



**EMPLOYMENT AND  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**  
STATE SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

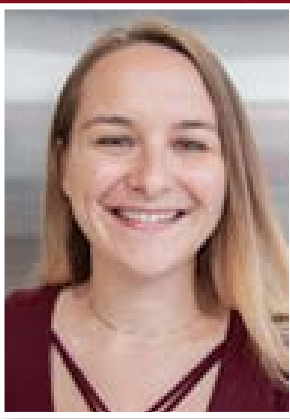
# 2019-2020 ANNUAL REPORT



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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## Letter from Natasha Jerde, SSB Director

Everywhere I turn lately, I hear the word “resilience.” Communities that have faced oppression and discrimination are lifting resilience as a crucial asset for surviving and thriving.

Parents and educators are recognizing the value of teaching our kids the skill of bouncing back from disappointments. And, all of us who face together the multiple hardships brought on by a global pandemic are having to build our resiliency muscle.

At State Services for the Blind we see resiliency in action every day. In these pages you’ll read stories of individuals drawing on strength and resilience to adapt to vision loss, pursue their goals in the face of setbacks, and challenge assumptions about what’s possible for people who are blind, DeafBlind, and visually impaired. As we recover from the COVID-19 global crisis we draw on that same spirit of resilience.

As I write this, things are not yet “back to normal” here at SSB. We are preparing our staff on protocols for in-person meetings with consumers that will use best-practices for health and safety. We’re making infrastructure changes in our Communication Center to prepare for the return of our volunteers. We’re awaiting the all-clear giving us the go-ahead to return to serving customers in-person and allowing volunteers back in our office.

We know that there will be some lasting changes to come out of 2020. We anticipate that there will be more flexibility for our staff to work from home on days when that makes sense. More of our volunteers will have equipment that allows them to work from home as well. Finally, we’ve seen how some remote learning and tech training provides advantages for our consumers. We will continue to experiment with service delivery to find the sweet spot that best serves our customers.

Thank you for reading this combined report reviewing the work of SSB in 2019 and 2020. We were in the process of wrapping up our 2019 report when the first wave of the pandemic hit and we, with so many, had to quickly pivot to focus all of our attention on safely serving our customers under the pandemic-related restrictions. Now, looking back over the span of two years, I find hope and lessons in resilience from the stories highlighted here.

A crisis, like the one we’ve lived through together, has a way of focusing our attention on the things that truly matter, and returning us to our values. The success stories highlighted in this report remind me of the values that SSB and the Department of Employment and Economic Development have chosen to guide our work. As I read through these pages, here are a few examples of those values at work:

### Focus on the Customer

Customers hoping to enroll in SSB’s Business Enterprise Program once needed to come to St. Paul to complete their training. For many, especially those living in Greater Minnesota and those with work and family responsibilities, this requirement made participation impractical if not altogether impossible. That’s how it was for Tim Flaata of Owatonna when he first considered the program several years ago.

Over the last several years, however, we’ve re-designed our BEP training program by putting our customers’ needs front and center. As you’ll read in this report, people like Tim can now complete more of the training online and on a schedule that works for them. John Hulet, BEP manager, says Tim is a shining example of the value of re-designing the training through a customer-focused lens. “Tim was really motivated,” John says. “He completed his training as fast as we had anyone go through it, and he did it while he worked full-time.”

### Communicate Early and Often

For most of my career, I’ve had the privilege of working in various capacities here at SSB. The success of our customers, from students to seniors to everyday working men and women, is something I witness daily. It can be easy to forget that there are still lots of folks in the general public who just aren’t aware of the strategies and alternative techniques that blind, low-vision, and DeafBlind people use to build successful and productive lives. Employers ask, “How could someone do this job if they couldn’t see?” Concerned family members ask, “How can my aging parents continue to live on their own, now that they’re losing their vision?”

In 2019, we created three videos to speak directly to concerns like these.

- “How Could I Do This Job If I Couldn’t See?” shows Minnesotans using high- and low-tech solutions at work. It’s a nice introduction for hiring managers

who might wonder if an applicant who is blind, low vision, or DeafBlind could indeed be the best person for the job.

- “How Could I Do It If I Can’t See It?” speaks to the experience of seniors trying to live well with vision loss.
- “How Can I Read It If I Can’t See It?” is for everyone who loves reading and worries that vision loss, or another disability might steal the joy of reading.

Following the release of the videos we launched an ad campaign on Facebook and Google. As a result, our videos were watched more than 200,000 times. We’re pleased that these videos have an impact, and we’ll continue to communicate that vision loss is not a barrier to a rich and rewarding life.

### Seek Solutions

2019 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the first on-air broadcast of Radio Talking Book, our first-in-the-nation radio reading service. But even as we look back and honor this remarkable achievement, we knew we have a commitment to meet the evolving needs and preferences of today’s consumers. On October 1st, 2020, we ceased broadcasting over our FM carrier. Now listeners to the RTB hear their favorite content via an app on their phone, through our online stream, or by saying, “Alexa, play Radio Talking Book.”

### Create Inclusion

For many who are new to Minnesota, English language classes are the gateway to finding work, connecting with the community, and building a new life. Teaching these skills often depends on visual cues. At SSB, we’ve been working with customers to connect them with resources for learning English that don’t rely on vision.

Last year SSB training coordinator Charlene Guggisberg connected with a Somali woman living in Willmar, who is blind, to create audio files of Somali words and their English equivalents. SSB vocational rehabilitation counselor Meredith Larson got in touch with a former customer who is a native Somali speaker, and SSB audio quality coordinator Jeff Behl produced the audio tracks.

Charlene remembers how isolated the customer had been, and how quickly she embraced mobility skills and braille by building on the simple foundation of these audio files. Sometimes it takes creativity, initiative, and working together to ensure that all are included, and no one is left behind.

### Encourage New Ideas

Engineering students at St. Paul’s University of St. Thomas take on an annual challenge for their senior project. For the last three years, St. Thomas students have worked to preserve the master copies of the tactile diagrams created by our braillists.

Graphs, diagrams, and other images provide essential information in textbooks and other publications. Our braillists create tactile representations of these graphics by hand, make thermoformed copies of these for the braille book, and store the master diagrams in our library for use in additional copies. Over the years, we’ve archived more than 40 thousand tactile diagrams, meaning that they are vulnerable to flood, fire, or other damage.

Through the generous initiative of a former SSB council member, we partnered with St. Thomas to create digital files of these master diagrams and safeguard their preservation. Last year a team of St. Thomas students devised a Tactile Digital Scanner that can capture and reproduce our tactile masters. The scanner is a tangible example of new ideas put to work, and our partnership with these student engineers represents a new and creative way to come together and find new ideas.

### Be Gracious

I know I can hardly wait for the day when it will be safe to resume our normal activities. When we can at last open our doors and welcome customers and volunteers back to our offices, we know they will be greeted with a warm welcome. In an internship at SSB, student Levi Welsh learned the art and skill of graciousness as he provided support to our front desk staff.

We know that the extraordinary circumstances of 2020 have required patience and flexibility from our customers, volunteers, and partners. I thank you for the graciousness you have extended to us as we found new and creative ways to serve Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, and visually impaired. Our commitment to you and to the values that drive us are stronger than ever, and we know that that spirit of resilience will yield greater opportunity for accessibility, achievement, and equality for our community.

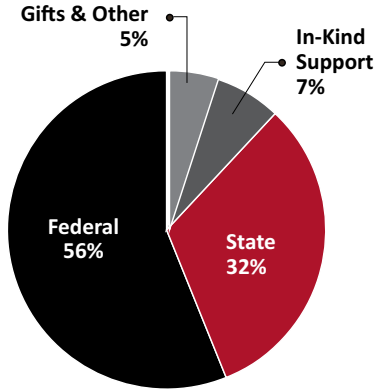


Natasha Jerde, SSB Director

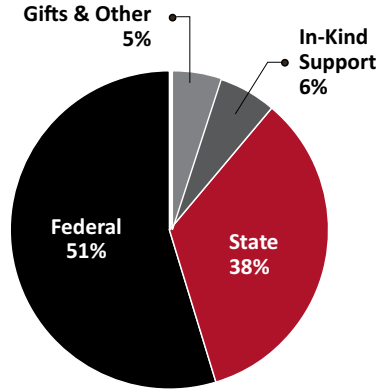
# SSB FINANCIALS

## SSB Funding Streams

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2019

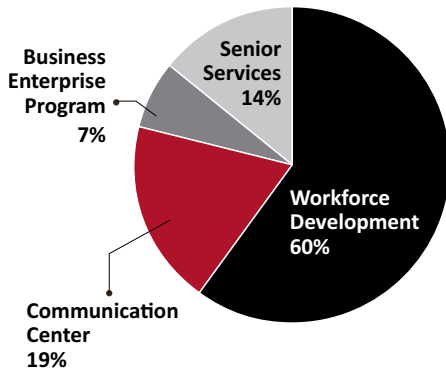


FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2020

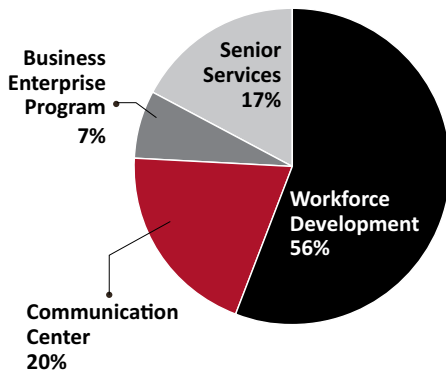


## SSB Funding Distribution

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2019



FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2020



## SSB Expenditures

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2019 AND 2020

Federal Funds	FFY 2019	FFY 2020
Basic VR	\$10,035,311	\$7,438,893
Supported Employment	6,347	(21,673)
Independent Living	\$55,402	\$74,141
IL-Older Blind	\$677,871	\$702,575
Special Education Agreement	\$624,999	\$623,394
<b>Total Federal Funds</b>	<b>\$11,399,930</b>	<b>\$8,817,330</b>
<b>Total State Funds</b>	<b>\$6,551,386</b>	<b>\$6,543,014</b>
Other Funds		
Gifts/Bequests	\$283,401	\$260,908
Dept. of Commerce - Telecommunications Access	\$98,840	\$96,478
Aging Eyes	\$123,827	\$121,190
Communication Center	\$13,690	\$13,800
Business Enterprises	\$467,222	\$440,129
<b>Total Other Funds</b>	<b>\$986,980</b>	<b>\$932,506</b>
In-Kind Support		
<b>From Volunteers</b>	<b>\$1,425,000</b>	<b>\$1,020,000</b>
<b>Total All Funds</b>	<b>\$26,363,297</b>	<b>\$17,312,849</b>



## Accessibility in Vending

State and federal laws give blind persons a priority to operate vending services on federal and state properties. SSB's Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides training, certification, technical support, and management services to these self-employed business owners.

Scott Eggen maintains more than 125 vending machines in the St. Paul area. Recently he worked with Three Square Market, a company that provides micro-market vending technology, to make sure their kiosk technology is fully accessible. He helped design a kiosk that uses speech output for blind and low-vision customers, and a repositioning feature for customers using wheelchairs.

Working with suppliers like Three Square Market makes technology accessible, both for business owners like Eggen and his customers.

## Reading Your Way Can Be Life-Changing

Having access to print in a format that works is vital to learning, working, and staying engaged. SSB's Communication Center provides materials for Minnesotans whose disability makes reading print difficult; including those who may have difficulty holding a book, turning pages, or processing visual information.

SSB received this email: "I just wanted you to know what incredible service you provided to my son these past twenty years. He's a practicing artist and lives in St. Paul. Listening to incredible literature continues to inspire and influence his work. You made it possible for my son to not only graduate from high school, but also from university and even to get a master's degree. You've contributed to the making of a successful Minnesota citizen."

## Helping Seniors with Hearing and Vision Loss

SSB's Aging Eyes Initiative trains community partners to provide practical support, tools, and devices for seniors living with vision loss. As many of these individuals also experience hearing loss, SSB partnered with Minnesota's Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division (DHHSD) to include a Pocketalker in its community partner kits.

A Pocketalker is a hand-held device that amplifies sounds closest to the listener while reducing background noise. It's useful for one-on-one conversation, small group discussion, TV listening, and conversing in a car. It provides a reliable alternative for seniors who may not yet need hearing aids or may not be able to purchase them.

## Reading Your Way Can Be A Lifeline

For many senior citizens, not being able to read is second only to giving up driving on their lists of losses. And especially during this pandemic, access to reading has been a lifeline.

SSB received this note from a customer in Greater Minnesota: "I am coming up on 100 years old, and I appreciate this service very much. The books helped me escape to another world. I would never have thought of asking for the books and love the variety!"





## Significant Steps Toward Business Independence

In 2020 Randall Bradley incorporated his business, Balance Team Architecture. It's one of many significant steps for Bradley to re-launch the architectural business he closed in 2009. His vision loss, due to diabetic retinopathy, was one of several reasons that business ended.

Bradley connected with SSB's Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Mark Groves. He then enrolled in Adjustment to Blindness training and began to work with low-vision aids and devices. Years after closing his architectural business Bradley realized, "I still had some architecture in me."

While working to re-launch his business, Bradley worked with Groves and landed a job at Home Depot. Bradley views this as part of his journey, even as he puts the pieces in place to re-establish himself as an architect.

## Small Business Owner Modernizes to Serve Customers

Small business owners have been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, including those in SSB's Business Enterprise Program (BEP). But they are re-building and finding ways to re-launch their businesses.

Michael Colbrunn manages vending services at Minnesota State University in Mankato, where touchless point-of-sale solutions are increasingly important for convenience, health, and safety. Colbrunn worked with MSU to add card readers to his vending machines: MSU paid for the card readers, and BEP technicians obtained and installed new machines.

Blind vendors operate concession services in federal and state locations like office buildings, rest areas, and colleges and universities. The BEP

program provides training, certification, technical support, and management services to these self-employed business owners.

## SSB and Employer Team Up for Empowerment

Hesper Lovejoy faced significant vision loss 20 years into her career as a Legal Administrative Assistant at Minneapolis law firm Winthrop & Weinstine. When her vision started to deteriorate due to retinitis pigmentosa, she confronted her circumstances head-on.

Lovejoy enrolled at Vision Loss Resources (VLR) in Minneapolis, where she gained skills in orientation, mobility, and using screen-reading software and other tech. She worked with an Assistive Technology Specialist after work hours and on weekends, to program software compatible with programs she used in her job. She also contacted Guide Dogs of America, and in 2019 her new guide dog Kiwi came into her life.

SSB worked with Winthrop & Weinstine to install CCTV, a closed-caption TV system that enlarges print and images, and JAWS, a screen-reading software that converts text to speech.

"Hesper knew what she needed, and we were able to help her get there," said SSB Director Natasha Jerde. "We not only work with blind, DeafBlind, and visually-impaired job seekers, but we partner with businesses to make sure employees who are losing vision get what they need to keep working. Of course, more than anything, it was Hesper herself who provided the drive and determination to continue in the job she loves."



Every Minnesotan 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.

- 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 cause, 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](mailto:aging.eyes@state.mn.us), call us at 651-539-2276, or visit us at [www.mn.gov/deed/ssb/seniors/aging-eyes.jsp](http://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 significant vision loss to live well after 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 love the written and spoken word, check out the range of volunteer possibilities by visiting us at [www.MNSSB.org](http://www.MNSSB.org).

**SSB is now part of GiveMN,  
which you can visit at  
[mn.gov/deed/ssbdonate](http://mn.gov/deed/ssbdonate)**



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State Services for the Blind is a program of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

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