human Resources supervisory staff in order to learn about all aspects of the field. With an interest in organizational psychology, Joshua is pursuing a career in HR due to his passion for wanting to help others succeed. When he’s not working or studying, Josh can be found at the gym, playing sports, or advocating for the rights of blind people.

Having just completed her Masters in Communication Sciences and Disorders from St. Cloud State, in 2023, Kat Wilkes began a new job as a speech-language pathologist with the Rochester Public Schools. Kat has a deep commitment to working with elementary school kids and is thrilled to be starting her career at a Rochester elementary school.

“I’m so glad to be fully employed,” Kat says, “It means a lot to have the chance to give back, pay taxes, and contribute to the community. I feel very grateful.”

The 100 years of SSB’s existence marks a century of progress for blind, DeafBlind, and visually impaired Minnesotans. Today, SSB provides training and resources for employment, offers seniors the tools they need to live independently with vision loss, and ensures that any Minnesotan with a print disability has access to the books and materials they need in a format that works best for them.

“SSB is a catalyst for independence and access,” said DEED Commissioner Matt Varilek, “Every day, in school, on the job, or out in the community, blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans are making our state a better place for all of us.”



Amy Arias-Esquivias



Joshua Olukanni



Kat Wilkes

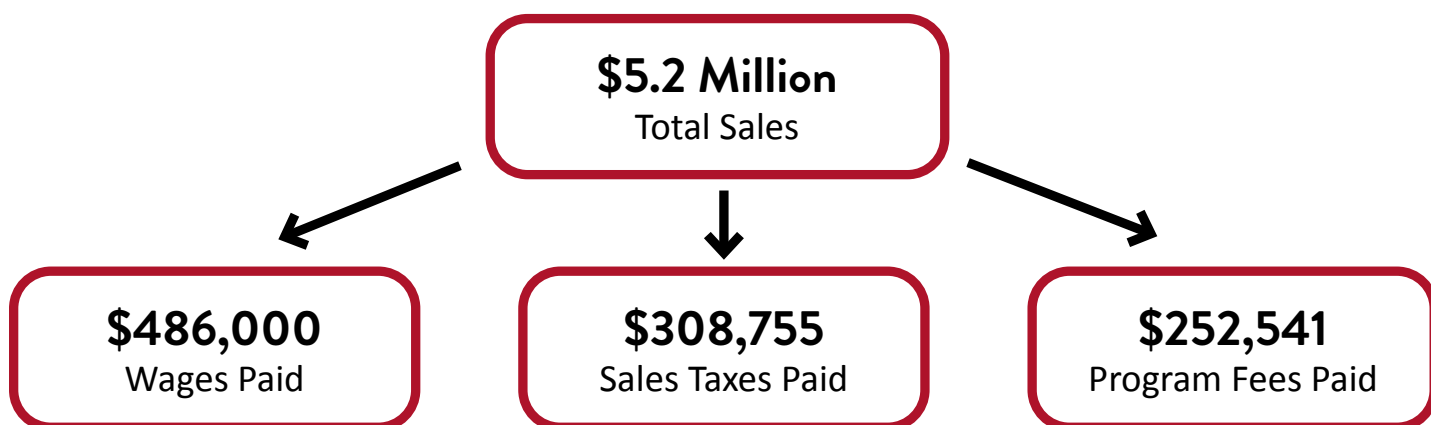


BUSINESS ENTERPRISE PROGRAM

Federal Fiscal Year 2022-2023

- 24 business operators served
- 19 individuals employed by BEP operators
- 23 businesses in 145 locations in 46 cities across the state
- \$54,420 Average Net Profit

BEP Contributed \$1,000,000 to Minnesota's Economy



An Eagle Eye for Success

“You can be successful at anything, if you just keep moving forward,” said Eric Harms, Business Enterprises Program (BEP) vending business owner.

The Minnesota BEP provides profitable vending machine business opportunities to qualified licensed, legally blind Minnesotans in order to broaden their economic opportunities. You have probably come across one of our community partner sites in a state or federal office building, a rest area, or on a state college or university campus.

Eric has been operating a vending business through BEP for over seven years. During that time, his business has expanded from three locations to eight, including over 30 vending machines and a seasonal store. He explains his early experience as a new business owner.

“When I started in the BEP, I was nervous about having so much responsibility as a business owner, but I knew I would be successful because I had the training, tools, and resources I needed, so I could focus on making the customer’s purchasing experience the best it could be.”

Located in St. Paul, Eric’s vending business is called Eagle Eye Vending. He can be found filling vending machines at the Centennial Building, the Veterans Affairs Building, the Department of Administration Building, the Department of Transportation Building, the State Office Building, the Judicial Building, and the State Capitol. Eric also operates a convenience store at the State Capitol during the legislative session from February to May each year.

“I really like interacting with my customers”, Eric explains. “You never know how you can impact someone’s life with just a few kind words. I’ve had many experiences where customers will say how



Eric Harms

much they appreciate me and the service I provide. It makes me feel good and it motivates me to be even better.”

Eric lost his sight as a child due to retinoblastoma. At a young age, Eric had to learn how to navigate the world without his vision. He believes some of the early life lessons he learned continue to help him today as a business owner. “When I was young, I needed to learn how to do things without my sight... often using alternative methods than sighted people and with different types of technology. Today, as a business owner, I continue to look for ways to make my business as efficient and effective as possible. Business requires you to adapt to a constantly

An Eagle Eye for Success continued on next page

An Eagle Eye for Success

An Eagle Eye for Success continued

changing environment. I think that is why I find it so enjoyable. You never know what challenge will come up next, but you know with every challenge comes opportunity. As a business owner, you must be able to look for that opportunity and try to seize it to make your business better.” Eric learned that trial and error are constant in life and failure is inevitable. “Everyone fails and the more things you try, the more times you will fail,” he explains. “Once you realize this and accept it, it becomes easier to try new things and find what works best for you...the most important thing is that you keep trying and exploring. This is the only way we really learn about ourselves and create the world we want to live in.”

Along with his BEP colleagues across the country, Eric faced one of his biggest challenges in 2020 when the pandemic hit. “The pandemic was, and continues to be, a great challenge to many BEP operators,” Eric describes. “Many of the locations I service have not returned to the pre-pandemic building populations and therefore sales continue to be lower than before the pandemic. Even though I continue to expand my business, my sales have yet to fully recover. It would be easy to give up, but I think my business will eventually recover if I continue to focus on the customer and their needs and look for additional locations to add to my business.”

Eric is currently considering attaching a micro market to one of his business locations. A micro market is a self-checkout convenience store. It has all the benefits of a convenience store, but does not require the business owner to be always present to operate it.

“I’m really excited about this potential opportunity,” Eric said. “I know this type of business may be the future of vending and I look forward to this new challenge.”

Eric and his business were highlighted in a KARE11 interview last summer. One of the messages Eric shared was, “Blind people are the same as sighted

people, we just may do things a bit differently.” If you would like to see the entire interview, you can find it at the following link: [\(36\) The unsung hero at the MN capitol - YouTube](#)

When Eric is not running his business, he can be found cheering for the Twins and Vikings or even playing beep ball. What is beep ball? It is baseball where the ball emits a beeping sound and players rely solely on their hearing to hit and catch the ball. Eric plays on Minnesota Millers beep baseball team. The Millers are Minnesota’s only competitive beep baseball team and are part of the National Beep Baseball Association (NBBA).

Eric is also a disc jockey. His love for the radio began when he was a teenager and worked as a part-time broadcaster for a local Albert Lea radio station. He now hosts his own online broadcast at www.theqonline.net. “My radio broadcast airs on Saturdays from 6 – 9 pm CDT,” Eric explained. “I really enjoy music, especially country. This gives me a format to share my favorite songs and to provide updates and information related to country music.”

Eric is a member of the BEP Elected Committee of Blind Vendors. In this capacity, he is a representative for several of his BEP colleagues at quarterly meetings. He and his fellow committee representatives actively participate with the BEP director on ways to help move the program in a positive direction. “I really enjoy working with my colleagues, leaning about them, their businesses, and representing them to the best of my ability.”

Eric has a passion for helping others and being a positive influence. “I’ve always wanted to help others by sharing my experience and providing them with encouragement. When I was younger, I was a mentor and teacher and I really enjoyed how this made me and those around me feel. I try to implement these experiences in my interactions with my customers as a way of giving back to the community.”

SENIOR SERVICES UNIT | By the Numbers

FFY
2023 **3,617**

CLIENTS SERVED BY THE SENIOR SERVICES UNIT

Private residence <i>(house or apartment)</i>	2,335
Senior Living Retirement Community	719
Assisted Living Facility	422
Nursing Home/ Long-term Care Facility	136
Homeless	4

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 89.

Syd Normington, Enjoying Life, One Step at a Time

This year, Syd Normington was anticipating the vacation with his wife to Mexico, at the little spot where they had often gone before, not with relish, but with worry. He had to admit, he was even just a little bit scared.

Syd has lived all of his life with vision loss, but, for most of those years, he had managed just fine. Few people even knew he had a disability. Now, as his vision deteriorated further, it was becoming much harder for him to manage. He could do alright at home, in familiar settings, but even there, he was starting to encounter awkward situations. He would run into things more often, or accidentally bump into people.

But what would it be like in Mexico. How could he navigate the airport? The hotel? The streets of a foreign city?

Syd knew he needed to do something. So, he called SSB.

In 2023, SSB hired two travel trainers. These orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists teach vital skills for getting around safely and confidently. Prior to bringing on these new staff members, it was sometimes difficult to find O&M contractors to work with customers, especially in Greater Minnesota. Now counselors have better options to more quickly connect customers with the important training they need.



*Providing Services to Help
Seniors Choose Where to Live*



Syd Normington

Syd Normington, Enjoying Life, One Step at a Time continued on next page

Syd Normington, Enjoying Life, One Step at a Time

Syd Normington, Enjoying Life, One Step at a Time continued

Syd got connected with Senior Services counselor Laura Straus, who set him up to meet with staff trainer, Michell Gipp.

When Syd first met with Michell, he knew he was finally ready to take the step he had for so long been reluctant to embrace. He was ready to use a white cane.

“This is what I would tell anyone who is worried about using a cane,” Syd explains, “It gives you your independence back. You can go where you want to go. You can do exactly what you want to do.”

For Syd, the journey to that first meeting with an O&M instructor was a long one. At 17, through an accident, Syd lost his right eye. Then, at 26, he experienced tears in the retina of his left eye. This meant that he would eventually have to give up his first career as an engineering draftsman. “Because of the hemorrhaging, the drafting lines began to get pretty wavy,” Syd remembers.

Born in Blackpool, England, Syd came to Minnesota at the age of 23. He re-trained for a career in IT and worked at the Carlson Companies and then for the University of Minnesota Physicians group.

Syd retired on his 62nd birthday. By that time, his vision had deteriorated to the point where many things were becoming more difficult. “I walked out on the street that day,” Syd says, “And I knew that part of my life was over, and I would soon need to learn how to do things in different ways, without sight.”

It took a few more years before he was ready to contact SSB. Once he did, his world opened up again. A quick and enthusiastic learner, Syd readily took to adapting to new techniques for doing things.

In addition to O&M training, Syd got connected with Daily Skills Trainer Char Guggisberg. An avid cook, Syd was eager to learn new tips and tricks for him to manage in the kitchen.

With guidance and training from Char, plus a few devices, like a talking kitchen scale, Syd continues as the primary cook in his household. With a global palate, he enjoys cooking Indian, Mexican, and Italian cuisines. He is particularly known for his enchiladas and his spaghetti Bolognese. “I focus on the positive,” Syd says, “That way, I learn how to do the things that are important to me. There’s always a way to do something, you just have to learn it.”

Looking back over his lifetime, Syd reflects on his own acceptance of his vision loss, and the changes in society as well. “I was part of the era when there was a lot of stigmas toward anyone with a disability. So, for most of my life, I hid the fact that I had a vision loss.”

It was through his daughter that Syd began to shift his own thinking about being a person living with a disability. “My daughter talks openly about disability,” he reflects, “She’s forthright about it, and it’s just a part of life for her. She’s not ashamed, and she asks for the things she needs.”

“Acceptance is key,” Syd says, “I used to hide the fact that I couldn’t see as well. Now it’s just part of who I am.”

And how did that trip to Mexico turn out? Well, with his white cane, Syd not only navigated the airport and his hotel, but went out on his own each day for a morning stroll. With his new-found skills, he is no longer worried or afraid, but is fully enjoying life on his own terms.



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

Audio Services

- Number of CC volunteers: **175**
- Accesses to RTB stream: **12,462**
- Accesses of NFB Newslines: **563,342**
- NLS Equipment and accessories circulated: **3,976**
- Audio Books uploaded to BARD: **210**
- Audio Services print pages transcribed: **37,185**
- Equipment repaired: **1,412**

Radio Talking Book

- RTB recorded and broadcast: **237 new books** in 2023. This is a **75.6% increase** from 2022's 135 books.

Engineering

- Number of Engineering volunteers: **2**
- Access to RTB stream and NFB Newslines: **656,082**
- Talking book players circulated: **3,963**
- Audio books uploaded to BARD: **180**
- Transcribed pages: **47,124**
- Equipment repaired: **1,393**



Braille Services provided to K-12 Minnesota Students From 07/01/22 To 06/30/23

- Minnesota students served: **41**



- Number of braille titles purchased from other states: **132**
- Number of braille titles newly transcribed by CC: **243**
- Number of braille titles reproduced and reused by CC: **283**
- **Total number of braille titles provided: 658**



- Number of braille pages purchased from other states: **161,889**
- Number of braille pages newly transcribed by CC: **15,803**
- Number of braille pages reproduced and reused by CC: **96,759**
- **Total braille pages provided to Minnesota students: 274,451**

Human-voiced Audio and Why it Matters

Human-Voiced Audio and Why it Matters

Audio Services Transcribes a Major Reference Work

Judy Breuer had a problem. For her classes in her Masters in Social Work program at St. Scholastica, she needed access to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision*, commonly known as the *DSM-5*. This standard reference volume is indispensable for clinicians, social workers, and students in these fields.

Judy had a couple of options available to her, but none were very workable. She knew she might be able to find a version of the reference manual in an electronic format. With this version, she could read the text using synthesized speech, or she could magnify the text so that it was large enough for her to read on her screen.

However, Judy knew that, on the one hand, she wouldn't be able to sufficiently process the information by listening to it with synthesized speech. Indeed, there are many people, like Judy, who can't process materials through synthetic speech. They find the lack of proper inflection, and the mispronunciation of words too jarring and distracting. For expository material like the *DSM-5*, with lots of technical language, abbreviations, and acronyms, reading this way can be nearly impossible.

On the other hand, Judy also knew that the *DSM-5* would be too large and unwieldy to read with screen magnification. Navigating would be cumbersome, and her eyes would soon tire.

The best solution for Judy was human-voiced audio, in an accessible format. Human narration, especially if done well, would mean she would be able to comprehend the material. Plus, the accessible format would allow her to easily move around in the text in the way that a reference volume like this is designed to be used.



Judy Breuer

The problem, Judy knew, was that transcribing a 947-page book, like this, chock full of medical terminology and other jargon, would be a huge undertaking. As a customer of the Communication Center, Judy reluctantly contacted Dan Gausman, the audio services librarian. (*See in this report the tribute to Dan Gausman who died in November, 2023*). She wondered if Dan could help her find another way of accessing the *DSM-5*, short of asking the Communication Center to record it.

"Dan always wanted what's best for each person," Judy recalled, "He said, 'a recorded version is what you need, and that's what we will do. End of story.'"

"When I opened that email from Dan, saying that the Communication Center would record the book," Judy recalls, "I literally read that email through tears!"

Judy will complete her MSW in 2024. She hopes to pursue a career as a therapist or in social work. Along with her degree, she'll bring a wealth of skill, experience, and expertise to her new career. For a decade, Judy developed and hosted the "Wellness Renaissance" podcast, working as a food and nutrition coach, and organizing events on wellness and holistic health. Since 2017, she's worked with the Duluth Domestic Violence Intervention Program, including as a small-group facilitator for men arrested on domestic violence charges. "My own experience with a disability has helped me gain an empathetic perspective," Judy says, "With the men I've worked with, my approach is to understand who they are and to see them as whole people."

Wherever her career takes her next, it's likely that Judy will draw from the *DSM-5*. Along with Judy, people with print disabilities around the country and internationally will also now, for the first time, be able to access the *DSM-5* in an accessible audio format through BARD, the Braille and Audio Reading Download app from the National Library Service.

"15 of our talented volunteers worked on this project," notes Jeff Behl, Audio Services Supervisor, "We wound up with about 80 hours of recording time, but we are tremendously proud of the result. We know this book will be useful for many, and we are pleased to have made this contribution."



In her studies, it hasn't always been easy for Judy to work with teachers and other administrators to get the materials she needs in a usable format. "It can be painful to think about how much time I lose to my disability, and advocating for what I need," Judy says.

By contrast, having an ally like Dan Gausman in the Communication Center was like a breath of fresh air. "Dan makes you feel human, seen, and valued," Judy says.

Steve Bakke, A Journey Back to Broadcasting

Steve Bakke, A Journey Back to Broadcasting

Steve Bakke wasn't always a broadcaster. Like so many of us, his life path moved in different directions. Although perhaps this is where he was meant to be.

His love for broadcasting began while working at the college radio station. "At the college station, I did a little bit of everything, including some Top 40 as a rock 'n' roll disc jockey, and I always loved that. I thought, gee, I should think about doing this as a career", recalls Steve.

However, his path altered along the way. After those early days as a radio disc jockey, Steve continued his education and completed his master's degree in business. He landed a job at General Mills, which brought him to Minnesota. Further employment included working in advertising with small ad agencies where he collaborated with some freelance contributors. Steve remembers, "One of the freelancers was an art director in community theater. I was having lunch with her one day and mentioned that I had always thought it would be fun to act, to be on stage, to be a performer, but the closest I had got to that was doing some radio. And she said, "Well, you have a really nice voice. You should pursue that." "So, I did some digging and found an online audition for the Radio Talking Book."

In 2005, Steve began his role at SSB as a volunteer reader on a program called "Bookcase." He states, "Over the years, my role as a volunteer kind of expanded. I took on another program where I began as a substitute. It was a two-hour evening newscast. That kind of grew and I got involved with a couple other things at SSB. Then about two years ago, I saw a notice posting a position for a new intermittent broadcaster to back up the full-time broadcasters. And so again, I went in and auditioned."

It was then that Steve became an SSB employee. However, he continues his role as a volunteer reader, too. "It is more an extension of what I've been doing

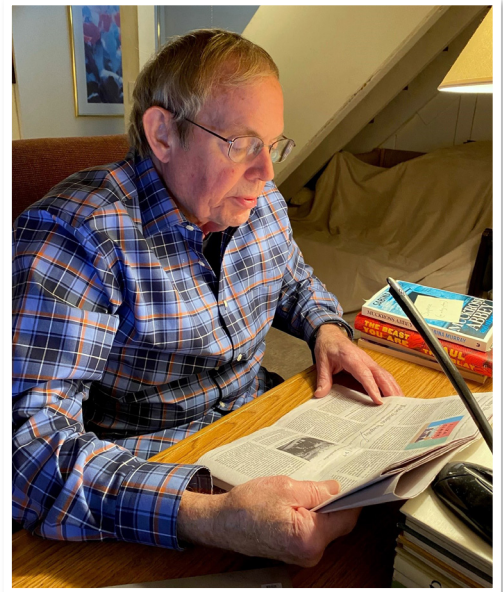
and takes me back into this realm of radio work that I always enjoyed, but just haven't done much of for a long time", expounds Steve.

Steve especially enjoys the challenge of being live on air. He

explains, "The most fulfilling part of the job is doing the live broadcast. When you're reading on the air, it is all sight reading. You can't back up and start it over again or erase your mistakes. So, you really have to be on your game and you have to manage the time. Not everyone has a good sense for that. You have to learn how long each news article and segment takes and manage that time, so you don't end everything abruptly."

Steve delights in being recognized by his voice and getting feedback from listeners across the country. "The volunteer work is exciting for me. It's important for me to try to do a good job. I've received quite a lot of feedback over the years from people who listen to the programs and are appreciative of the work we all do. I've gotten feedback from people as far away as Texas and Florida that have said they really appreciate me, my voice, and the programs that we do." Even though they cannot see him, his listeners know him by his voice, with some even approaching him or calling his name.

SSB and its listenership are fortunate to have Steve's clear, calming, and confident voice come through across the airways. We are thankful he found his way back to broadcasting, one of his early passions.



Steve Bakke

The Communications Center Marks a Milestone

The Communication Center Marks a Milestone: 1,000 Titles Now Available Across the Country and Around the World

In 2023, SSB's Communication Center marked the milestone of uploading its one thousandth title to BARD, an app of the National Library Service (NLS) that stands for Braille and Audio Reading Download. Now, more than 1,000 titles recorded by SSB are available to people with print disabilities around the country and across the globe.

Less than a decade ago, the National Library Service created a process that enabled local transcription programs, like the Communication Center, to add titles to its collection by uploading those titles to BARD. Our engineering team notes that submissions from the Communication Center make up about 10% of the total.

Here's a quick look at how that process happens

It starts with the print pages. A customer may need the book for school, work, a book club, or their own enjoyment. Alternatively, Radio Talking Book (RTB) supervisor Joseph Papke may have identified the book as appropriate to be broadcast on RTB.

Next, the book must be prepared for recording. First, it is catalogued and entered into a database. Then, the book is structured: this means using special software to put navigation "markers" in place. Markers enable the listener to quickly and easily find a particular page or chapter in a book.

Once structuring is completed, the book is prepared for the narrator to record. An information sheet is created that tells the narrator important details about the book. Then it is ready for transcription.

For this step, we turn to one of our skilled and dedicated volunteers. In order to read for SSB, volunteers must pass a reading test and learn the process of recording. This ensures the accuracy and quality which customers rely on.

Volunteers use one of 20 recording booths in the St. Paul office, or record at home using a special unit supplied by the Communication Center.

When the book is completed, the Engineering Unit puts on the final touches: adjusting volume, editing out silences, and putting the book in the correct audio format. Finally, it is ready to send to the customer or broadcast on Radio Talking Book.

If the book is a good candidate for the National Library Systems collection, our engineering team gets to work once more. They make sure the audio files conform to the BARD standards and complete the process to upload the book to the BARD system.

Finally, any patron of NLS – anyone with a print disability, including people who are blind – can easily and quickly download that title and start reading.

Fun Facts about SSB's BARD books

- Minnesota SSB began uploading books to BARD in 2015.
- We were recognized by the NLS for submitting the 2,000th book of all the books uploaded from all the regional libraries.
- In December 2023, the SSB Communication Center surpassed 1,000 total books uploaded.
- SSB uploaded seven books from the Harry Potter Series in the Finnish language.
- SSB has submitted books in several different languages, including: Hmong, Spanish, Karen S'Gaw, Dakota, and Ojibwe.
- Some recordings have been from foreign language books translated into English.
- SSB has recorded several informational brochures including manuals and English/Spanish language eye care brochures.
- We have 191 different narrators on BARD with some being the original authors.
- 80% of the books we record are greater than 200 pages.
- Our Communication Center ranks third in the nation for uploads from local sites, behind Texas and Washington

A Versatile Volunteer: John Grape of the Braille Unit

A Versatile Volunteer: John Grape of the Braille Unit

Volunteers are an essential part of the Communication Center. Their hard work and dedication enable the CC to carry out its mission of making print accessible to Minnesotans with print disabilities. Over the past 14 years, John Grape has donated his time and talents to two different units in the Communication Center, each requiring a different set of skills.

John, of Little Canada, has been a Braille Unit volunteer for the last two years. He repairs and maintains Perkins Braille machines. The standard Perkins Braille is a typewriter-like machine which is used to produce braille text on special paper that is slightly heavier than regular paper. It has six primary keys, each representing a dot in a braille cell, as well as space, backspace, and line space keys. These Brailles are used by people with visual impairments to write and read work documents, school assignments, personal letters, grocery lists, or any other type of written material.

John came to the Communication Center with no prior experience working with Brailles. He taught himself by studying a repair manual. According to him, the most frequent repairs needed involve fixing stuck keys or cleaning and re-applying machine lubricant which has dried out.

John first learned about the volunteer opportunity through a former co-worker, who happened to be the brother of Braille Unit supervisor Jay Maruska.

Before his work with Perkins Brailles, John was an Engineering Unit volunteer for 12 years. His responsibilities included cleaning, maintaining, and repairing Talking Book players: machines which are used by people with print impairments to listen to recorded books and magazines.



John Grape holding a Perkins Braille.

John is a retired electrical engineer who worked for what was formerly the Sperry Corporation for 38 years. He is married, with five children and eleven grandchildren. When he is not busy with volunteering or family activities, he enjoys woodworking, auto repair, gardening, and bicycling.

When asked what he likes best about volunteering, John replied that he enjoys repairing equipment. He also gets great satisfaction knowing that his work helps make it easy for people with visual impairments to use their Perkins Brailles every day.

Remembering Audio Services Librarian, Dan Gausman

All of SSB was deeply saddened by the sudden passing of Audio Services librarian Dan Gausman, 63, on November 9th. Dan began as a volunteer, then worked in the Communication Center for 12 years. He was the first point of contact for customers wanting to have a book recorded. He also catalogued all incoming books and entered them in the Audio Services database. Dan worked closely with students needing textbooks recorded, making sure that the material was completed on time. He also had regular contact with college disability service staff to ensure that students received books in the most accessible format for their needs.

Dan spearheaded a major project to begin recording materials in other languages spoken in Minnesota. Largely due to his efforts, the Audio Services Unit was able to transcribe books in Somali, Lakota, Karen, and Hmong, among others.

He was passionate about literacy, and fascinated by the process of learning to read, as well as the actual

physiology involved in reading.

Dan is survived by his wife of 24 years, Annette Schardin, his mother Marilyn, his five siblings, and many other relatives, friends, and co-workers.

A lifelong resident of St. Paul, Dan attended the University of Minnesota and St. Catherine University.

Fittingly, for someone who loved books and reading, Dan's memorial service was held in the community room at the Roseville Library on December 4th.

Customers, volunteers, and colleagues alike deeply valued Dan's kindness, generosity, willingness to help, and encyclopedic knowledge of numerous subjects, as well as his one-of-a-kind sense of humor. He left an indelible impact on everyone fortunate enough to know him.



Dan Gausman

Remembering the Life of RTB Volunteer Coordinator Tony Lopez

The staff and volunteers at SSB were deeply saddened by the news of the death of Tony Lopez, our volunteer coordinator for Radio Talking Book (RTB). Tony passed away suddenly on July 15, 2023. He was 55.

Tony began his association with SSB and RTB as a volunteer. With a great voice, a love of books, and a lot of radio work experience, Tony was a natural fit and a great asset for RTB. He joined our staff 25 years ago.

In an article about Tony in *City Pages*, he said of his work at SSB, "It's about a sense of connectedness." Indeed, for our volunteers and many RTB listeners, Tony embodied that connection.

"Tony was a superb volunteer coordinator for RTB," reflected volunteer Tom Clark, "He always answered my questions and concerns quickly and professionally. He will be greatly missed."

His many responsibilities included researching program materials and content; coordinating daily programming,

newspaper reading, and RTB's volunteer workforce; and maintaining relationships with listeners, magazine editors, radio reading services, and other disability organizations.

Prior to joining SSB, Tony enjoyed a successful career in broadcast radio, most notably at Minnesota Public Radio's *The Current*. Tony had a passion for music, cooking, and the public library, along with a deep love of family and friends.

He is survived by his wife Laura, his daughter Minnie, his mother Lorraine, his sister Teresa, and his brother Orlando, as well as numerous nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and in-laws. Tony will be remembered for his deep commitment to his family, and his passion for his friends, music, cooking, and the public library.



Tony Lopez

2023 VOLUNTEER MILESTONES

Meet Our Multi-Talented Volunteers

We appreciate each of our volunteers. Here are those who achieved a milestone in 2023:

5-Year Volunteers

- Dieker, Wendy
- Eastwold, Paul
- Hanneman, Sue
- Leach, Debra
- Schroden, Pamela
- Sheldon, Roger
- Smyth, Peter
- Will, Mina

10-Year Volunteers

- Barnes, Melissa
- Fritzam, Nancy
- Habeeb, Philip
- Holden, John
- Kraemer, Maggie
- Krusemark, Connie
- Lammer, Beth
- Larson, Becky
- Lundquist, Christine
- Mirenda, Andrea
- Montgomery, Kayla
- Petersen, Stacey
- Riley, Martha (Marti)
- Thayer, Steven
- Wicklund, Beth

15-Year Volunteers

- Barthel, Al
- Beal, John
- Grape, John
- Hunter, Nathan
- Judson, Andrew
- Oberle, James
- Olson, Melissa
- Ray, Stevie

20-Year Volunteers

- Blaisdell, Bette
- Browne, Sally
- Kovel-Jarboe, Patricia
- Mueller, Ilze
- Plante, Annette
- Potts, John
- Schallberg, Lloyd
- Tabar, Ron
- Williams, Sandra

25-Year Volunteers

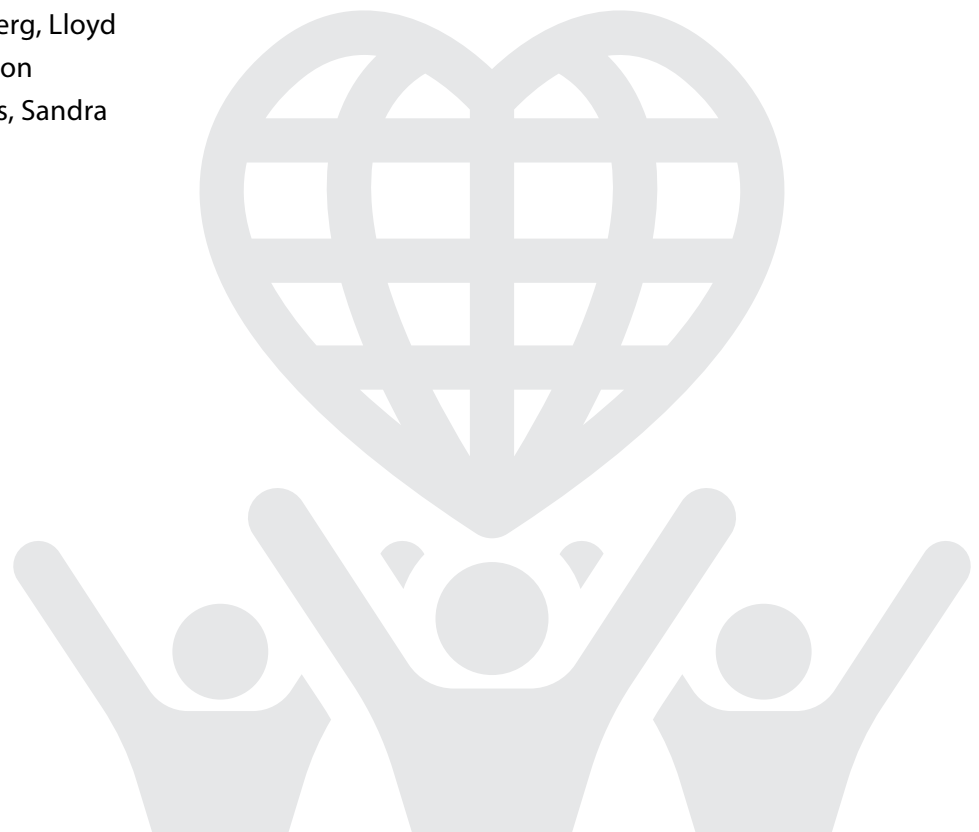
- Fowler, Kristine
- Gunter, John
- McPherson, Carol

30-Year Volunteers

- Brodtmann, James
- Paulson, Virginia

35-Year Volunteers

- Blomgren, Frank
- Krinke, Lambert
- Stearns, Nanette
- Worthington, Dorothy





100 YEARS

Minnesota State Services for the Blind Celebrates 100 Years

2023 marked a centennial milestone for SSB. On June 22nd, 173 people gathered for a celebratory event at Mendakota Country Club in Mendota Heights. Invitees included current and previous SSB staff, volunteers, customers, SRCB council members, honored guests, and speakers from the National Federation of the Blind and the American Council of the Blind. Makenzie Nolan, a Senior Public Engagement Liaison from the Governor's office, presented SSB with a proclamation from Governor Tim Walz announcing June 22nd as 100 Years of State Services for the Blind in Minnesota. It was a day of celebrating our commitment to low vision, blind, and DeafBlind Minnesotans with the hope of continuing our services for another century.

SSB Celebrating 100 Years!



SSB celebration gathering



Brianna Holeman, Jon Benson, Natasha Jerde



Kia Yang & Taey Mack



Joseph Papke & ASL interpreter



Muzamil Ibrahim & Tou Yang

SSB Celebrating 100 Years!



Muzamil Ibrahim, Khalid Khalif, & Abdirahman Mumin



Janet Dickelman



Natasha Jerde & Carol Pankow



Douglas Federhart & Stuart Holland



Makenzie Nolan and Natasha Jerde



Michell Gip



Davica Suknanan & Mark Dahlberg

100
YEARS
**STATE SERVICES
FOR THE BLIND**
— 1923-2023 —



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.

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

www.mnssb.org