



# State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

2019 ANNUAL REPORT



# Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Letter from the Chair . . . . .   | 2  |
| Letter from Director Jerde . . . . .  | 4  |
| Values of State Services for the Blind . . . . .                            | 6  |
| Success Story. . . . .  | 7  |
| Communication Center Committee Report. . . . .                              | 8  |
| Customer Satisfaction and Goals<br>and Priorities Committee Report. . . . . | 10 |
| DeafBlind Committee Report . . . . .  | 19 |
| Employment Committee Report . . . . .                                       | 19 |
| Minority Outreach Committee Report . . . . .                                | 20 |
| Senior Services Committee Report. . . . .                                   | 20 |
| Transition Committee Report. . . . .  | 21 |
| Vendor Outcomes and Measures Committee Report . . . . .                     | 21 |

# Letter from the Chair

Jeffrey Thompson, Council Chair  
State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind  
2200 University Avenue West, Suite 240  
St. Paul, MN 55114

November, 2019

The Honorable Timothy Walz  
Office of the Governor  
130 State Capitol,  
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
St. Paul, MN 55155

## Dear Governor Walz,

Congratulations on becoming our new Governor of Minnesota. It's my pleasure to write you as the chair of the State Rehabilitation Council-Blind (SRC-B), and to report on our work during 2019.

With one of the biggest membership roll-overs in our council history, we worked through those challenges. Even with these challenges, the SRC-B received praise for its work from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) staff conducting their monitoring visit this year. Indeed, we are proud of our wide range of committees supporting the effectiveness and reach of our council. As you will read in these pages, our committees and task forces bring both concerns and innovations to the council, and, in turn, the council guides the work of State Services for the Blind (SSB). It is a great relationship where the exchange of information and ideas can intersect and lead to ensuring that blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans have the best opportunities to succeed.

Briefly, I would like to note three important highlights from 2019:

- SSBs 'Seniors Services Aging Eyes initiative is now being implemented in three other states. This innovative project, developed with input from the council and our Senior Services committee, provides resources to community partners so that they can offer a first-level of support to Minnesota seniors living with vision loss.

- Our pre-employment transition students work has been praised and modeled across the Nation as well. A career fair, and a program called "Blind and Socially Savvy" were among the highlights of our programs for students again this year.
- Finally, personally, I had the privilege of attending the NCSAB (National Council of State Agencies for the Blind) conference in Washington DC. By the conclusion of the conference I felt well-informed and connected to the discussions and programmatic solutions of other agencies.

Minnesota's SRC-B strives to improve our effectiveness and advising SSB in this ever changing landscape of Vocational Rehabilitation. The strong relationship we have with SSB staff confirms the importance of our work in guiding and advising.

In June, we extended our thanks to Carol Pankow as she concluded her work as the director of SSB, and we wished her well in her new role as Assistant Commissioner at the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). In her time at the helm of SSB, Carol did much to foster a strong and productive relationship between the council and SSB.

## Council Members

### Back Row:

Michael O'Day, Kristina Petronko, Carolyn Cherry, Ron Woelfel, Jeff Thompson, Ryan Strunk, Krista Bahnsen

### Front Row:

Judy Sanders, Brian Dulude, Jessica Eggert



We are excited having Natasha Jerde as the newly appointed Director of SSB. From our experience with Natasha over the last decade, we are confident that we, the SRC-B and SSB will continue bringing Minnesotans who are Blind, Visually Impaired, Deaf-Blind or have trouble reading the printed word, the best resources and services to live successful lives.

Best,

Jeff Thompson

# Letter from Natasha Jerde



## Dear Governor Walz,

Just a few months into my tenure as the director of State Services for the Blind, I can say that one of the true privileges of this position is having the opportunity to work with our council. The State Rehabilitation Council-Blind (SRC-B) not only guides the work of our agency, but they provide valuable suggestions and insight to me as I lead this dynamic, consumer-driven organization. While I have served as director only since September, I have been on staff and in management positions here at SSB for eleven years, and I have enjoyed working with the council in every stage of my career.

As I began my work as director, I shared with the council the core commitments that I have made to our staff, the individuals we serve, partners, volunteers, and consumer organizations. I also offered my road map for the year ahead and the values that pave the way. In this letter, I will share an overview of the last year, and conclude with a summary of what I shared with the council concerning the year to come.

## Oversight and Review

Making sure that our consumers get the services they need in the time they need them is at the heart of what we do. Serving our consumers well requires faithful compliance to the laws, policies, and rules that define the scope of our work. In this last year we completed several review processes that will help us strengthen our services in the years ahead. Notably, in June, representatives from the Rehabilitation Services Administration were here to conduct a federal monitoring visit. In the fall, the Office of Legislative Audits reviewed our processes for tracking donations to the Communication Center. While we are still awaiting the findings from these reviews, we gained a great deal through the rigorous process. We learned that our pre-employment transition services model is a model for other states, we have sound internal controls, and our consumers are getting diverse and good paying jobs.

## A 2019 Snapshot

I know that numbers are a poor substitute for the true impact our services have made in the lives of blind, DeafBlind, and visually impaired Minnesotans. Nonetheless, I hope that you'll recognize that behind each of these numbers are stories of empowerment, achievement, and access.

- 4,223 Minnesota seniors with vision loss served. This year we reached more seniors than any other comparable program in all of the U.S. except for California. 7% of seniors served by the older blind programs nationally were here in Minnesota.

- \$24.82 was the average wage of consumers who found fulltime employment in 2019.
- 50 is the number of years our Radio Talking Book service has been broadcasting. In 2019 we celebrated the golden anniversary of this first-in-the-nation radio reading service.
- 186 students got their textbooks and other materials in braille.
- 91,469 print pages transcribed into audio (including 55,500 recorded this year) were sent out to consumers.
- \$128,000.00 was the highest salary earned by a small business owner in our Business Enterprise Program.

## SSB in 2020

Three key focus areas will guide our work in 2020. I shared these priorities with the council in my first meeting with them in my role as director, and their input and guidance in the coming year will help refine our work in achieving these goals.

### Priority One: Tomorrow's Communication Center, Today

Fifty years ago, when we first launched the world's first radio reading service, we were out in front in making print accessible. For the first time, blind people, and people with print related disabilities had access to the daily newspaper, current magazines, and the latest books. It's been our goal ever since to keep that spirit of innovation alive so that the consumers we serve can have the same access to information that those who can read print enjoy. My first priority in the year ahead is to

ensure that our Communication Center can stay ahead of the curve in providing access to print in alternative formats. I have two key goals within this priority:

1. Make sure our database infrastructure is adequate for the demands made on it. Our Communication Center is part library, and part production center. As such we require a robust, flexible, and scalable database system to organize and track multiple complex processes. Our current system is both inadequate for the demands placed on it, and increasingly vulnerable in our world of heightened cyber security.
2. Expand the reach of the Radio Talking Book to new platforms and multiple options for streaming. We are thrilled that the RTB is now available as an Alexa Skill and as an app on iPhone and Android. In order to keep the RTB relevant and useful to our consumers, we know we need to rely less on fixed options like radio receivers, and more on versatile and mobile options like smart speakers and smartphones. Being faithful to our history means continuing to innovate so that we continue to serve our consumers in the way and at the time that works for them.

### **Priority Two: Great Customer Service is Grounded in Good Policy**

Like many organizations, we have a significant number of staff who will be retiring in the next few years. We've benefitted from the expertise and knowledge that their years of experience has given them. In the coming year we will be developing a fiscal and policy handbook to record best practices for administering our programs and services. Hand-in-hand with this project, we will be completing a rulemaking process to ensure that our policies and procedures fully align with new provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Furthermore, the Communication Center will be updating its policies to make sure that our distinctive identity as a public-private partnership scrupulously complies with all state and federal guidelines.

For many, policies and procedures can seem dry and dreary. I believe that having clear, well-thought-out policies contributes to building trust, promoting transparency, and ensuring fairness. At SSB the goal of good policy is great customer service.

### **Priority Three: Equipping Our Staff**

While policy creates the framework for great customer service, it's a great staff that brings great customer service to life. When each and every one of our staff members has the resources. Training, and knowledge to do their jobs well, great customer service will be the inevitable result. Strengthening our onboarding process, evaluating allocation of staff resources, and transferring institutional knowledge are some of the key components that will help us in strengthening our staff.

### **Values and Commitments**

My commitments as we implement these priorities include:

- Timely, clear, and transparent communication
- Staff and stakeholder involvement in decision making, whenever possible
- A receptiveness to opposing ideas, constructive feedback, and insights on how we can do things differently
- A willingness to take risks, as appropriate and necessary, if the benefits prove to outweigh the costs

### **A Thank You**

Finally, you will find in these pages how we are bringing to life the values that guide the work of the Department of Employment and Economic Development. I am grateful to have the guidance, insight, and wisdom of each of our council and committee members as we strive to live by those values. I wish to thank the council for their hard work in 2019 and to share my excitement about working with them in the year ahead.

Yours,

Natasha Jerde

# Values of State Services for the Blind

In 2019, following a department-wide process for gathering input, SSB's parent agency, the Department of Employment and Economic Development adopted the following values. The staff and council of SSB seek to live out these values as a reflection of our work.

## **Focus on the customer.**

We are public servants who come to work each day to create impact for our customers: the people, businesses, and communities we serve. We build relationships that last. We listen to our customers, whether internal or external, and incorporate their feedback in our service delivery. We strive for simplicity, fairness, and transparency.

## **Find a way.**

We come to every challenge with a solutions-oriented mindset. When a problem arises, we collaborate across teams and brainstorm ways to solve it. We choose optimism and focus on getting things done. We see compliance as a means toward impact.

## **Communicate early and often.**

We believe in open communication. Great work happens when everyone is clear on where we're heading, and who is doing what. We are honest with one another, and strive for transparency with the public and our stakeholders as a means toward shared understanding. When in doubt, we over-communicate to ensure clear ownership and accountability.

## **Create inclusion.**

We actively remove barriers that have historically left people out. We believe we're far stronger when our teams are inclusive. We respect opinions that are different than ours and we proactively seek out diverse perspectives in the planning and execution of our work. It's not only the right thing to do, but it makes us stronger and more equitable.

## **Encourage new ideas.**

We celebrate and encourage creative thinking. We create space to experiment with new ideas, giving ourselves the permission to think boldly. We believe it's okay to try new ideas to make an impact in our work – it's the only way to learn and get better.

## **Be gracious.**

We're humbled by the opportunity to serve the people of Minnesota. We bring an attitude of thankfulness to our work, expressing gratitude to those we work with and for. We celebrate our wins, and have a good time working with one another. Bringing joy to our jobs makes DEED a great place to work.



**Yahya Abdikadir,**

## **Determination + Ambition**

“I mean, I’m not going to lie. It was good,” said Yahya Abdikadir about the Summer Transition Program, an intensive two-week experience co-sponsored by SSB and the Department of Education. “I got to meet some cool people and got to make some friends along the way. Yeah, it was fun.”

Yahya shared his thoughts about STP on a Blind Abilities podcast. The podcast series is created in collaboration with SSB and often features the reflections of young blind, DeafBlind and visually impaired Minnesotans. Yahya’s casual, laid back style belies his motivation and commitment to hard work. Even before starting college, Yahya was volunteering with the tech giants, Google, Apple, and Amazon, helping to troubleshoot and test accessibility and other issues. He also worked with middle school students and staff at the Eagle Ridge Middle School in Savage.

The STP experience was so positive for Yahya two years ago that he applied and was accepted into the program again last summer. “It was all about professionalism,” Yahya reflected, “Learning what we need to be professional with employers.”

Another skill that SSB’s Transition Services promotes is self-advocacy. That’s a skill that Yahya puts to use nearly every day. It’s helped him build connections with Apple, Google, and Microsoft, and in finding the right college program following high school. “I talked with a couple of schools, and talked with their disability services, and that’s how I chose the University of Minnesota.” Yahya will begin his studies at the U. in the fall of 2020.

Yahya’s long-term plans are to have a successful career as a programmer. He’s already shown that he has the determination and the skills to set himself apart from the competition. When he’s not studying or working, Yahya plays on Minnesota’s blind hockey team, and keeps in shape through running.



## Committee Charge

The product of this committee consists of reports to the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind, containing specific strategies for increasing and improving Communication Center services as well as making visible the accomplishments of the past year. Committee members were Steve Jacobson, Chair; Catherine Durivage, Kristin Oien, Catalina Martinez, Cody Beardslee, and Jeff Thompson.

During FFY 2019 the Committee met four times to receive updates and offer input on the projects, staffing changes, and other ongoing work of the Communication Center. In addition, significant time and effort were directed toward improving the effectiveness of this committee.

The efforts of this committee are greatly enhanced by the extremely active participation of Communication Center section supervisors and managers. The committee wishes to express our thanks for their efforts and time. Rather than receiving extended general presentations, the staff prepares what we have come to refer to as “preview reports” before each meeting. This permits us to concentrate more on asking questions and meaningful discussion. It also provides the committee with valuable information that is beyond specific presentations.

During this past year, we had three in depth presentations on major activities of the Communication Center. These included a close look at braille production and how costs are established, a similar look at audio production, and a presentation on the changing landscape of the Radio Talking Book service and supporting software.

While braille production is becoming increasingly automated and more textbooks are available as publisher files, there remains gaps in that process

**313,158** braille pages produced for Minnesota’s students during this past year.

## TEXTBOOKS:

**85** selected for the national Library Service collection.

Downloaded **12,809** times.

**55,499** pages recorded and over **121,000** prepared for recording.

that must be fulfilled by braille volunteers. This is particularly challenging since the Communication Center meets the need for braille textbooks for most of Minnesota’s K-12 students under a contract with the Minnesota Department of Education. Formatting issues together with STEM materials specifically require a good deal of human intervention to produce useable textbooks in braille. Also, the increasingly graphical nature of textbooks brings with it challenges. A new braille embosser that can produce more complex tactile graphics has been purchased during this past year, and there is an on-going project with St. Thomas University students to produce tactile graphics from scanned images. There were 313,158 braille pages produced for Minnesota’s students during this past year.

The Audio Section also records textbooks as well as adding structure markup to material recorded by the Radio Talking Book network volunteers. There were 85 books that were selected for the national

**1,261 National Library Service Talking Book players were repaired during the past year.**

Library Service collection and these books were downloaded 12,809 times. This is a testament to the quality of the Communication Center's work. The Audio Section is also responsible for scanning textbooks and making them available in an electronic format for students who prefer receiving textbooks in that format. There were 55,499 pages recorded and over 121,000 prepared for recording.

The Engineering section, working with other sections, has been active in a number of areas. Software for recording is being updated and software and storage is being moved into a "cloud". Apps are being developed to allow access to the Radio Talking Book by other devices. One of the two parallel talking newspaper systems was eliminated to reduce costs. Over the years, Dial-in News and NFB Newsline tended to cover different publications, but their overlap has increased greatly in recent years. There were 442,505 accesses of NFB Newsline during the past year.

It should also be noted that the Radio Talking Book reached its fiftieth anniversary last January. A number of us were present at a very well attended celebration. In an effort to reduce costs of the Radio Talking Book service while minimizing the impact on its users, there has been an effort to increase automation and reduce the number of hours that a human needs to be present in the studio.

While the above represent significant efforts, the Communication Center provides other services on a daily basis. Such services include the distribution and maintenance of National Library Service book players and the provision of text materials to support employment and leisure reading. For example, 1,261 National Library Service Talking Book players were repaired during the past year.

Changing technologies impact greatly all aspects of the services provided by the Communication Center. This committee hopes to play a constructive role in helping to navigate these changes during the coming years.

## Charge

This committee exists to carry out specific duties contained in federal regulation for the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. These include:

1. Conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of and consumer satisfaction with
  - the functions of the Department of Employment and Economic Development;
  - Vocational Rehabilitation services provided within the state (except adjustment to blindness and technology services), and
  - the employment outcomes of persons served.
2. In collaboration with SSB, evaluate the extent to which SSB achieved its goals and priorities, strategies used, and factors that impeded success and performance on the federal standards and indicators.
3. Jointly with other committees of the Council, and in partnership with SSB, develop and, as necessary, revise an annual statement of goals and priorities.

The product of this committee must include a statement of goals and priorities, a customer satisfaction report, and a joint report with SSB on progress made in improving the effectiveness of the VR program, including progress concerning goals and priorities. Quarterly progress shall be reported to the Council.

## Part I

### State's Performance Under the Performance Accountability Measures of Section 116 of WIOA

The Program Year 2018 data is available for SSB's common performance measures. The data includes employment retention in second quarter, median earnings in second quarter, and measurable skill gain. Data on the additional measures are not yet available.

| Program Year 2018                |            |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| Agency                           | MN-B       |
| Employment Retention 2nd Quarter | 42.6%      |
| Median Earnings                  | \$4,316.67 |
| Measurable Skill Gain Rate       | 31.6%      |

## Part II – Customer Satisfaction Survey Review

In 2017, the frequency of the conducting of the customer satisfaction survey (CSS) was changed from quarterly to once a year. The survey for PY2018, conducted near the end of the program year, covers customers served during the period from February through July 2019. The survey includes only six months of data because the reliability of responses collected from experiences more than six months in the past decreases.

The Committee reviewed the CSS results for PY2018. The survey was conducted for the first time in electronic format and lower than normal response rates were experienced which could be a factor in the decrease in scores.

## SSB Customer Satisfaction Survey

### PY2018 Summary Results

| Summary  | FFY 2018 |
|--|----------|
| <b>Q1: How satisfied are you with the time it usually took to get your answer</b>            | 71%      |
| <b>Q2: Satisfied that counselor (staff) understood customer's needs</b>                      | 72%      |
| <b>Q3: Satisfied that customer given enough info to make good choices on employment plan</b> | 64%      |
| <b>Q4: Satisfied that customer had an active role in decisions about services</b>            | 75%      |
| <b>Q5: Satisfied that services helped plan for/maintain employment</b>                       | 60%      |
| <b>Q11: Overall satisfaction with services provided</b>                                      | 67%      |
| <b>Q12: Extent to which services have met expectations</b>                                   | 72%      |
| <b>Q13: Comparison with "ideal" set of services</b>  | 67%      |

SSB's results on the Customer Satisfaction Survey are also computed by the Minnesota Department of Economic Development utilizing the Minnesota Customer Satisfaction Index (MnCSI). Simply put, this index summarizes overall satisfaction with services by applying a formula to the responses for Questions 11, 12, and 13 on the survey. Using the MnCSI makes it possible to compare the customer satisfaction ratings of SSB with those of other agencies in Minnesota and with industry in general

Average MnCSI score over time (rolling quarterly 12 month periods)

| Customers Served     | Apr 16 – Mar 17 | Jul 16 – Jun 17 | Oct 16 – Sept 17 | Mar 18 – Aug 18** | Feb 19 – July 19** |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Average MnCSI Scores | 76.4            | 75.7            | 75.6             | 73.5              | 63.9               |
| N size               | 233             | 235             | 238              | 260               | 134                |

The committee continued to track the questions about assistive technology that began to be asked on the survey in the year ending 2015:

**Q6. Have you received any Assistive Technology from State Services for the Blind? This could be hardware or software.**

| Responses  | 2015<br>4 Quarters | 2016<br>4 Quarters | 2017 4<br>Quarters | 2018<br>Mar-Aug | Feb-Jul 19 |
|------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Yes        | 72%                | 66%                | 65%                | 66%             | 69%        |
| No         | 25%                | 31%                | 31%                | 31%             | 25%        |
| Unsure     | 3%                 | 3%                 | 4%                 | 3%              | 6%         |
| DK/Refused | <1%                | 0%                 | 0%                 | 0%              | 0%         |
| N Size     | 223                | 216                | 238                | 281             | 189        |

**Q7. Think about when you most needed to use your Assistive Technology. How prepared did you feel to use the Assistive Technology when you needed it? Were you very well prepared, somewhat prepared, not very well prepared, or not prepared at all? (NEW VERSION STARTED APRIL 2016)**

| Responses              | 2015<br>4 Quarters | 2016<br>4 Quarters | 2017<br>4 Quarters | 2018<br>Mar-Aug | Feb-Jul 19 |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Very prepared          | 46%                | 37%                | 60%                | 55%             | 50%        |
| Somewhat prepared      | 37%                | 42%                | 32%                | 35%             | 37%        |
| Not very well prepared | 12%                | 8%                 | 5%                 | 6%              | 7%         |
| Not at all prepared    | 4%                 | 11%                | 3%                 | 2%              | 5%         |
| DK/Refused             | 1%                 | 2%                 | 1%                 | 2%              | 2%         |
| N Size                 | 161                | 142                | 154                | 184             | 106        |

**Q8. Think about when you most needed to use your Assistive Technology. How prepared did you feel to use the Assistive Technology when you needed it? Were you very well prepared, somewhat prepared, not very well prepared, or not prepared at all? (NEW VERSION STARTED APRIL 2016)**

| Responses         | 2015<br>4 Quarters | 2016<br>4 Quarters | 2017<br>4 Quarters | 2018<br>Mar-Aug | Feb-Jul 19 |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Very Useful       | 75%                | 76%                | 75%                | 70%             | 67%        |
| Somewhat useful   | 22%                | 16%                | 20%                | 21%             | 22%        |
| Not very useful   | 1%                 | 2%                 | 1%                 | 3%              | 5%         |
| Not at all useful | 2%                 | 4%                 | 1%                 | 2%              | 1%         |
| DK/Refused        | 1%                 | 1%                 | 2%                 | 4%              | 5%         |
| N Size            | 161                | 142                | 154                | 184             | 129        |

The members of the committee read the verbatim comments elicited by the following two survey questions to determine if trends or issues specific to SSB were apparent. No significant trends were identified from this data.

**Q9. In your opinion, what is/was the most important part of the services you received from SSB?**

**Q10. If you could change one thing about the services you received, what would you change?**

## **Part III**

### **Progress on FY18 Goals and Priorities (July 1, 2018-June 30, 2019)**

The Goals, Priorities, and Strategies for FFY 2019 include three main goals: increasing successful employment, increasing SSB's outreach, and increasing diversity.

The priorities for the first goal are increasing employment outcomes, increasing the awareness of potential SSB applicants, improving the opportunity for individuals who are Non-English speakers to make an informed choice, and ensuring that Non-English speaking participants can effectively engage in and achieve their goals.

### **Goals and Priorities 2019**

The Goals, Priorities, and Strategies for FFY 2019 include three main goals: increasing successful employment, increasing SSB's outreach, and increasing diversity.

The priorities for the first goal are increasing employment outcomes, increasing the awareness of potential SSB applicants, improving the opportunity for individuals who are Non-English speakers to make an informed choice, and ensure that Non-English speaking participants can effectively engage in and achieve their goals.

### **Increase Competitive Integrated Employment**

To increase competitive integrated employment outcomes by 3% from the previous year, SSB took the following strategies:

1. Annual review of customer base with counselors and develop targeted plans for those in "ready for employment" status.
2. Active participation in the Assistive Technology interagency workgroup as part of the Olmstead Planning. Serve as the Olmstead lead for employment and assistive technology strategies that will make the State of Minnesota a model employer for persons with disabilities.
3. Actively promote the Connect 700 and Supported Worker programs to SSB customers to help increase employment of people with disabilities in state government.
4. The SSB Employment Team will meet regularly to review those individuals in ready for employment, in employment and in employment status for over 90 days and will work with counselor to ensure steady case progression.

### **Results Summary**

Through the team model, counselors, their supervisor, and their support team meet on a monthly or bimonthly schedule to review all customers on the caseload. Special attention is given when discussing those individuals in the ready for employment status. The WDU employment team was assigned a special project where they evaluated all customers who were ready for employment, in employment less than 90 days, and in employment over 90 days. They assisted counselors with getting those customers moving through the process and into a successful employment outcome. SSB customers seeking state employment are encouraged to participate in the Connect 700 and Supported Worker programs. SSB had 13 known customers who utilized the Connect 700 process during PY2019.



The Assistive Technology interagency workgroup completed its work by developing a statewide agency resource directory that includes training entities, resources for technology and equipment, and programs that provide support for individuals who are unable to afford assistive technology.

## **Awareness of the Vocational Rehabilitation Process**

For potential SSB applicants to have an increased awareness of the vocational rehabilitation process including their responsibilities and intents to achieve an employment outcome SSB utilized the following strategies:

1. Continue using the new intake process, collect data and review in six months.
2. Complete a full analysis of closures by October 31, 2018 to determine the impact on unsuccessful closures using the analysis from 2017 which was too preliminary to draw any substantive conclusions.
3. Determine the viability of hiring a part time staff who is an East African language speaker to liaison and lead further community engagements with New Americans.
4. After reviewing the analysis, implement strategies as needed.

## **Results Summary**

We have learned that by having potential applicants attend our intake process, at least one third make the informed choice to not make application.

We believe it is still too early to determine the impact on unsuccessful closure as most customers who enter in to services can spend up to several years in the program, and dropping out can happen at any point. We do see, however, that because individuals are making informed decisions at the front end, we have fewer customers who are dropping out sooner.

We have determined that it is not viable to hire a part time staff who is an East African language speaker. One reason is the cost, the second is that the staff who conducts our intakes is actively engaged in African culture and the State Rehabilitation Council – Blind’s Minority committee which focuses on outreach. That staff meets with non-English speaking customers individually with interpreters to ensure that focused communication occurs and that the purpose of the vocational rehabilitation program is fully explained and understood.

## **Improving Opportunities for Non-English Speakers**

To improve the opportunity for individuals who are Non-English Language speakers to make an informed choice about whether there are SSB services that meet their blind, low vision, or DeafBlind rehabilitation needs, SSB has used the following strategies:

1. Determine the extent that language is a barrier during the SSB orientation and intake process for Non-English Language speakers in their fully understanding the concepts, requirements, and expectations of participating in the Vocational Rehabilitation or Independent Living programs and how to address that barrier.
- Engage with the DEED New American’s Project for technical assistance
  - Review other states VR programs for best practices
  - Survey language interpreter vendors and ethnic community resources for ways to ensure that communication with shared meaning is achieved.
  - Engage with community leaders from New American-focused organizations for input and guidance.



- Determine the viability of hiring a part time staff who is an East African language speaker to liaison and lead further community engagements with New Americans.
- Based on the findings, develop and implement strategies to ensure Non-English Language speakers are provided with information that is complete, accurate, and understandable.

### **Results Summary**

Based on the intake strategies in the preceding Priority, this priority was not utilized. We have determined that it is not viable to hire a part time staff who is an East African language speaker. One reason is the cost, the second is that the staff who conducts our intakes is actively engaged in African culture and the State Rehabilitation Council – Blind’s Minority committee which focuses on outreach.

### **Non-English Speakers Achieving Independent Living and/or Vocational Rehabilitation Goals**

To ensure that Non-English Language participants can effectively engage in and achieve their goals in either VR or IL program services, SSB has used the following strategies:

1. Research existing resources, entities, and programs, locally and nationally, for ideas on effective engagement with non-English Language participants.
2. Research methods for effective teaching and training to Non-English Language participants
3. Develop a model for effective engagement, teaching, and training Non-English Language participants.
4. Implement a pilot of the model and assess its effectiveness.

### **Results Summary**

A meeting was held with the manager and a staff of the Minnesota Adult Basic Education Disability Specialists Physical and Nonapparent Disability Assistance (PANDA) group to discuss the feasibility of this priority as it applies to blind New Americans who do not read, write, or speak English. The thinking was that PANDA would be able to play a role in helping to establish a connection between available public Non-English Language programs and our customers. What became apparent is that the intent of PANDA is to support the reasonable accommodations of students in the classroom through Braille or technological access, for example. It does not have the capacity to address blind students who cannot speak English at some basic level and who do not have some method for accessing symbols or interpreting information as result of their vision loss. It is a very difficult situation. We conclude that the training developed by one of our CRP’s to give Non-English Language learners the fundamental spoken and written (Braille) skills to prepare them for the Adult Basic Education environment is currently a best model for meeting this priority.

### **Increasing Number of Students in Pre-ETS**

To increase the number of transition students receiving Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) from SSB to 80% of students identified by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) as blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind (Currently serving 130 of 193 students listed on the MDE Unduplicated Child Count Report as Blind, Visually Impaired or DeafBlind.) SSB took the following strategies:

1. Identify and communicate with all transition aged students who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind who are not currently engaged with SSB so they are informed of services.
2. Regular communication with teachers for Blind and Visually Impaired (BVI) students through the BVI listserv and targeted mailings about SSB opportunities for students so they can share this with families and encourage them to apply for services.
3. Utilize the data sharing agreement with MDE to obtain names and addresses of blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind students and target mailings specific to Pre-ETS and services SSB can provide.

## Results Summary

In PY 2019 of 193 students that were identified by the MDE, 130 were served, meaning we did not reach our goal for students receiving services, in spite of utilizing the strategies. In part this may be due also to a clarification of our agreement with MDE in that MDE cannot provide us with names and addresses of students; they can only provide the number of students in a particular district. This means that we can only send a request to those districts to share information about SSB with the students and families, making us dependent upon school officials as to whether that actually happens or not. We will see if this effects the numbers for PY2020.

## Identifying Activities for All Pre-ETS Students

All Pre-ETS students will have required Pre-ETS activities identified. Strategies Include:

1. All potentially eligible students will have required activities identified on the Workforce One activity page.
2. All eligible students will have required activities identified on the IPE.
3. Promote and continually improve the year-round transition programs provided by Community Rehabilitation Providers.
4. Promote the pre-employment transition services and activities to students and families by increasing the distribution of promotional materials.
5. Annually review, update, and implement the SSB Pre-ETS Blueprint.

## Results Summary

These strategies were all met. The two contracted year-round transition programs provided by Community Rehabilitation Providers continue to annually evaluate and improve upon their programs. One program added a stronger employment component after their evaluation. The programs are promoted in SSB's monthly newsletter "The Spectacle" as well as directly to students, families, schools, and teachers B/VI and DeafBlind.

## Technology Assessments for College-Bound Seniors

To ensure during their senior year, 100% of transition aged students planning to attend college will complete technology and travel assessments and receive requisite equipment and training prior to graduation, the following strategies were used:

1. Each fall counselors identify students that are graduating.
2. Technology specialists complete a comprehensive assessment and procure required equipment.
3. Counselors and Assistive Technology Specialists will work with the students Individualized Education Plan team to discuss these strategies and the assessment results so a coordinated plan can be implemented.
4. Training is provided to students to build necessary skills for entering college.

## Results Summary

These strategies were met and have become standard operating practice. SSB provides the College 101 workshop for students in high school who are thinking about attending college or any other post-secondary education program. In 2018, the workshop was offered in greater Minnesota. Training opportunities were also provided through the Summer Transition Program in 2018 and 2019. A panel on post-secondary readiness specifically is meant to prepare students for entering college. In PY2019, 12 students participated in these activities.

## Improving Outcomes for DeafBlind Customers

To provide services and training to customers and vendors to improve the employment outcomes for DeafBlind (DB) individuals, the following strategies were used:

- Focus on improving skills of vendors (state contractors) who are able to “directly” serve DB individuals.
- Work with HKNC and/or other professionals to train current and potential ATB trainers on specific techniques for DB individuals. ATB training areas of specific interest include technology and tasks of daily living, especially to include ProTactile techniques.
- Provide training to interpreters who frequently work with ATB vendors in Minnesota to improve on specific communication techniques, ex. ProTactile techniques and boundaries for DB individuals.
- Identify strategies to improve current transition services to address the specific needs of DeafBlind youth.
- Develop DB Foundational Skills document.
- improve communication between DB Committee and SSB Transition Coordinator
- Include DB youth in the content of messages about Transition services such as video, brochure, etc.
- Increase awareness of the DeafBlind community by collaborating with the DeafBlind consortium of agencies and participating in community events such as conferences/awareness day, panels, policy projects, presentations, etc.

## Results Summary

SSB has met these strategies with the exception of a Foundational Skills document. We have also hired an employment specialist to work specifically with DeafBlind job seekers. This staff is proficient in signing and is engaged with the local DeafBlind community and brings knowledge and resources to our program that we expect to greatly benefit these customers.

## Activities to Connect with Top Minority Communities

To participate in 10 touchpoint activities throughout the year in order to increase existing ongoing outreach efforts within the five top minority communities in Minnesota so they are aware of and have access to information about SSB, the following strategies were used:

1. Strengthen the connection with the Red Lake and White Earth VR Services Projects for American Indians with Disabilities.
2. Each member of the SRCB’s minority outreach committee will make contact with at least two organizations in a minority community and report back to the committee to be shared with the SRC-B.
3. Focus outreach efforts to locate more resources in the Somali community and the minority communities outside of the metropolitan area.

## Results Summary

A staff serves as SSB's liaison with White Earth and Red Lake. This year she connected by phone to the VR directors in both communities. The committee and SSB staff members staffed resource tables at the Red Lake Senior Fair, and the Native Health Fair in Minneapolis which included members of the Red Lake and White Earth tribes living in the Twin Cities.

To connect with community organizations, SRC-B minority outreach committee members made contact with organizations in person. They also developed a list of organizations and each committee member was responsible to call selected organizations on that list. Committee members also did cold calling organizations and while the committee didn't complete all of its calls, each member had two contacts in the course of the year.

This year SSB participated for the first time at a Somali health Fair in Dakota County and had a resource table at Ka-Joog, a large Somali Independence Day Festival in Minneapolis.

## Promoting A Culture that Celebrates Inclusion

SSB will actively promote a culture that celebrates inclusion and diversity with the following strategies:

1. All SSB job postings have a preferred qualification of fluency in a second language.
2. SSB will participate in the Connect 700 Hour program for the State of Minnesota.
3. Work with the Minority Outreach Committee to develop an email distribution list of minority communities and communicate job openings to them.
4. All postings are sent to consumer and professional groups for broad dissemination.
5. Expand the Pre-ETS student worker program and develop opportunities in greater Minnesota.

## Results Summary

These strategies have all been met. All SSB job postings now have a preferred qualification of fluency in a second language and SSB participates in the Connect 700 Hour Program. The Pre-ETS student worker program was expanded to include a student worker who worked with a BEP vendor in Greater Minnesota during the summer to learn about the vending business.

## Examining Staffing Patterns

To determine if the number of SSB employees of diversity leaving SSB is disproportionate to the number of employees of non-diversity leaving the agency, the following strategies will be utilized:

1. Establish a baseline from data starting in 2016.
2. Collect and analyze data annually to calculate the numbers and review the reasons for SSB staff exiting the agency.

## Results Summary

Exit interviews with staff exiting the agency have not been conducted until recently. Staff turnover has been high and this area did not get the attention it needs and will continue to be an area of focus. ■

## DeafBlind Committee Report

### Committee Charge

This committee exists to support and advise State Services for the Blind (SSB) regarding its services to individuals who are both deaf/hard of hearing and blind/have low vision. This committee provides input to the Customer Satisfaction & Goals and Priorities Committee of the full Council for consideration in the development of annual goals and priorities in conjunction with SSB. The DeafBlind Committee has worked on strategies for making people more aware of SSB and services. Some don't realize that people with both hearing and vision loss should work with SSB rather than Vocational Rehabilitation Services. This can make it frustrating.

In the fall, we warmly welcomed new members, and spent time reviewing our goals and the history of our committee. We emphasized Pre-ETS services as this can be confusing. We will continue to focus on publicizing the work of SSB, especially to schools. We want to make sure that DeafBlind students are getting the services they need to be successful.

## Employment Committee

### Committee Charge

This committee exists to provide advice and propose strategies to increase the quantity and quality of employment outcomes for individuals served through the state vocational rehabilitation services for the blind system.

Because of delays in filling vacancies on the SRC-B and other challenges, the employment committee did not meet this year. However, we can provide the following information regarding successful employment closures for ffy19.

- There were 90 successful closures this year.
- The average wage for fulltime work was \$23.51.
- The average wage for part time work was \$14.49.

## Minority Outreach Committee Report

### Committee Charge

The role of the Minority Outreach committee is to advise State Services for the Blind (SSB) with specific strategies concerning its services to individuals with minority backgrounds. Additionally, the committee is responsible to provide input to the council, and both the customer satisfaction and the goals and priorities committee in order to develop the annual goals and priorities in conjunction with State Services for the Blind.

This year, the Minority Outreach Committee worked in two key areas: providing resources at events, and contacting organizations that serve minority populations.

Events where we staffed a resource table included a pow wow, the Somali Independence Day, the Hmong Freedom Festival, a Somali Health fair, and similar events.

We updated a list of key nonprofit organizations and divided up the list so that each committee member would contact by phone a certain number of organizations.

In addition to these activities, we had ongoing discussions about the best ways to reach various populations, and strategies for increasing our own cultural awareness and the cultural awareness of SSB staff.

## Senior Services Committee Report

### Committee Charge

The Senior Services Committee exists to assist State Services for the Blind to improve and expand services to blind, visually impaired, or DeafBlind Minnesotans who are not interested in employment. The majority of this group is seniors. These customers face significant barriers to independence, but they can benefit from services which help maintain or increase their independence. Activities include identifying unmet needs, recommending services necessary to meet these needs and identifying strategies to remove or reduce barriers to their independence.

For the 2019 Fiscal year, the membership of the Senior Services Committee was significantly reduced due to deaths of members as well as a time lag in appointing and approving new members, related to the change in the state's Governor. The committee focused mostly on the progress of the Aging Eyes Initiative (AGI) program in the Senior Services Unit. Cindy Kaufman, the Aging Eyes Coordinator, occasionally attended meetings to discuss the ongoing program and to obtain feedback from the committee.

Joining the Aging Eyes Initiative as a partner was the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, part of the Dept. of Human Services. With some funding from the Department, equipment for the hard of hearing was added to the AGI briefcase to expand the services to better include those with both hearing and vision loss.

The committee members decided to postpone considering new projects until additional members were approved and appointed to the committee for FY20.

## Transition Committee Report

### Committee Charge

This committee provides specific advice and counsel regarding services to transition-age youth (ages 14-21). This committee will provide input to the Customer Satisfaction & Goals and Priorities Committee and the full Council for consideration in the development of annual goals and priorities in conjunction with SSB, and will monitor those goals and priorities throughout the year.

In 2019 the Transition Committee tracked activities and programs for transition-age students from SSB and community organizations. We received reports from SSB's Transition Coordinator and other staff members as well as updates from providers who offer programming for transition students.

## Vendor outcomes and Measures Committee Report

### Committee Charge

This committee exists to support and advise SSB regarding measuring the outcomes realized by the recipients of training in adjustment to blindness and technology. This committee will provide input to the Customer Satisfaction & Goals and Priorities Committee and the full Council for consideration in the development of annual goals and priorities in conjunction with SSB, and will monitor those goals and priorities throughout the year.

SSB and the SRC-B designed a customer survey to measure the satisfaction of Adjustment to Blindness (ATB) training participants with training completed through SSB ATB vendors. Customers are chosen to be surveyed from 30 to 90 days after they have completed ATB training or when their case is closed with SSB, whichever is earlier. In the winter of 2014, SSB and the SRC-B worked to redesign the questionnaire to elicit more helpful survey responses. By fall 2017, SSB moved to just administer a WFD survey on a one-time basis. Now starting in the summer of 2019, the SSB ATB survey administration was adjusted to collect responses in-house at the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) via SurveyGizmo, DEED's online survey software system.



## STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL FOR THE BLIND

2200 University Avenue West, Suite 240  
St. Paul, MN 55114

[www.mnssb.org](http://www.mnssb.org)

Upon request, the information in this document can be made accessible for persons with disabilities.

Equal opportunity employer and service provider.

**JANUARY 2020**