

# YOUR RESOURCE WITHIN REACH

## Minnesota State Services For the Blind 2015 ANNUAL REPORT



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#### Letter from SSB Director, Carol Pankow

For a few days in June, SSB was filled with the energy of young adults. The students in the Summer Transition Program teamed up with our workforce staff to build their resume writing and job interviewing skills. While they were here, they also had the chance to learn firsthand about assistive technology and the wide array of alternative formats offered through the Communication Center.

I thought a lot about them a few weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon in July, as I, along with millions of Americans, celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It was astonishing to consider that these young adults have only known a world in which the protections and opportunities of the ADA were always there.

As the numbers and the stories in this report will show, in 2015, thousands of Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, or experiencing vision loss reaped the rewards of opportunity, independence and access enshrined by the ADA. In addition to briefly noting some of the highlights from 2015 at SSB, I would like to use this space to reflect on what lies ahead. Remembering those young adults reminds me every day that there's a lot of work yet to do to ensure that the promise of the ADA is fully realized in jobs, independence, and equal access.

#### **SSB 2015 Highlights** Opportunity Through Employment

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A record 143 customers found employment in 2015. This is a 78% increase in just three years. And these are good jobs. The average wage was \$20.90, up from \$17.37 in 2014.

#### Seniors Pursuing Independence

More than 4,000 Minnesota seniors experiencing vision loss pursued greater independence with the tools and training they got from SSB. A 25% increase over last year, this was a record number for our senior services team. This



**Carol Pankow** 

year, we also saw a jump in the number of seniors taking adjustment to vision loss classes. You'll read more about what these classes offer, later in this report.

#### Access to Information

This past year, our Communication Center provided nearly 14,000 Minnesotans with the information they needed, in the format they needed. What formats? Custom audio and braille transcriptions; podcasts; radio broadcasts; news by phone, computer, and mobile app; text; and downloadable books through BARD (Braille Audio Reading Download). Building on our close partnership with the Minnesota Braille and Talking Book Library, we launched a single 800 number that connects customers to all of the services of both organizations.

#### Meeting Challenges

In 2016, SSB is facing the hard reality of a budget shortfall. A one-time charge for an expensive customer management system and funding restrictions under new federal regulations are two significant factors that have resulted in this budget crunch. Under such circumstances, federal rules require us to restrict the number of customers we can serve through our workforce team. This means that

### **DIRECTOR'S REPORT**

some job seekers will be put on a waiting list until we can free up monies to serve them. Customers who are already in our workforce system are not affected. Communication Center and senior services also continue as normal. Working in collaboration with our Council, we have implemented cost-cutting measures and are aggressively pursuing new revenue sources to turn this around.

#### **Preparing for a Bright Future**

In addition to the cost-saving measures noted above, two new programs launched in 2015, will set us on a course to better serve our customers well in to the future. Responding to the dramatic increase in the number of seniors experiencing vision loss, we have launched the Aging Eyes Initiative. We welcomed Margaret Klein as the new coordinator for this important project. You can read more about this innovative model of sharing resources with community partners further on in this report.

#### **Critical New Services for Students**

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, federal legislation passed in 2014, places a strong emphasis on working with students to make successful transitions to higher education and work. At SSB, we're very excited to have Sheila Koenig on board as the coordinator of these services.

We've done intensive outreach to make sure we're connecting with all the blind, DeafBlind, and visually impaired young adults who might benefit from our program. We have also contracted with partners across the state to provide year-round programming. We're focused on equipping students with work experience, job search skills, and, most of all, with the tools they need to be strong and confident self-advocates.

I strongly believe that investing in young adults will pay dividends well into our future. Laying a strong foundation means that they will have the chance to succeed, thrive, and participate in a vital and growing Minnesota.

Carol Pankow Director, State Services for the Blind

#### The Communication Center — 2015 in Numbers

13,801	Customers who turned to the Communication Center to meet their needs for accessing print
1,019,870	Braille pages provided
1,335,328	Print pages transcribed into audio-this now includes newspaper reading
22,709	Pieces of equipment maintained and distributed by our Engineering department
	Hours of Radio Talking Book programming
1,157	Generous donors who contributed gifts to the Communication Center and Senior Services
656	Skilled, dedicated, and talented volunteers who provided \$1,945,000 in in-kind support.

### **SSB FINANCIALS**



#### **SSB Funding Streams** FISCAL YEAR 2015

Federal Funds		
Basic VR	\$10,289,000	
Supported Employment	\$81,000	
Training Grant	\$57,000	
Independent Living	\$61,000	
Independent Living — Older Blind	\$703,000	
Special Education Agreement	\$547,000	
Total Federal Funds	\$11,738,000	
Total State Funds		
State Funds	\$5,925,000	
Other Funds		
	4072 000	
Gifts/Bequests	\$873,000	
Gifts/Bequests Telecommunications Access MN	\$873,000 \$80,000	
Telecommunications		
Telecommunications Access MN	\$80,000	
Telecommunications Access MN Communication Center	\$80,000 \$87,000	
Telecommunications Access MN Communication Center Business Enterprises	\$80,000 \$87,000 \$511,000	
Telecommunications Access MN Communication Center Business Enterprises Total Other Funds	\$80,000 \$87,000 \$511,000	

#### SSB Funding Streams

FISCAL YEAR 2015



SSB Funding Distribution

FISCAL YEAR 2015



### **DIVERSE CAREERS**



#### The Diverse Careers of SSB 2015 Employment Services Customers

From auditors to waiters, carpenters to nursing assistants, in 2015 our customers found work in a diverse range of markets. This list of occupation titles for our 2015 successful employment closures demonstrates the breadth and scope of our customers' skills and experience.

- Accountants and Auditors
- Adult Education and Literacy Teachers
- Agricultural Sciences Teachers, Postsecondary
- Assemblers and Fabricators
- Automotive Service Technicians and Mechanics
- Business Intelligence Analysts
- Carpenters
- Chief Executives
- Childcare Workers
- Clergy
- Coin, Vending, and Amusement Machine Servicers and Repairers
- Community and Social Service Specialists
- Computer Systems Analysts
- Counter Attendants
- Customer Service Representatives
- Demonstrators and Product Promoters
- Directors, Religious Education
- Dishwashers
- Educational, Guidance, School, and Vocational Counselors
- Entertainers and Performers, Sports and Related Workers
- Executive Secretaries and Executive Administrative Assistants
- Farmers, Ranchers, and Other Agricultural Managers
- Farmworkers and Laborers, Crop
- Financial Specialists

- First-Line Supervisors of Housekeeping and Janitorial Workers
- Fitness Trainers and Aerobics Instructors
- General and Operations Managers
- Graduate Teaching Assistants
- Health Educators
- Healthcare Support Workers
- Home Health Aides
- Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Workers
- Interpreters and Translators
- Janitors and Cleaners
- Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers
- Librarians
- Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners
- Maintenance Workers, Machinery
- Management Analysts
- Massage Therapists
- Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technicians
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Medical Secretaries
- Medical Transcriptionists
- Mental Health Counselors
- Musicians and Singers
- Nonfarm Animal Caretakers

- Nursing Assistants
- Office and Administrative Support Workers, Office Managers
- Order Clerks
- Outdoor Power Equipment and Other Small Engine Mechanics
- Patient Representatives
- Personal Care Aides
- Physical Therapists
- Postsecondary Teachers
- Production, Planning, and Expediting Clerks
- Production Workers
- Refuse and Recyclable Material Collectors
- Rehabilitation Counselors
- Retail Salespersons
- Sales and Related Workers
- Shipping, Receiving, and Traffic Clerks
- Social and Community Service Managers
- Solar Sales Representatives and Assessors
- Stock Clerks and Order Fillers
- Stock Clerks, Sales Floor
- Stock Clerks- Stockroom, Warehouse, or Storage Yard
- Teacher Assistants
- Teachers and Instructors
- Training and Development Managers
- Training and Development Specialists
- Waiters and Waitresses

### **COMMUNICATION CENTER**

#### Facing Obstacles, Figuring it Out



Asked what advice she would give to other young adults facing vision loss, Tessa Pichotta says, "Don't think of what you can't do. Just do what you want, and figure out how you're going to do it."

Tessa Pichotta

"If something visual gets in my way," she continues, "I just figure out how to overcome it; or, if it turns out to be an obstacle, I figure out how I can still be a part."

That's how Tessa handled cross country skiing, for instance. As her vision changed (Tessa has cone rod dystrophy and her sight is gradually deteriorating) she realized that she no longer had the depth perception to travel at high speeds through the snow. Now, she's the manager for the team.

Tessa spent part of her summer at the Communication Center as an intern. With her love of books, it was a natural fit for her. "I'm constantly reading, and love books," she says. Now, Tessa does most of her reading by enlarging the print, but she's been taking braille lessons twice a week, anticipating the time when she will need it.

Tessa began her summer as one of 14 young adults in the Summer Transition Program. Living at St. Kate's in St. Paul, the students had the chance to practice skills for living on their own, and were introduced to various work settings. Tessa, who loves history, especially appreciated learning what happens behind the scenes at the History Center, one of the sites visited by the STP students.

As our Communication Center intern, Tessa worked in the mail room, structured books for recording in Audio Services, and copied hundreds of pages with the thermal form machine, the device used by the braille section to make braille copies from the master pages.

"Tessa was a joy to work with," says Linda Woodstrom, Coordinator for Alternate Media in Audio Services, ""She learned things so quickly, and, like so many in her generation, understood how to manipulate digital media immediately."

Tessa, a senior this year at Irondale High School, is an avid reader, loves musical theater, and usually has Broadway tunes cued up on her playlist.

### **BUSINESS ENTERPRISE PROGRAM**





**MicroMart** 

Curt Jones — Expanding, Innovating, Making a Difference

Curt Jones is one of 39 business owners in SSB's Business Enterprises Program (BEP). Through BEP, blind, visually impaired, and DeafBlind Minnesotans have the opportunity

to buy in to a business, managing vending services on federal, state, and local properties.

Though there have been lots of changes in Curt's several decades in the business, none has been so striking as the change to managing the state's first licensed MicroMart, a fully automated kiosk style market that Curt has set up at the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) building in St. Paul. "You could say that baseball and golf are the same game, because they both involve hitting a ball with a stick, but you'd be completely wrong. That's how it is with this MicroMart. It's a whole different ballgame," Curt says.

A micro market, a new trend in vending and convenience food marketing, is a kiosk with shelves and coolers stocked with products. Consumers simply pick up the item they want, and pay through a self-checkout process. The markets offer the variety of a convenience store without the need for staffing. Curt stocks the BCA mart with fresh sandwiches, salads, fruit, muffins and specialty chips, along with greeting cards and health and beauty products.

"It gives me the chance to try things out, and see what works and what doesn't," Curt reflects, "I can also adjust the pricing, run daily specials, or mark down items that need to move." For Curt, and for other blind BEP business owners considering adding a MicroMart, one very significant obstacle is the lack of accessibility in the digital screens being used. Blind consumer groups across the country are lobbying hard to push manufacturers to build in a speech component or find other ways of ensuring access. "This issue will be critical for our vendors," noted John Hulet, the supervisor of the BEP program at SSB, "We clearly see the advantages of this format, and know that it will be more common. These vending businesses have afforded hundreds of blind individuals the opportunity to run their own business, make their own way, and be their own boss. We want to make sure these opportunities will continue well into the future, and accessibility will be key."

Curt works with employees to handle the visual tasks that he cannot access on his own. He also coordinates with his wife who "has a flare for decorating," and works to develop appealing displays and layouts. Curt's wife, who worked as a special education teacher, also encouraged him to hire individuals with cognitive disabilities. "It's worked out well for us," Curt says, "We hire four or five kids and it helps them get some work experience and the chance to show what they can do." It's part of Curt's entrepreneurial spirit; ready to try something new and give people a chance.



### **SENIOR SERVICES**

### Dynamic Women Build Bright Futures

As individuals, Ruth Weber, Anne Nelson Murphy, Roz Strimling, and Barb Spiess are each quite impressive. Together, they're nearly unstoppable. To be with these four women is to be surrounded by stimulating conversation, lots of laughter, and plenty of energy.

"You might say we're birds of a feather," Anne says. Then Roz picks up, "We have different backgrounds and histories, but we all have the kind of attitude that if there's an obstacle in our way, we can do something about it." There are murmurs of assent all around the table.

The four women met at a class at BLIND Inc., which, like similar programs in other parts of the state, teaches practical skills for living with less vision.

SSB made it possible for Ruth, Anne, Barb, and Roz to attend BLIND Inc. It's part of the suite of options available from SSB's Senior Services team to help seniors remain independent and active.

Ruth, now in her 80s, has been blind for over 30 years. In that time, she has been an inveterate traveler, visiting more than 100 countries. While she's more than self-sufficient as a blind person, Ruth realized that there were still things she could learn, especially in the area of technology; and so she welcomed the opportunity to take part in the classes. Like others of her generation, Ruth was daunted by the prospect of learning to use technology, but with typical determination, she realized she could take on the challenge.

Technology was high on Anne's list too, as was cooking. "I was finding that I was spending less and less time in the kitchen as my vision



Ruth Webber, Roz Strimling and Anne Nelson Murphy Not pictured, Barb Spiess

deteriorated," she recalls. Along with the others, Anne learned simple modifications to get cooking again; and she's using technology too.

"I found a shortbread recipe with my iPad," she announced to the others, "and it turned out great."

Barb admits that she had certain unchallenged assumptions about the classes at BLIND Inc. "I had a preconceived notion that maybe it was going to be a sad place," she remembers, "but then, every day I would leave at the end of the day feeling so much better than when I came." Barb credits those classes, the connection with her classmates, and the support and expertise of SSB's Senior Services with helping her maintain her active life. She's able to do the things she loves, including gardening, kayaking, reading, and enjoying art. "I don't see paintings in the same way I used to," she says, "but I find the changes interesting."

For Roz too, the classes have provided a confidence boost. Roz stopped working several years ago, not because she wanted to, but because her vision loss made it too difficult to keep working as an activities director. Now she's reconsidering that decision. In the fall of 2015, Roz made the jump from meeting with a counselor in Senior Services, to strategizing about employment options with a counselor in Workforce Development at SSB.

"When you're determined to do something," Roz sums up, "You can do it."

### **SENIOR SERVICES**



#### **New SSB Initiative Serves More Seniors**

#### Aging Eyes INITIATIVE

Extending SSB's reach to the growing number of seniors losing vision

has been a discussion for SSB leadership these past few years. Right now, one in three persons over the age of 74 experience uncorrectable vision loss. By 2020, vision loss will be a reality for some 25,000 Minnesota seniors. The increased demand for services is proving that these projections are not baseless statistics. This year, our Senior Services counselors assisted over 4,000 Minnesotans, an increase of 25% from 2014, and a record number for SSB.

In 2015, SSB launched the Aging Eyes Initiative. The program consists of training and equipping community partners to provide a first-level of support to seniors in the early stages of vision loss.

"The question, How can we best tap into existing senior providers?' began it all," says Margaret Klein, coordinator of the Initiative. "Since there are already so many skilled and passionate volunteers and professionals working with seniors across Minnesota every day," she continued, "why don't we offer them information and important basic low vision tools to begin addressing vision loss? Often, it's a nurse in a block nurse program, a staff person at a Center for Independent Living, or an activities director who first notices that someone may be having difficulty seeing. Why not empower them to provide the appropriate simple low vision aids and devices that we know can make the most difference?"

Through an in-person workshop and online modules, prospective community partners learn about common eye conditions, gain an understanding of a philosophy of independence and choice, and learn basic adaptive techniques. Each partner is then given a kit with all the basics, like magnifiers, tinted glasses, large print materials, bump dots, and a talking clock. Through a quick, non-bureaucratic process, partners simply request new supplies as needed. The project frees up SSB counselors to meet with seniors with more advanced vision loss, and to provide more extensive support.

Mabel Tarleton, Director of North Shore Area Partners, a Living at Home program based in Silver Bay, says simply, "We love it."

"Recently," she adds, "we provided a consumer with a magnifier, and she told us it was the most wonderful thing she had ever seen. To get it for free, when she was on a fixed income, was an amazing gift."

In addition to the Statewide Independent Living Council's initial investment to provide supplies, SSB's leadership and staff are grateful to the Hamm family for their generous support.



Margaret Klein with Aging Eyes Kit

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#### Making a Difference: One Dot at a Time

Sue Roberts is one of a handful of Communication Center volunteers who has never been to our offices.

Through an online website that matches volunteers with organizations, Sue discovered the need for braille transcribers. Working with another group dedicated to providing assistance to the blind, she received her braille transcriber certificate in October 2012. "I just fell in love with it," Sue says, "Whenever I have a spare moment, I work on a braille assignment." In fact, when we called Sue, she had just been sitting outside her home in Ocala, FL working on a transcription project.

Interested in additional braille transcriber opportunities, Sue found SSB's online request for a transcriber in October 2014. "It has been a rewarding experience transcribing for 2 organizations. I enjoy the diversity of projects, and have learned so much. Typing the words is the easy part; learning the correct formatting for different projects has been the challenge," says Sue.

"Sue is among our most accurate transcribers," says braille proofreader Judy Sanders, "I always look forward to getting her work."

Though not an assignment from the Communication Center, Sue says that one of the most interesting transcription projects she worked on was brailling a high school yearbook. "Michael, blind from birth, wanted to read the dedication to him in his senior yearbook. I learned a lot about the hopes and dreams of teenagers today in that assignment, a refreshing change from things you see on the news."



Sue Roberts and husband Jack

Retired after 30 years of working at IBM, Sue and her husband have pursued various volunteer opportunities. "Before we moved from Tennessee to Florida," says Sue, "I would talk with seniors at an assisted living community and write down their life stories for them to share with their families. I also did online research for museums." Since moving to Florida, the couple help Kindergarteners learn to read and do basic math.

As our braille volunteers know, in 2016 the U.S. will switch over to a new braille code — Unified English Braille — which introduces several new rules and modifications to the current braille standards. Just recently, Sue learned that she passed the certification exam for UEB transcribing. "I was so happy that all the studying worked and I passed," she says.

Summing up her experience as a volunteer braille transcriptionist, Sue says, "My bottom line: I found my niche in retirement as a braille transcriber volunteer. It exercises my brain, fulfills the need to be a part of a great group, and provides me with a feeling of accomplishment."

### **OUR VOLUNTEERS**

**20 Year Volunteers** 

Dan Kuechenmeister—RTB

Nancy Mackenzie—RTB

Linda Schwenzeier—RTB

Karen Thompson—RTB

Charlotte Volkmuth—RTB

**25 Year Volunteers** 

**30 Year Volunteers** 

**35 Year Volunteers** 

40 Year Volunteers

**45 Year Volunteers** 

Barbara McClellan—Audio

11

Audrey Friedman—RTB

Barbara Goldner—Audio

Judith Anderson—Audio

Beverly Burchett—RTB

Cintra Godfrey—RTB

Jannis Ritter—RTB

Betsy Sell—RTB

Tom Haley—RTB

Diane Bean—RTB

Linda Goese—RTB

Art Grachek—RTB

Karen Jones—RTB

Art Nyhus—RTB

Judy Sloan—RTB

Janice Engberg—RTB

### **Our Multi-Talented Volunteers**

The 656 volunteers in our Communication Center bring an impressive array of talents to their work, from repairing digital equipment to creating tactile diagrams, describing complex charts and knowing the correct pronunciation of technical terms. On behalf of the 14,000 customers who use the services of the Communication Center each year, the staff of SSB wishes to thank the following volunteers who reached notable milestones with us in 2015.

#### **5 Year Volunteers**

- Sue Abrahamson—Braille
- Jeanette Barsness—RTB
- Judith Borash—RTB
- Brad Borgelt—RTB
- Gwen Brutlag—RTB
- Jeanne Burns—RTB
- Mary Caven—Audio
- Kenneth Coy—RTB
- John Demma—RTB
- Natasha DeVoe—RTB
- Denise Dross—RTB
- Esme Evans—RTB
- Roger Faber—RTB
- Patricia Favaro—Braille
- Jackie Fredericks—RTB
- Ann Fredrickson—Audio
- Tracy Goman--RTB
- James Goodner—RTB
- Susan Goolsby—RTB
- Mary Hall—RTB
- Sandra Hofsommer—RTB
- Sam Jones—Audio
- Lynda Kayser—RTB
- Beth Kelly—RTB
- Daniel Kelly—RTB
- Don Lee—RTB
- Helen Leverkuhn—Braille
- Fred Matzer—Audio
- Carol Mikkelson—RTB
- Dorie Miller—Braille
- Lannois Neely—RTB
- Eleni Pinnow—RTB
- Phil Rosenbaum—RTB
- Matthew Russell—Braille
- Mitch Russell—Braille

- Taylor Schmidt—Braille
- Lynn Shubitz—RTB
- Robert Stevens—RTB
- Kathy Stults—RTB
- Dolores Valente—Braille
- Julia Wallace—Audio
- Desmond Whitney— Audio & RTB
- Mary Clare Wyrowski—RTB

#### 10 Year Volunteers

- Gary Anderson—Audio
- Stephen Bakke—RTB
- Kenneth Clark—RTB
- Barbara Depman—Audio
- Vivian Gangl—RTB
- Clarice Hietala—RTB
- John Holden—RTB
- Nancy Holden—RTB
- Alletta Jervey—RTB
- Joyce Johnson—RTB
- Patrice Johnson—RTB
- Diane Ladenson—RTB
- Carol Lewis—RTB
- Barbara Mak—RTB
- Karen Malver—RTB
- Laura Rohlik—RTB
- Bonita Sindelir—RTB
- Bonnie Swenby—Audio
- Carmen Wendland—RTB
- **15 Year Volunteers**
- Billie Anderson—RTB
- Duayne Anderson—RTB
- Andrea Bell—RTB
- Barbara Bloomer—RTB
- Julie Bolton—RTB

- Lynn Brand—RTB
- Tim Brand—RTB
- Ron Carlenberg—RTB
- Ann Carlson—RTB
- Mary Christenson—RTB
  Joanne Collins Wayne—RTB
- Jim Colville—RTB
- Ruth Colville—RTB
- Annette Contos—RTB
- Thomas Drake—RTB
- Paul Fjestad—RTB
- Curtis Ghylin—RTB
- Dawn Godel—RTB
- Paul Gorman—RTB
- Joseph Grant—RTB
- Sister Char Grossman—RTB
- Geraldine Gulbranson—RTB
- Connie Hefty—RTB
- Mary Holmes—Audio
- Desta Hunt—RTB
- Tim Hunt—RTB
- Kenneth Irrgang—RTB
- Jean Larrivy—RTB
- Mark Lystig—Audio
- Angela Minto—Audio
- Pat Pearson—RTB
- Renè Pelletier—GeneralKathy Piehl—RTB

Kirk Reiten—RTB

Mabel Schauland—RTB

Ward Schendel—RTB

Myrna Smith—RTB

David Tanner—RTB

Clifford Wicklund—RTB

Judy Woodward—RTB

State Services for the Blind 2015 Annual Report

Loren Woolson—RTB

Mary Vos—RTB

#### **Help Spread the Word**

Every Minnesotan who could use our services, should know about our services. Help us spread the word that SSB offers free or low-cost services for reading, working, and living safely and independently.

- If there's a senior in your life who has macular degeneration, glaucoma, or is losing vision due to some other cause, let them know that we're here for them.
- When you visit your ophthalmologist or optometrist, ask if they know that SSB has the knowledge, services and resources to make sure that their patients with significant vision loss can live well after diagnosis.
- If you are an employer, talk with our business relations team about finding the candidate who could be your next great hire.
- If you know someone with hiring authority, please let them know that State Services for the Blind has a pool of job seekers with the skills and experience to fill a diverse range of positions.
- If you love the written word, check out the range of volunteer positions by visiting us at www.mnssb.org

#### **Mission Statement**

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.

# State Services for the Blind

is a program of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

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www.mnssb.org



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Upon request, this information can be made available in alternate formats for individuals with disabilities.