



# STATE SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

**m** EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



# 2025

# 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, low vision, or DeafBlind.

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## Natasha Jerde, Director State Services for the Blind

In a year marked by change and uncertainty, one thing remained constant at State Services for the Blind: our commitment to the blind, low vision, and DeafBlind Minnesotans we serve. Throughout 2025, we stayed focused on our mission—supporting people as they pursue their goals, contribute to their communities, and build the skills needed to live well with vision loss.

Within these pages, you will meet customers whose stories reflect determination, creativity, and resilience. You'll read about individuals gaining employment, strengthening independence, giving back, and redefining what is possible in their own lives. Their successes are the true measure of our work and the reason we continue to evolve and improve our services.

This year was also one of innovation and initiative. In 2025, we launched **Evolve Employment**, a five-year effort designed to address the persistent challenges of unemployment and underemployment among blind and low vision Minnesotans. We brought together a dedicated team with deep experience in vocational rehabilitation, employment services, business engagement, and consumer advocacy. With a two-pronged approach—supporting both job seekers and employers—Evolve Employment is already helping us test new ideas, build stronger partnerships, and gather real-world data that will inform and strengthen our employment services well into the future.

At the same time, we navigated a shifting fiscal landscape. Changes in federal policy created challenges that affected our programs across the board. Throughout 2025, and as we planned for 2026 and beyond, we acted thoughtfully and cautiously to ensure fiscal stability while maintaining essential services. We are especially pleased that we were able to continue distributing funds through the Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund. After clarifying the carryover of funds, this pilot program is once again supporting small and mid-sized Minnesota businesses as they hire and retain employees with disabilities—an investment that benefits workers, employers, and communities alike.

This annual report offers snapshots of a year that was both challenging and deeply rewarding. Across our programs, including the work of our Communication Center and service teams statewide, customers found success, staff demonstrated innovation and dedication, and partnerships grew stronger.

I am proud of what we accomplished together in 2025. Most of all, I am inspired by the achievements of blind Minnesotans who continue to lead full, engaged, and meaningful lives. Thank you for your continued support, collaboration, and belief in the power of opportunity.

Warm regards,

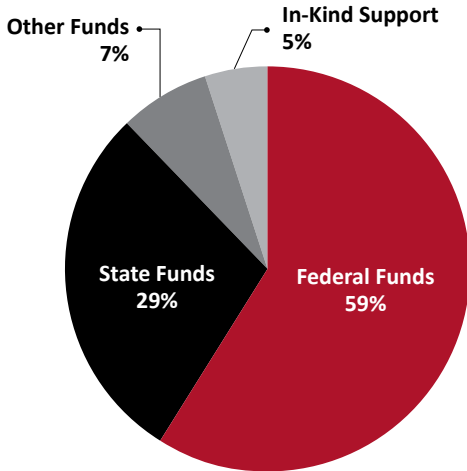
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Natasha".

Natasha Jerde, SSB Director

# SSB FINANCIALS

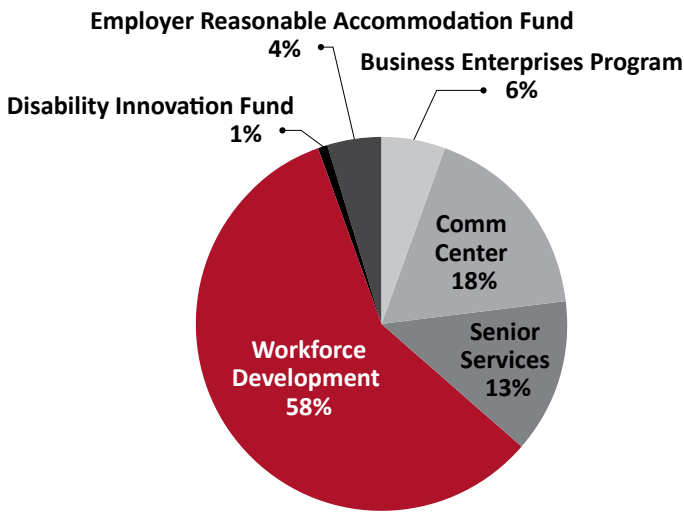
## SSB Funding Streams

STATE FISCAL YEAR 2024 AND 2025

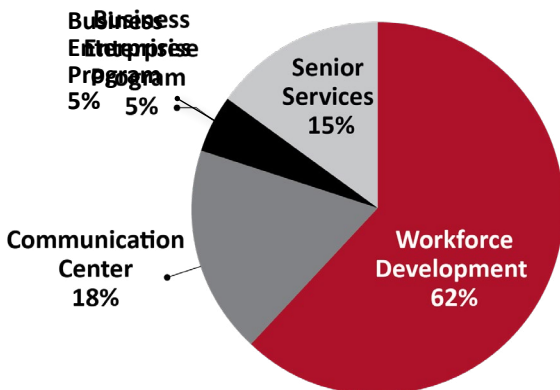


## SSB Funding Distribution

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2025



FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2025



## SSB Expenditures

STATE FISCAL YEAR 2024 AND 2025

Federal Funds	FFY2024	FFY2025
Basic VR	12,442,628	14,598,788
Supported Employment	-	-
Independent Living	15,138	101,925
IL-Older Blind	1,397,994	1,337,154
Special Education Agreement	688,971	676,762
DIF Grant		251,845
<b>Total Federal Funds</b>	<b>14,544,731</b>	<b>16,966,474</b>

<b>Total State Funds</b>	<b>5,903,917</b>	<b>8,480,962</b>
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Other Funds	FFY2024	FFY2025
Gift/Bequest	197,886	298,538
Dept. of Commerce --		
Telecommunications Access MN	94,999	54,625
Special Revenue		
Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund	-	1,235,684
Communication Center	-	-
<b>Business Enterprises</b>	<b>569,890</b>	<b>2,106,895</b>

In-Kind Support	FFY2024	FFY2025
<b>From Volunteers</b>	<b>1,207,836</b>	<b>1,411,591</b>
<b>Total All Funds</b>	<b>20,726,931</b>	<b>28,965,922</b>

## Director's Note on Program Services

Through Workforce Development, Senior Services, and the Business Enterprise Program, (our program services) we partner with blind, DeafBlind, and low vision Minnesotans as they pursue their goals for meaningful employment and for living with greater confidence, independence, and connection in their communities. Across all of these programs, we are guided by a shared belief: with the right supports, opportunities, and expectations, people who are blind or have low vision can thrive at every stage of life. The stories in this section offer a snapshot of the energy, creativity, and commitment that define our program services. We highlight key activities and initiatives underway in these program areas, and—as always—we are pleased to share a few exemplary stories that illustrate the real impact of this work. These stories reflect not only individual achievement, but also the strength of partnerships among customers, staff, families, employers, and community organizations working together toward shared success.

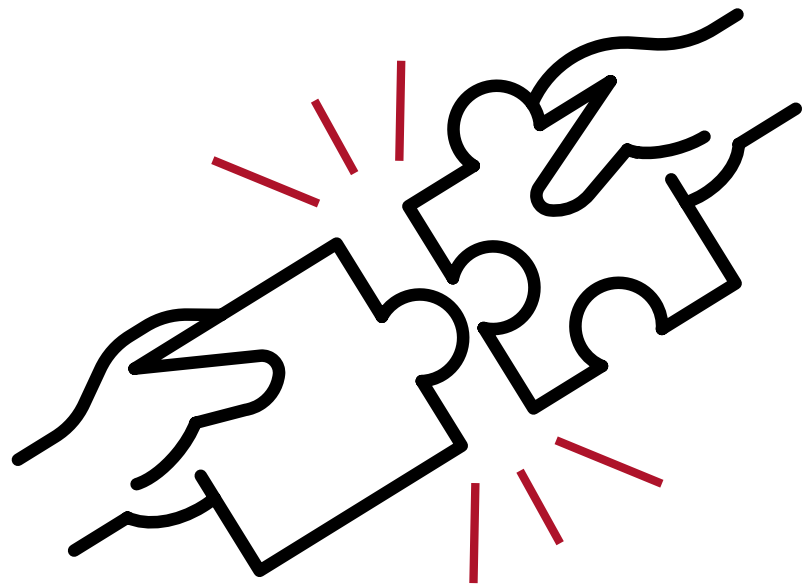
Our Workforce Development team experienced a remarkable year, serving more customers than we have seen in nearly a decade. This growth reflects both increasing demand for services and our ongoing efforts to evolve how we support job seekers in a changing labor market. Counselors and employment specialists focused on individualized planning, skill development, and strong connections with employers, helping customers move toward competitive, integrated employment that aligns with their interests and talents. The momentum we saw this year reinforces the importance of innovative, responsive employment services that meet people where they are.

Youth Services continued to invest in the next generation, offering a broad array of activities designed to help students build skills for self-advocacy, job preparation, college exploration, and independent living. From hands-on learning experiences to peer connections and mentoring, these opportunities empowered young people to envision their futures with confidence and to begin building the tools they will need for success in adulthood.

Within our Business Enterprises Program (BEP), we took deliberate steps to tailor services to better support the development of family-sustaining businesses. We saw higher incomes for many BEP small business owners, even as vending businesses continue to evolve to succeed in a market that is vastly changed from pre-pandemic times. These outcomes underscore the value of entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic stability and personal fulfillment.

Senior Services once again served nearly 4,000 Minnesotans, providing critical support at a time of life when vision loss can bring significant transitions. In addition to ongoing services, the program launched new support groups and placed a renewed emphasis on skills training, helping older adults maintain independence, build confidence, and stay connected.

Together, these efforts reflect SSB's commitment to growth, innovation, and impact. We invite you to explore the following pages and learn more about the work happening across our program services—and, most importantly, about the customers whose determination and achievements mark the true measure of our success.



## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT UNIT - State Fiscal Year 2025

**1,064** Customers Served

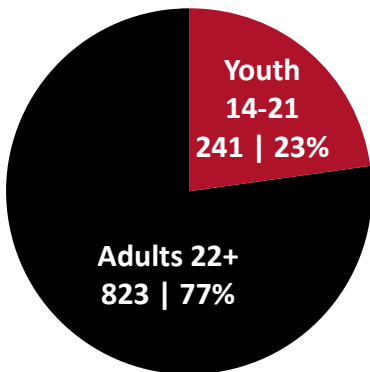
**100** who received employment outcome

### Vision Impairments of Customers Served



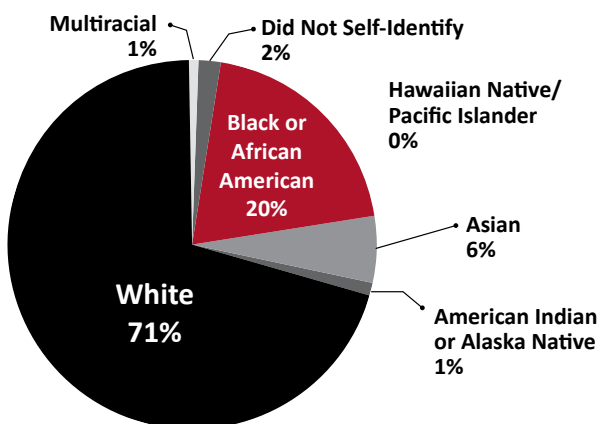
Note: These totals do not include customers who exited prior to providing specific demographic information.

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



Age	Count	Region	Percent
Youth 14-21	100	Greater MN	9%
Youth 14-21	141	Metro	13%
Youth 14-21	0	Out of State or Private	NA
Adult 22+	532	Metro	50%
Adult 22+	286	Greater MN	27%
Adult 22+	5	Out of State or Private	NA
Total	1,064	All	100%

### Serving Minnesota's Diverse Population



### Achieving Equity

DEED is working to address disparities and achieve economic equity for all Minnesotans by identifying and breaking down barriers to employment and business opportunities. Data on the populations served are valuable for program development and policy decisions. This program targets individuals who are blind, low vision, or DeafBlind.

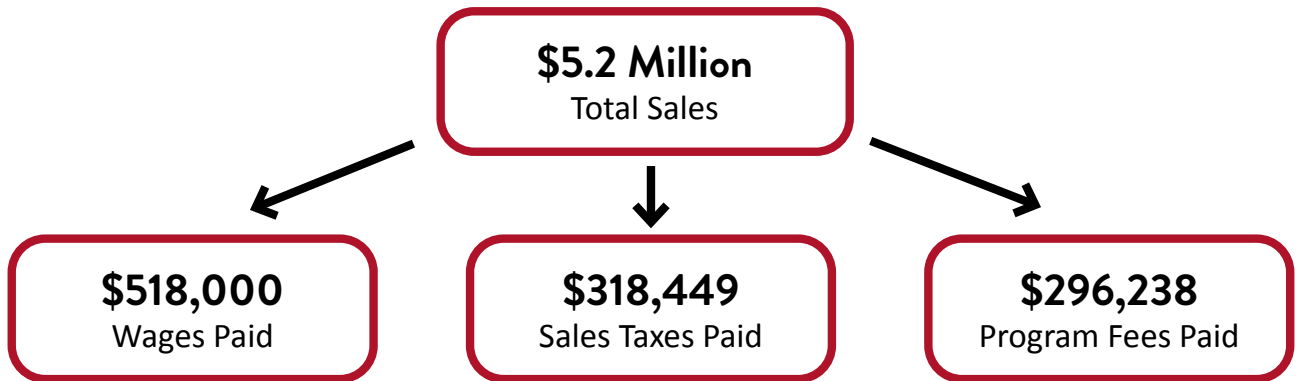


## BUSINESS ENTERPRISES PROGRAM

### Federal Fiscal Year 2025

- 22 business operators served
- 18 individuals employed by BEP operators
- 22 businesses in 140 locations in 44 cities across the state
- \$60,576 average net profit

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



## SENIOR SERVICES UNIT

### State Fiscal Year 2025

# 3,617

## CLIENTS SERVED



*Providing Services to Help Seniors Choose Where to Live*

<b>Private residence</b> <i>(house or apartment)</i>	<b>2,335</b>
<b>Senior Living Retirement Community</b>	<b>719</b>
<b>Assisted Living Facility</b>	<b>422</b>
<b>Nursing Home/ Long-term Care Facility</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>Independent Living (18-54)</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Unhoused</b>	<b>4</b>

*Independent Living (18-54) are customers served not as seniors, but as younger people who are unable to participate in WDU programming.*

## A Carpenter Builds a New Life

For Brad Blank, the path to entrepreneurship began not with a business plan, but with a few encouraging words. A lifelong carpenter and woodworker who lost his vision in 2021, Brad connected with State Services for the Blind and began learning new skills to help him put his life back on track. One day, about 2 years ago, an assistive technology instructor made a simple observation that put Brad on a new path. “You know,” she said, “You have a lot to offer and could be doing so much more.”

Brad immediately knew that she was right, and that what he wanted to do was to get back to woodworking.

Brad traces his love of carpentry back to building treehouses at age 12. He went on to a long career in carpentry and manufacturing. Losing his vision in 2021 - through a hereditary condition he had not known about – turned his world upside down. No longer able to work, he contacted State Services for the Blind and began learning the skills that would put him on the path of independence. Though the first two years were especially difficult, challenging himself to learn and adapt brought Brad to the point where he could take hold of the idea of launching his own woodworking business.

To help launch his new business, Mind’s Eye Woodworks, on the suggestion of an employment services specialist at SSB, Brad turned to the St. Cloud Small Business Development Center (SBDC). Like SSB, the nine SBDCs across Minnesota are part of the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). Consultants with the SBDC assisted Brad in mapping out a business plan and designing business cards and a website. In addition to providing skills training, as Brad’s business took shape, SSB helped with the purchase of some accessible woodworking tools. With a solid plan in place, Brad officially filed his business in May and celebrated with a ribbon cutting in August.

Bringing together sustainability and design, Brad uses repurposed wood from pallets to build raised garden boxes, bat houses, and décor pieces. His garden boxes with an American flag motif have proven especially popular. One of those boxes was featured in a silent auction for Wounded Warriors in the Crosslake area.

As word spreads about Brad’s work, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. A customer from St. Augusta MN, is one of several who agreed to share their praise for Brad’s work on the Mind’s Eye Woodworks website. “Brad built a custom planter box as a surprise birthday gift, and I couldn’t be happier with the result. He took the time to confirm all my measurements, answered my questions promptly throughout the process and delivered a beautifully crafted piece that was exactly what I envisioned. I will definitely be working with Brad again in the future and highly recommend him to anyone looking for quality craftsmanship and reliable service.”

To use an analogy that Brad might appreciate, the services and supports provided by SSB and the SBDCs are like tools in a toolbox. Entrepreneurs like Brad skillfully use those tools to build a strong business and a new life.



*Brad Blank opening his business with a ribbon cutting ceremony.*



*Custom bat houses by Brad and Mind’s Eye Woodworks.*

## Evolve Employment Initiative Expands Opportunity



### Evolve Employment

Empowering Talent. Elevating Workplaces.

**Evolve Employment** is SSB's new model demonstration grant-funded program designed to make the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) process more **person-centered, timely, and effective** for individuals who are blind, have low vision, or are DeafBlind. The initiative is about testing new approaches that improve outcomes for both participants and staff through **collaboration, innovation, and systems change**.

In 2024, SSB was awarded a \$9.1 million dollar Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). Through the winter and spring of 2025, we onboarded new staff, began planning, training, and setting out goals and strategies. Very quickly, staff got to work assisting job seekers, reaching out to employers, and providing critical job retention services.

Looking ahead, Evolve Employment will continue to expand services, including:

- Intensive post-hire job stabilization and rapid response retention
- Progressive employment, training, and skill-building
- Sector-specific opportunities

While we will monitor capacity in real-time, urgent job retention cases will always remain **top priority**. This project affords us the opportunity of testing new strategies, reaching Minnesotans with low vision who may not otherwise be served within traditional vocational rehabilitation models, and building more robust employment opportunities for workforce customers in emerging markets.

## ERAF Pilot: Expanding Access and Impact Across Minnesota

Over its two-year pilot phase, the Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund (ERAF) has proven to be a transformative resource for Minnesota's small and mid-sized businesses. Administered by DEED, ERAF reimburses employers for the cost of job-related accommodations, helping them retain valued employees with disabilities and build more inclusive workplaces.

Between FY24 and FY25, ERAF supported **104 unique employers** and distributed over **\$1.35 million** in reimbursements. Applications nearly doubled year-over-year, with strong participation from both the Twin Cities metro and Greater Minnesota. A March 2025 survey found that **94% of employers reported productivity gains, and 98% said they would recommend the program** to others.

"You start thinking more creatively... and very open-minded about what else can I do."  
— *Jill Lloyd, President, Lloyd Security*

ERAF's success has drawn national attention, earning a NASWA Equal Opportunity Award and inspiring interest from states like Colorado, New York, and Vermont. As ERAF enters its third year, it is poised to become a national model for inclusive workforce development—while continuing to drive meaningful change for Minnesota employers and employees alike.



*Ray McCoy, center, receives the 2025 NASWA Equal Opportunity Award.*

## Discovering Through Touch: Artist Linda Brant-Malm Redefines How We Experience Art

Linda Brant-Malm had a question. How could she help the children in her life, including future grandchildren, understand her vision loss? She could tell them, of course, about how her eye condition, retinal pigmentosa, gradually took away her peripheral vision. But, could there be a way to explain about “tunnel vision” in a way that was less abstract and not scary? Could she draw on her years of experience as a costume designer, and boundless creativity to create an approach that was interactive and even fun?

That’s what started Linda Brant-Malm on a path that would lead her to a new business, Tactile Artworks, whose mission is to redefine how art is experienced. Tactile Artworks provides presentations to schools, support groups, and other communities to explore art through interactive pieces and storytelling. As Linda built skills to live well with her own vision loss, and pursued her new business venture, she turned to SSB. SSB provided training and support for accommodations needed for her work.

In her first piece, called “Hungry Little Monsters” a large collection of brightly colored handcrafted creatures sit next to a big round platter with two eyeballs in the center. Workshop participants are invited to place the “little monsters” all over the platter, gradually filling up the peripheral spaces surrounding the eyes.

Linda describes how, as her vision loss progressed, she felt as though “tiny monsters were nibbling away at the edges of my vision. They kept nibbling until all I had was a tiny circle in the middle.”

One day she brought “Hungry Little Monsters” to Vision Loss Resources, where Linda had taken classes. Linda was delighted that the piece resonated with adults as well as kids. “Around the table, people were smiling and laughing,” Linda remembers, “and they were talking too, and telling their own stories.”

“That’s when I knew I was on to something,” she says, “I could use whimsical design to create something colorful and wild and not straightforward. As the project grew, I looked for ways to make each piece more engaging and interactive.”

Linda’s series of pieces moves through the journey of grief and acceptance. A goldfish too big for its bowl describes the feeling of being stuck. A series of spirals captures the circuitous path through grief toward hope. The tactile image of a figure with a guide dog emerging from a tunnel into the radiant sunlight pays homage to the increasing freedom that Linda has found through working with her guide dog.

The mission of Tactile Artworks, Linda explains, is simple but radical: to show art through touch. “Even most 3-D art can’t be touched—or you’re only allowed to touch it with white gloves,” she says. “I wanted to create something truly experiential, something people could hold, explore, and play with.”

To build this new venture, Linda drew on her decades of experience as a costume designer. Over the course of her illustrious career, she worked with Camp Snoopy, Sesame Street Live, Disney, and Cirque du Soleil. “I chose



*Linda Brant-Malm*

animal costumes as a specialty,” she says. “I loved the challenge of transforming a human form into an animal character—thinking about ears, bellies, tails. It taught me how to communicate emotion and personality through shape and texture.”

Linda had known since childhood that she had retinitis pigmentosa, a condition shared by her father and grandfather. Though she loved art, she grew up believing she should prepare for a career that wouldn’t be threatened by vision loss. But in college she realized that what she loved most, and had the greatest talent for, were the art classes she took as electives. She decided to pursue art and transferred to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. On her very first day there, a professor spoke with such passion about costume design that Linda felt an immediate spark of recognition. She had found her path.

Her family’s experiences with vision loss became a compass of sorts. Her grandfather coped by withdrawing. “He spent most of his time in his favorite chair,” she recalls. Her father, by contrast, refused to let vision loss confine him—traveling to 106 countries before passing away in Japan. Linda saw these two extremes—one turning inward, one outward—and imagined a middle way for herself. “I told my brothers I wanted to be the normal one,” she says with a laugh.

As the years went on and her own vision deteriorated, Linda eventually reached a moment of reckoning. “I realized, okay, this is really happening,” she says. “And I’m going to have to figure this out.” That recognition, though difficult, became fertile ground for her creative work. Tactile Artworks gave her a way to translate loss into connection, and uncertainty into play.

While her pieces emerge from her lived experience of blindness, Linda is quick to say they are not only about vision loss. Each sculpture captures a universal part of being human: feeling powerless or afraid, searching for meaning, moving through grief, finding hope. And always, there is an element of whimsy—bright colors, unexpected textures, shapes that invite curiosity. “I think people open up when they’re having fun,” she says. “If the art is disarming, then the conversation can be too.”

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## Kris Mitchell: Building Community Through Sports and Service

Kris Mitchell has lived with low vision his entire life, but he doesn't let it define his limits. An athlete at heart, Kris grew up playing football and basketball, always finding creative ways to adapt and keep pace. His love of sports carried him through school, where he studied sports management, and it continues to fuel both his professional and personal life today.

Kris currently balances two demanding roles—working in the front office with the Minnesota Twins and serving with the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, where he has been for nearly a decade. At the Parks Board, Kris designs programs that open doors for urban youth, from organizing trips to Twins games and Valley Fair, to creating cooking classes in partnership with local restaurants. “I would love to be a park director one day,” he shares, “to bring the community together through programs that give kids opportunities they might not otherwise have.”

Much of Kris's success, he notes, comes from support he received early on from Minnesota State Services for the Blind (SSB). From magnifiers and computer access to help with résumés and interviewing skills, SSB's resources gave him the tools to build a career and learn how to self-advocate. “No one is going to speak up for you—you have to do it for yourself,” Kris says.

Despite the challenges that come with vision loss, Kris thrives on facing each day with focus and determination. He is proud of his strong work ethic and ability to hold himself accountable, and he encourages others with vision loss to take things one day at a time. Looking ahead, he's excited about new challenges—including pursuing homeownership. “It's scary,” he admits, “but also exciting.”

Through his career, community service, and resilience, Kris Mitchell shows how passion, adaptability, and hard work can open doors and inspire others to see possibilities instead of limitations.



*Kris Mitchell on the MN Vikings' home field.*

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**“No one is going to speak up for you—you have to do it for yourself,” Kris says.**

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## Empowering Youth Through Experiences

In 2025, State Services for the Blind (SSB) Youth Services delivered a robust lineup of programs that blended outdoor adventure, skill-building, and community connection for blind and low vision students across Minnesota.

“We’ve done three different opportunities this year with Wilderness Inquiry,” said Shane DeSantis, who coordinates many of the youth programs. “They’re all about getting individuals outdoors.”

Those experiences included a snowshoeing and fire-starting day at Fort Snelling, a three-day camping trip at William O’Brien State Park, and a canoe trip down the Mississippi River. Each event was designed with accessibility in mind. “Wilderness Inquiry provides everything—you can show up with the clothes on your back and a bag of a couple of extra pairs of clothes,” Shane explained. “They even had Halal marshmallows for one of our students.”

The summer camping trip was a standout. “Students cooked meals over a campfire, set up their own tents, washed their dishes outdoors, and canoed the St. Croix River,” Shane said. “It’s amazing to see students take on those responsibilities and thrive.”

Looking ahead, Shane shared that the canoe and camping trips will return in 2026, though the winter event may be changed to low turnout. “Being outdoors in the cold—I get it,” he said with a laugh.

Beyond outdoor adventures, Youth Services’ Peer Ambassadors hosted virtual hangouts, a summer picnic, and a winter pizza party with cookie decorating. They also led sessions during the Summer Transition Program, a 10-day residential experience at the University of St. Thomas. “It’s truly a jam-packed, on-the-go experience,” Shane said. “The students are quite literally exhausted and go home with so much knowledge.”

The Summer Transition Program is a collaboration with the Department of Education and District 916, helps students build independent living skills, explore careers, and connect with peers. “They’re cooking, doing laundry, going on mobility lessons, and even doing blind sailing and improv,” Shane said. “It’s a unique experience for our students.”

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**“Networks and community are so important. Seeing our students build and grow together is so rewarding.”**

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SSB also supported students in gaining real-world work experience through internships and virtual job tracks in areas like digital marketing and journalism. “It’s a good entry-level way for our students to get some work experience, work in a team, and build those soft skills that are so important,” Shane emphasized.

Parent engagement was another key focus. SSB hosted listening sessions on orientation and mobility and Social Security benefits. “We had a good turnout,” Shane said. “One parent called me after and said, ‘I learned a lot and now I have questions about how to help my son who’s graduating.’ That’s the kind of impact we want.”

Reflecting on the broader purpose of these programs, Shane added, “We know networks and community are so important. Seeing our students build that and grow together—it’s so rewarding.”



*Students gather for an outdoor adventure to build social connections and outdoor skills among students with visual impairments.*

### Connecting through Learning - SSB's New Training Kitchen

The spirit of creativity and nourishment is alive and well in SSB's training kitchen. Designed to empower individuals with vision loss, this new space at SSB's St. Paul headquarters offers hands-on learning in cooking, nutrition, and independent living skills. It's more than just a kitchen—it's a place where confidence is built, flavors are explored, and independence is celebrated.

In September 2025, SSB trainers Char and Kia began their third round of training sessions in the newly updated space. These training sessions run once a week for 8 weeks. Participants learn their way around a kitchen and practice cooking techniques with low vision. Training is gradual release where they begin with simple, no-cook meals like a sandwich and chips and ramping up to cooking with the microwave, stove, and oven. The end goal is for participants to build confidence to keep cooking at home with low vision.

In addition to kitchen skills, the training space also has a washing machine and dryer for laundering lessons. Other life skills covered in the training sessions are medication management, paper money organization, orientation and mobility (O & M), and transportation options. "We have one of our O&M trainers come in and work with me on these classes. So even when there's like cooking or other stuff going on, they can pull a person and work with them, and then eventually we go on outings together. So that's also part of the class," states Char.

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**"It is really good that they're in the SSB office and there are other people with different levels of vision loss around that can connect with the participants, and it's not just me, as their teacher demonstrating things," says Char.**

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Training participants range from youth to seniors. SSB's Youth Services department held a four-week training course for students this summer. "We really need to be nailing down those foundational skills for transitioning students, and I see that happening more in the kitchen space at SSB. We sometimes find that students who are preparing to go off to college are struggling with those basic independent living skills. And we have to start at the very basics, like using a microwave," adds Kia.

An unexpected benefit of having the training space at SSB is the exposure participants have to other SSB staff. They can meet with staff from other departments and get to know the people who transcribe materials into braille or audio. The trainers can also pull in other specialists who can facilitate technology assessments, conduct an O&M lesson, or even just offer support and advice. "It is really good that they're in the SSB office and there are other people with different levels of vision loss around that can connect with the participants, and it's not just me, as their teacher demonstrating things," says Char.



*SSB's training kitchen provides a safe environment to learn low vision cooking skills.*



## Building the Plane While Flying It: Mike Colbrunn's Trailblazing Journey in BEP

When Mike Colbrunn became a licensed Business Enterprises Program (BEP) owner-operator in September 2015, he stepped into a world of opportunity—and challenge—that would shape his career and redefine what was possible for blind entrepreneurs in Minnesota.

Mike's relationship with State Services for the Blind (SSB) dates back to 1997, when he received Adjustment to Blindness training. But it wasn't until 2015, when BEP became his employment goal, that he fully engaged with the program.

"I got my BEP license in 2015," Mike recalls. "But the journey started years earlier when my counselor, Maureen, first told me about the program. At the time, I had a young family and a job, and I couldn't dedicate the time needed for training." It wasn't until a few years later, after shadowing a blind vendor and reconnecting with Maureen, that the timing—and the training—aligned.

### From Vending to Visionary

Mike's growth as a business owner has been anything but conventional. With the support of SSB BEP mentors like John Hulet and Jerry Christensen, and through his involvement with the National Association of Blind Merchants, Mike immersed himself in upward mobility training and learned to think beyond traditional vending.

"I learned about different types of businesses that fall under the Randolph-Sheppard Act," he explains. "Having the open-mindedness to pursue other types of businesses allowed us to explore new opportunities that weren't previously prioritized."

That mindset led to one of his proudest accomplishments: securing a full food service dining contract at Camp Ripley, a U.S. Army National Guard training facility in Little Falls, Minnesota.

"This was our first time doing this as a program," Mike says. "Many states have these military dining contracts, but the infrastructure is already in place.

We had to build the roadmap from scratch—and do it in just a few months."

The effort involved a massive team, including DEED fiscal and legal staff, John Hulet, Natasha Jerde from SSB, and Mike himself. "There's an expression, 'you're building the plane while you're flying it.' That's what it felt like at times," he says. "I'm extremely humbled that these people were doing this for me. They foresaw the outcome and believed in it."

### A Business Built on Grit and Growth

Today, Mike oversees 12 locations, including Camp Ripley, and employs up to 35 people, about half of whom are full-time. His role is multifaceted—part operations, part strategy, and all-in commitment.

"I don't have a typical work week," he says. "I still fill vending machines, receive orders, manage the stockroom, and then spend the rest of my time on the computer overseeing accounts, budgets, and financials. I wear more than one hat for sure."

Despite the workload, Mike finds deep satisfaction in the autonomy and accountability that come with being self-employed. "You can really measure your own work in the bottom line. It's very results oriented."

### Facing Challenges with Innovation

The vending and convenience industry is evolving rapidly, and Mike is keenly aware of the need to stay ahead. "Everything is going cashless faster. That requires technology—kiosks, equipment, and more. It's very difficult to keep up, and you don't want to be left behind."

Operating within a state-run program adds another layer of complexity. "You can't just make knee-jerk decisions. There are approvals, regulations, and timelines. But staying relevant is critical."

### Advice for Aspiring BEP Entrepreneurs

Mike's advice to those considering BEP ownership is clear: "To be successful, you're going to have to put the work in. There's no easy way to do this. Your success depends on how much you're willing to put into it."

He also encourages future entrepreneurs not to limit themselves—or the program. "Things that seem impossible are sometimes possible. Sometimes the success isn't obvious. You really have to put a lot of your energy into your own success."

### *Continuation of Building the Plane While Flying It: Mike Colbrunn's Trailblazing Journey in BEP*

#### **Collaboration is the Key**

"John Hulet tells me all the time that 95% of my success is me, if not more," Mike says. "But I haven't been alone in this. I've been able to grow because the program supports my motivation to grow."

He believes that collaboration is key to the program's future. "The state can find new opportunities, but you need blind vendors who want to pursue them."

Mike is also passionate about mentoring. "I love opening up my business to any blind individuals who want to see what it's all about. If we can create different types of businesses, the program can attract more folks interested in self-employment."

## Support Groups Build Communities

Support groups organized through State Services for the Blind (SSB) are helping people with vision loss find encouragement, practical strategies, and community. "I really wanted people to have a place where, regardless of their vision—whether macular degeneration, total blindness, or a brain injury—they can talk about their challenges but also focus on how to go forward," explained Stacy Shablott, who coordinates the program.

The first group began in Woodbury at Presbyterian Homes Stonecrest in late 2023, and since then the program has grown quickly. Today, SSB runs or supports 14 support groups and refers people to additional groups around the state. Most meetings are held monthly and led by volunteer facilitators. Discussions range from daily living tips—like putting a rubber band around a conditioner bottle so you can tell it apart from shampoo—to bigger themes such as grief, independence, and family dynamics. "Some of the best ideas come from clients," Stacy said. "It's amazing how sharing simple solutions can change someone's life." Confidentiality is a cornerstone of the groups, allowing participants to open up about personal struggles while finding reassurance that, as Stacy reminds them, "you're not alone." Jeff Kuehn attends a support group in Mora. He finds the meetings beneficial because, "we're learning all the different techniques and shortcuts - ways for cooking, gardening, plus learning about some of the new technologies. We're also there just for each other. We're there to support a person when they have a bad day with their vision loss. They can call somebody,



*Rochester support group facilitator Jody Alberts (center) with guest speaker Annie Young (left) and SSB Aging Eyes Coordinator Stacy Shablott (right).*

whatever, or just talk to us at the meeting about what to do for this situation."

These groups are also about connection beyond vision loss. Meetings often begin with lighthearted questions—like favorite summer foods or past hobbies—reminding everyone that vision is just one part of who they are. As Stacy put it, "Vision is a piece of who they are. It isn't who they are." That spirit of inclusion, practical problem-solving, and emotional support is what makes SSB's support groups a lifeline for so many across the state.

## Sarah Joda: Reclaiming Independence

Sarah Joda loved mountain biking—a sport demanding endurance, technical skill, and mental focus. Life’s trajectory is much like mountain biking: sometimes smooth and fast, other times a slow uphill climb laden with challenges. Sarah is now navigating a different kind of trail, one shaped by transformation, determination, and resilience.

Once an avid mountain biker, skier, endurance athlete, and mechanical engineer, Sarah thrived on a fast-paced lifestyle. In 2015, a mountain bike crash altered her life forever. What followed were neurological challenges, including severe photophobia, leaving her grappling with a world that appeared starkly white. Everyday essentials like phone and computer screens became inaccessible, plunging Sarah into isolation. “I look at a screen and it’s just like a flashlight. I can’t discern anything on it anymore,” says Sarah.

The complexity of Sarah’s condition lies in its invisibility. “I am not considered legally blind, as my eyes are physically fine. The issue resides within my brain,” she says. Amidst this uncertainty, a beacon of hope emerged: State Services for the Blind.

Seeking to regain independence, Sarah decided to learn braille. With the help of a friend, she contacted State Services for the Blind. “The beauty of their support lay in its accessibility; there were no invasive prerequisites or bureaucratic hurdles. They simply saw my situation and took action,” states Sarah.

Shortly after, Sarah began working with Char, an SSB instructor who became both a guide and a source of unwavering kindness. From learning braille to mastering the NLS eReader, every step was thoughtfully supported. “SSB’s resources, offered at no cost, helped me rebuild my confidence. Slowly but surely, I progressed—from painstakingly reading 30 braille pages over 10 days to confidently navigating novels,” remarks Sarah. Since listening to audiobooks is difficult, braille restored her love of reading. “There’s just something about being able to read a book and let my imagination piece together the story.”

As months unfolded, Sarah ventured into the world of screen readers. Learning to operate an iPhone



*Sarah Joda*

with voiceover and tackling JAWS and NVDA on Windows was humbling but empowering. “With time, persistence, and curiosity, I began to reclaim pieces of my life,” says Sarah.

Sarah’s journey has been anything but solitary. “Despite not fitting the medical or legal definition of blindness, the blind community has embraced me with open arms. Their resilience and generosity have shown me that adaptability knows no bounds,” she says.

Today, Sarah is focused on managing her health while pursuing projects like writing a therapeutic novel and working part-time with the Minnesota Youth Ski League. “The tools and resources provided by the blind community allow me to connect with friends, use technology, and regain a semblance of normalcy,” remarks Sarah.

“The existence of programs like State Services for the Blind reaffirms my belief in humanity and the power of community. They’re not just services; they’re lifelines that offer dignity, empowerment, and connection in a world that often feels isolating.”

“The path I walk now is one of adaptation and discovery. Yes, everything is challenging, but everything is also possible,” adds Sarah.

### Director's Note on Partnership and Connections

Connection and collaboration are at the heart of our work at State Services for the Blind. In this section of the annual report, we highlight some of the partnerships, outreach efforts, and shared commitments that strengthen our ability to serve Minnesotans who are blind, low vision, or DeafBlind.

We are stronger through connection. By working alongside trusted partners, we are better able to meet the diverse needs of our customers and respond with services that are timely, relevant, and person-centered. One of our most important partnerships is with our volunteers. Our Communication Center, in particular, would not be able to produce the volume of braille and audio materials our customers rely on—nor do so as efficiently—without the dedication, skill, and generosity of volunteers.

We also collaborate closely with community partners who bring specialized expertise and focused supports that complement our services. These relationships expand what is possible for our customers, ensuring they have access to a broad network of resources as they pursue their goals.

This past year, I have been especially grateful for the guidance and partnership of the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. Their insight and collaboration are invaluable in helping shape our priorities and strengthen our programs in ways that truly reflect the needs and voices of the people we serve.

Finally, our work is supported by an ongoing collaboration with federal, state, and local partners. Together, we help ensure that individuals can find the services they need.

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**“We are stronger through connection. By working alongside trusted partners, we are better able to meet the diverse needs of our customers and respond with services that are timely, relevant, and person-centered.”**

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## Global Connections

SSB's Director, Natasha Jerde, received a request for SSB to engage with a delegation of disability activists from Pakistan who are visiting Minnesota as part of the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). The group of 10 professionals plus several interpreters met with SSB leadership and staff on September 2nd to learn more about the work we do and the services SSB provides for blind, low vision, and DeafBlind Minnesotans.



## Spotlighting Independence and Mobility

Starting in January 2025, a committee of SSB staff and MN Teachers of the Blind met monthly to plan for a White Cane Awareness Day event at the capitol. Throughout the year, the plans came together for the half-day event. On Monday, October 13th, 80 blind and low vision adults, advocates, teachers, and students from across the state gathered in the capitol rotunda. The event kicked off with social time and visiting booths hosted by Minnesota Braille and Talking Book Library, Minnesota Council on Disability, Vision Loss Resources, SSB, American Council of the Blind of Minnesota (ACB), and the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota (NFB).

The crowd gathered around the rotunda to listen to positive and uplifting remarks by speakers from SSB, the Governor's office, NFB, and ACB. Students from across the metro took turns on the dais reading from the Governor's proclamation of White Cane Awareness Day in Minnesota.

Action moved down capitol hill when attendees proudly walked with their white canes across the capitol lawn to the MnDOT building to check out blind and low vision recreational activities from Minnesota Blind Sailing Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, and more. A white cane restoration station gave participants a chance to repair well-worn and broken canes.

**“The crowd gathered around the rotunda to listen to positive and uplifting remarks by speakers from SSB, the Governor’s office, NFB, and ACB.”**



*SSB O & M instructor, Jenny Pelletier helps with cane repairs at the white cane restoration station. Photo by Susan Kusz.*



*Students, teachers, families, and advocates gathered in the MN capitol rotunda to celebrate White Cane Awareness Day. Photo by Susan Kusz.*

### Showcasing Rehabilitation Careers

Many college students may not know what it looks like to have a career in rehabilitation services and counseling. In an effort to help their students get a glimpse into a future rehabilitation career, a marketing and communications Team from the University of Wisconsin-Stout reached out to ask if we would showcase SSB’s services. On October 1st, the team of three from UW-S arrived at SSB to conduct interviews and take videos and photos that demonstrate SSB services and training. The team covered several of SSB’s individual sections including braille, audio, engineering, workforce development, and senior services. They spent time in the new training kitchen and in the technology lab. The final result of their day spent at SSB will be a video to promote professional rehabilitation and counseling careers to UW-S students.



*SSB Director, Natasha Jerde, models a screen magnifier. Photo by UW Stout.*

### Collaborating with State Agencies

Throughout 2025, the SSB Outreach Team had opportunities to share the important work we do with other Minnesota state agencies.

#### MnDOT

##### **Building Accessible Streets: MnDOT and SSB Partner for Inclusive Design**

In late 2024, SSB was approached by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) as they worked on shared pathway accessibility.

MnDOT hosted a workshop in downtown Minneapolis highlighting a critical mission: making Minnesota’s streets safer and more navigable for people who are blind, low vision, or have other disabilities. Six participants from SSB joined MnDOT staff and consultants for a hands-on evaluation of pedestrian and bike facilities, providing feedback that will shape future designs. “It went very well,” said Mitchell Kiecker, MnDOT project lead. “We had a wide range of participants—some were trailblazers, others more cautious—and that diversity gave us invaluable insights.”

The group explored three different design styles along a three-quarter-mile loop, testing features like accessible pedestrian signals, truncated domes, and bike lane configurations. “One of the big takeaways was how important tactile information is,” Kiecker explained. “Those truncated domes and directional tiles are pretty much the only tools we have, so we need to use them strategically. If there are too many, they lose meaning.” Participants also shared concerns about roundabouts and complex intersections, where angled crossings and unclear cues can make navigation challenging.

Beyond design details, the workshop underscored the need for education and collaboration. “We talked about partnering with SSB to host orientation and mobility workshops when new facilities open,” Kiecker said. “A lot of people learned things they didn’t know—like holding the crosswalk button can sometimes give street names or extra crossing time. But it’s not standardized, so sharing that knowledge is huge.” MnDOT plans a follow-up event in the spring to include DeafBlind participants and gather broader feedback.

For Kiecker, accessibility isn’t just about compliance—it’s about community.

“We want people to feel like they don’t have to move to Minneapolis just because they’re losing vision,” he emphasized. “As improvements spread to suburbs and Greater Minnesota, people can stay in their homes and still navigate safely. Every change we make helps create communities that are better places to live for everyone.”



*SSB staff and customers navigate city streets to provide feedback to MnDOT on ideas for better accessibility and inclusive design.*

## Explore Minnesota

On April 24th, SSB's Outreach Team attended Explore Minnesota's annual agency all-staff meeting to talk about how best to serve travelers in Minnesota with Disabilities. Discussion topics included blind and low vision recreational activities across the state:

- Minnesota Wild Blind Hockey league
- Ski for Light skiing
- Blind Golf
- Blind dart leagues
- Blind sailing
- The Blind Birder Bird-a-thon
- The Minnesota Millers Beep Baseball team



The presentation moved into accessible travel within the state and how the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport is working hard to become the #1 accessible airport in the country. The session ended with some tips and live demonstrations on disability and blind etiquette. After the session, attendees responded with excitement over how much they learned and the need for further collaborations between agencies.

## Sharing Disability Innovation

The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) has an Innovation Lab which hosts "Innovation Talks". These are 1-hour virtual sessions that feature 3-4 short TED-like talks from agency staff focused on innovation efforts. On March 12th, SSB's Outreach and Marketing Coordinator, Lisa Larges, presented a fun and informative session titled "Why People with Disabilities are Badass Innovators and What Everyone Can Learn from Them". As SSB customers confirm, over and over, living with a disability requires the ability to think creatively and strategically. People with disabilities often develop the skills of great innovators, bringing "Fresh thinking that adds value." Lisa highlighted several inventors with disabilities including:

- Odette Shotwell who discovered two key antibiotics
- Vint Cerf who created TCP/IP which was foundational to the internet
- Charlie Leir who invented diaper tape and window clings

The presentation discussed the seven Principles of Universal Design and the importance of innovative, fresh thinking by and for people with disabilities and the need for simple, durable, and reliable solutions.



*Lisa Larges presents low vision cooking tips and showcases SSB's new training kitchen during the March Innovation Talk.*

### Mind, Body, and Soul Convening . . . Building Bridges to Opportunity

The Mind, Body, and Soul Convenings by the Minnesota Office of Equity, Opportunity, and Accessibility started as a series of work sessions hosted by Dr. Stephanie Burrage, and continue today by Chief Equity Officer Ashley Oolman, connecting key leaders to discuss priority issues with Governor Walz, Lt. Governor Flanagan, along with commissioners and leaders of key state agencies. Through the planning and implementation, the convenings have been an important way for the Office of the Governor to engage state agencies and leaders.

Each Mind, Body, and Soul Convening includes presentations on research, programs, and key policy items. Each session has rounds of small-group discussion where leaders – including Governor Walz, Lt. Governor Flanagan, and commissioners – participate as listeners. The feedback received has helped shape budget proposals and policies focused on addressing disparate outcomes or innovation policy ideas within the state.

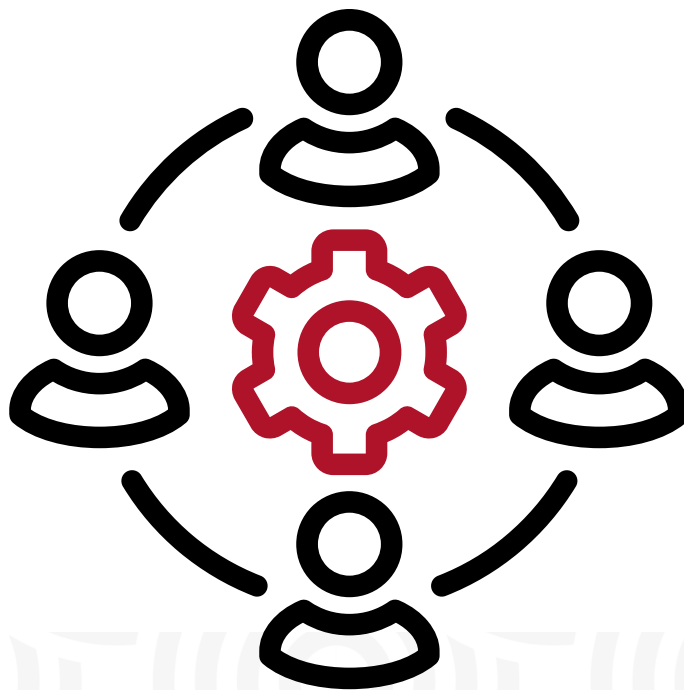
On April 22nd, SSB’s Outreach team joined the presentation on: *Building Bridges to Opportunity: How the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) is Powering Minnesota’s Workforce and Economy*. The SSB presentation focused on how SSB serves blind, low vision and DeafBlind Minnesotans by sharing tools and training for employment, living independently, and accessing print.

Community members found the proposals and information to be comprehensive of important priorities covering topics interconnected to one another, including education (birth to adult education), business and workforce development, and public safety.

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**“The feedback received has helped shape budget proposals and policies focused on addressing disparate outcomes or innovation policy ideas within the state.”**

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## Director's Note on Communication Center

At its heart, the Communication Center is about access to reading and information. Whether through braille, audio, or digital formats, our goal remains constant: to support learning, employment, and independence by delivering materials that are reliable and responsive to customer needs. This year, our teams continued to strengthen both the quality and the reach of these services.

In the following section, you'll read about the projects, partnerships, and behind-the-scenes work that have brought significant improvements to our Communication Center in this last year. Driving these improvements is an ongoing commitment to accuracy, timeliness, and a deep respect for the diverse needs of our customers.

None of this work would be possible without the extraordinary dedication of our volunteers. The department is especially fortunate to benefit from highly skilled individuals. Some are subject-matter experts who led their knowledge and skill to audio recordings. Volunteers have invested hundreds of hours to earn braille transcriber certifications, and others who show up to take on tasks that require sharp attention to detail and careful work. Their commitment not only expands our capacity but also raises the level of excellence our customers can expect.

RTB has been enriched by an influx of new volunteers, helping us continue to upload titles to BARD, the Braille and Audio Download service. As a result, important works—many with strong Minnesota connections—are now available not only here at home, but to readers across the nation.

This year also marked important progress in strengthening the infrastructure of the Communication Center. The full launch of KLAS, a library automation system software, for braille services has improved tracking, billing, and overall efficiency, complemented by the installation of a new modular shelving system. KLAS software is now being adapted for Audio Services as well, creating a secure, unified cataloging system that will support the entire Communication Center and enhance our work well into the future.

In addition to ongoing support for K–12 students, Audio Services took on a range of unique projects, from transcribing employee handbooks for a major employer to recording the Tyndale Bible in Early Modern English. In partnership with the Minnesota Braille and Talking Book Library, staff and engineers also converted more than 400 cassette-era recordings to digital audio—making these titles available nationwide for the first time. Staff training to repair Perkins Brailers in-house and continued development of new recording software further demonstrate our commitment to efficiency, stewardship, and innovation.

Together, these efforts reflect a Communication Center that is growing stronger, more agile, and more connected—always in service of access, opportunity, and the readers we are proud to support.

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**“Whether through braille, audio, or digital formats, our goal remains constant: to support learning, employment, and independence by delivering materials that are reliable and responsive to customer needs.”**

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## Audio Services, Radio Talking Book, and Engineering:

### Audio Services

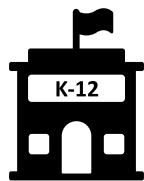
- Number of CC volunteers: **30**
- Accesses of NFB Newline: **767,699**
- NLS Equipment and accessories circulated: **4,039**
- Audio Services print pages transcribed: **21,249**

### Radio Talking Book

- RTB broadcast **258 books**. That is a **4.88% increase** from the 246 book RTB broadcast between October 2023 and September 2024.

### Engineering

- Access to RTB stream: **20,087**
- Talking book players dispersed: **7,512**
- Audio books placed on BARD: **484**
- Equipment Repaired: **1,316**
- CC books downloaded from BARD: **23,309**



## Braille Services provided to Minnesota Students K-12

From 07/01/24 To 06/30/25



- **Minnesota students served: 37**
- Number of braille titles purchased from other states: **123**
- Number of braille titles newly transcribed by CC: **185**
- Number of braille titles reproduced and reused by CC: **329**
- **Total number of braille titles provided: 637**



- Number of braille pages purchased from other states: **114,413**
- Number of braille pages newly transcribed by CC: **15,901**
- Number of pages reproduced and reused by CC: **67,333**
- **Total braille pages provided to Minnesota students: 197,647**

## Making Sound Connections – SSB’s Audio Services

As Minnesota’s accessible reading source, SSB’s Audio Services connects people across the state everyday with print materials in alternative formats. Any Minnesotan with a qualifying visual, physical, or reading disability, whether temporary or permanent is eligible for their services. Audio Services’ small but mighty team of 5 full-time staff members and 21 dedicated volunteers handle requests big and small. The Audio Services’ staff each play an important role in providing accessible materials. They field customer calls for access to the National Library Service and audio players, structure books with accessible digital markers for chapter and page navigation, screen and schedule volunteer readers, and catalog the materials into the National Library Service collection (BARD) and separately to the SSB catalog.

Adaptability, flexibility, and quality are paramount in Audio Services. “We do custom recordings of anything people send us. It could be literally anything under the sun. We pride ourselves on providing the most professional sounding audio materials that we possibly can,” says department supervisor, Jeff Behl. Audio Services also produces electronic text (e-text) which can be read by screen reader software on a computer or smartphone in computer voice, as well as large print (LP) for people with low vision who need larger text.

Some highlights from 2025 include an audio conversion of the rare 429-page Tyndale Bible for a seminary student and the Ski for Light at 50 book commemorating 50 years of helping blind individuals experience cross-country skiing. Other audio conversion projects include family genealogy projects, personal journals, employee handbooks, apartment contracts, and even post-surgical instructions for a patient.

In May, WCCO reporter Tony Peterson interviewed staff, volunteers, and customers to highlight SSB’s audio and braille services. Click or scan the QR code to view the WCCO segment.

Audio Services staff helped launch the new DA2 audio player rollout at the Minnesota Braille and Talking Book Library in August. The afternoon included an informational session and Q & A with patrons. At the end of the event, some participants were able to receive a new DA2 player on the spot.



*Transcribing the written word to audio, an Audio Services volunteer reads in one of SSB’s recording studios.*



*Susan L. and Catherine D. from MN Braille and Talking Book Library share information and features of the new DA2 audio player.*



Scan this QR code to view the WCCO segment featuring the Communication Center.

## Braille Section Updates Make Notable Improvements

In SSB’s Braille Section, three key improvements—new automated shelving, the implementation of a sophisticated new database called KLAS, and the dedication of outstanding new volunteers—have collectively resulted in operational efficiency, smoother production, and better customer service.

For years, the Braille Section’s physical shelving system presented a growing challenge. The old shelves, where thousands of purchased braille volumes were stored, had grown unwieldy and outdated. The old shelves were wobbly and packed to capacity, posing potential safety risks and making storage and retrieval difficult to manage.

The solution? A significant investment in new automated modular shelving. This upgrade did more than just ensure safety; it revolutionized storage. The new system boasts an impressive 49% improvement in linear space, allowing SSB to house and store a greater quantity of purchased books. This increased capacity means the Braille Section can extend the lifespan of its holdings, keeping books available to customers beyond the previous ten year limit.

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**“The new system boasts an impressive 49% improvement in linear space, allowing SSB to house and store a greater quantity of purchased books.**

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Complementing this physical transformation is the adoption of a cutting-edge database system: KLAS. The implementation of KLAS was a long, meticulous process, as the system—better suited for traditional cataloging—needed significant adaptation to meet the unique needs of a production environment like the SSB Braille Section. The effort has paid off handsomely. With the new shelving in place, both the shelves and the braille volumes can now be efficiently barcoded and tracked within KLAS. This dramatically simplifies tracking, eliminates the problem of lost or misplaced volumes, and, critically, cuts down on the wasteful and unnecessary need to re-purchase items. Beyond inventory, KLAS offers improved reporting, enhanced tracking capabilities, and streamlined billing, directly leading to faster and more accurate service for every customer.

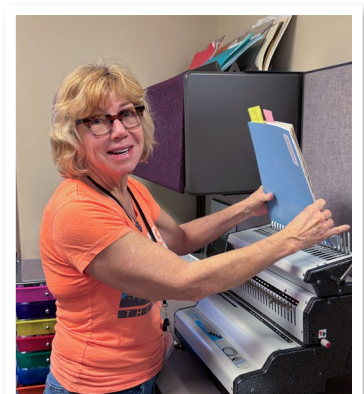


*SSB Brailist, Christine Smeed, showcases the new shelving in the Braille Section.*

Finally, the improved customer experience is not just about technology and infrastructure; it is profoundly human. The addition of several new terrific volunteers has greatly enhanced the Braille Section’s ability to serve its customers. These dedicated individuals contribute critical support to the production of braille books and materials. Volunteers like Michael O’Day assist with crucial proofreading, reading the print edition aloud as the professional braille proofreaders check the braille copy for accuracy. Similarly, Mary Jean has proven invaluable in running the thermalform machine and skillfully assembling the finished books. Their commitment ensures that materials are produced and distributed in a timely manner, bringing a reliable and human touch to the entire operation.



*Checking for accuracy, Braille Section volunteer, Michael O’Day, reads a textbook to a proofreader.*



*Braille Section volunteer, Mary Jean, binds one of the many completed braille volumes in 2025.*

## Celebrating Braille Literacy

For over 25 years, the Braille Challenge has grown into a global movement, inspiring students who are blind or low vision to strengthen a vital skill—braille literacy. As the only academic competition of its kind, it plays a crucial role in helping students build the foundation for academic success, career readiness, and lifelong independence.

Each year from January through March, students across the country take part in the Braille Challenge Preliminary Season. Open to all blind and low vision students, the competition is thoughtfully designed to support every level of braille proficiency. Participants are grouped by category and complete contests that challenge and grow their braille skills.

On Saturday, March 22nd, 12 Minnesota students in grades 1-12 competed in the very first Minnesota Braille Challenge. Hosted by BrightWorks, this competition tested students' braille literacy in five categories:

- spelling
- reading comprehension
- speed and fluency
- charts and graphs
- proofreading



The contestants were grouped by grade levels:

- **Apprentice (uncontracted braille): grades 1-2**
- **Freshman: grades 3-4**
- **Sophomore: grades 5-6**
- **Junior Varsity: grades 7-9**
- **Varsity: grades 10-12**

The long day of competition concluded with an awards ceremony for the contenders.

The top 50 national scorers—10 from each category—advanced to the final round: a two-day celebration of competition, connection, and fun. Four students from Minnesota qualified for this final competition. From June 26-29, finalists from across the globe competed in the 2025 Braille Challenge Finals at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, California.

On Friday, August 8th, SSB hosted a Champions Reception to honor and celebrate the four students who had represented Minnesota by competing in the Braille Challenge Finals. Lieutenant Governor, Peggy Flanagan welcomed each of the students and presented them with a letter from the Governor's office. The gathering included the Minnesota champions and their families, representatives from the Governor's office, leadership from BrightWorks and SparkPath, and SSB staff. The reception was followed up with a tour of SSB's Braille Section, where the students got a first-hand look at how their braille textbooks are created.



*MN Braille Challenge champions, their families, state dignitaries and SSB staff gathered to celebrate the four competitors from Minnesota to attend the Braille Challenge Finals. Photo by Susan Kusz.*

## SSB Staff Receive Specialized Perkins Braille Repair Training

SSB is enhancing its ability to maintain equipment by training staff to repair the durable and essential Perkins Braille. While SSB continues to value its longstanding partnerships with external repair vendors, this new in-house expertise will offer significant benefits in both efficiency and cost savings for the agency's extensive stock of Braille.

SSB's Braille Section utilizes a fleet of more than 50 Perkins Braille. Although a great deal of braille production is now managed via computer, the Braille remains an indispensable tool for parts of braille production. Known for their reliability and durability, these mechanical devices occasionally require servicing to ensure they function optimally.

To acquire this specialized skill set, two SSB staff members, Ed Stoffrahn and Isaac Haninen, traveled to the Perkins Braille Store, which is a component of the renowned Perkins School for the Blind. The Store offers a multi-tiered certification program designed to train professionals in the repair and maintenance of the Braille. The program features three levels of increasing complexity. Isaac completed the second level of training, and Ed successfully achieved the highest certification, Level 3.

Ed spoke highly of the experience, noting the dedication of the training staff and the broad reach of the program. "They put a lot of energy and commitment into this training," he said. "People attend from across the country representing various agencies and schools. While we were there, one participant was from France."

The core philosophy of the training is not simply to address symptoms, but to instill a deep, mechanical understanding of the device. Ed explained, "Fundamentally, the training emphasizes understanding the proper functioning of every part. From there, you can diagnose what is going wrong." This comprehensive knowledge allows certified technicians to troubleshoot problems, replace faulty parts, and return the Braille to like-new condition.

The decision to invest in staff training was driven in part by the Communication Center Advisory Committee, a body under the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. This committee immediately recognized the value of the initiative, both for its potential to realize **cost savings** and, critically, for the improved **time efficiency** in getting repaired units back in to use.

SSB remains committed to its existing repair infrastructure, emphasizing that it will continue to send out Braille for repair and greatly values the work and its longtime partnership with vendors who perform those services. However, by acquiring in-house expertise through the Perkins training, we now have the flexibility to quickly handle smaller repairs and routine maintenance internally. This hybrid approach ensures that SSB can provide the fastest, most effective support for the tools that enable the braille team to work effectively and efficiently.



*SSB engineering staff have become certified to repair Perkins Braille devices.*

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**“They put a lot of energy and commitment into this training . . . People attend from across the country representing various agencies and schools.”**

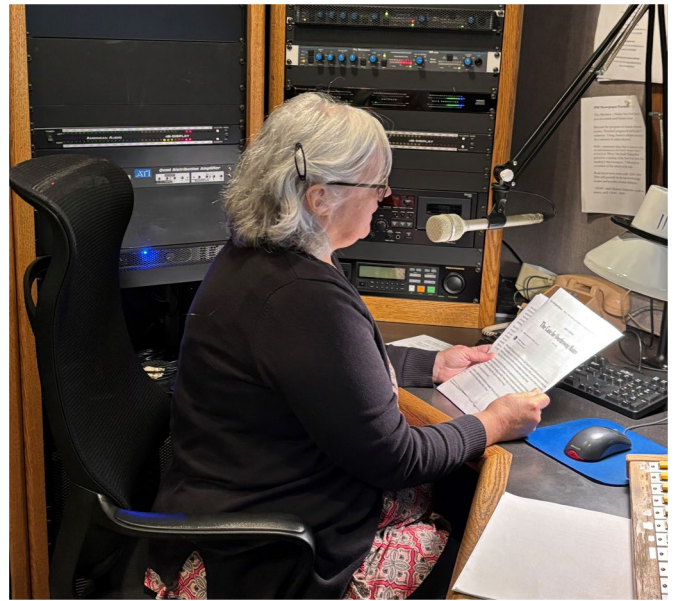
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## Business Connections

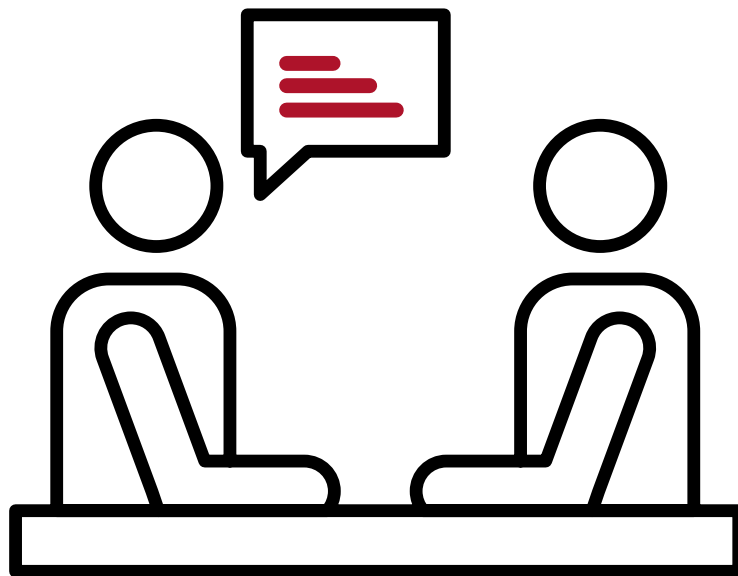
Radio Talking Book (RTB) staff and volunteer readers record about 20 new books each month. Once the recordings are completed, the audiobooks are uploaded to the National Library Service to be distributed through the Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD) catalog. Anyone with a print related disability is able to access NLS audio books for free.

Years ago, RTB formed a partnership with Magers & Quinn Booksellers in Minneapolis to purchase books used by RTB readers at a discount. The negotiated discount brought the price of books down to the same or even better than big-box retailers. This was a win/win for both parties. RTB purchased books from a local, Minnesota-based retailer and was able to economize their funding dollars.

Recently, the partnership has expanded further. RTB is now able to sell the books back to Magers & Quinn, which stretches RTB's budget farther and keeps the ecosystem of used books going strong.



*RTB staffer, Mary Beth Redmond shares the news of the day with listeners across the state.*



# 2025 VOLUNTEER MILESTONES

## Meet Our Multi-Talented Volunteers

We appreciate each of our volunteers. Here are those who achieved a milestone in 2025:

### 5-Year Volunteers

- Krista Eichhorst
- Tammy Miller-Hess
- Joanne Turner

### 10-Year Volunteers

- Dave Ellison
- Steven Griffith
- Patricia Muir
- (Margaret) Therese Murray
- Katie Pierson
- Deborah Sauer
- Martin Warren
- Laura Young

### 15-Year Volunteers

- Jeanette Barsness
- Sam Jones
- Beth Kelly
- Daniel Kelly
- Don Lee
- Lannois Neely
- Eleni Pinnow
- Phil Rosenbaum
- Julia Wallace
- Mary Clare Wyrowski

### 20-Year Volunteers

- Barbara Depman
- John Holden
- Nancy Holden
- Meredith McQuaid
- Bonnie Swenby

### 25-Year Volunteers

- Duayne Anderson
- Andrea Bell
- Mary Christenson
- Joseph Grant
- Connie Hefty
- Mark Lystig
- Pat Pearson
- Rene Pelletier
- Kathy Piehl
- Ken Slinde
- Judy Woodward

### 30-Year Volunteers

- Robb Empson
- Linda Goese
- Karen Thompson

### 35-Year Volunteers

- Betsy Sell

### 40-Year Volunteers

- Barbara Goldner

### 50-Year Volunteers

- Audrey Friedman







## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Every Minnesota resident who can benefit from State Services for the Blind should know about our services. Please help spread the word that SSB provides Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, and low vision with the resources and tools to achieve equality, independence, and access. In addition, the SSB Communication Center enables those with print disabilities (conditions that make it difficult to hold a book or read standard print) to access news, textbooks, leisure books, and a wide variety of other written materials.

- As we've shown in this annual report, SSB's Communication Center is funded through multiple public and private partnerships. Our work as "Minnesota's Accessible Reading Source" depends upon the generosity of our volunteers and financial donors.
- If there's a senior citizen in your life who is losing vision due to macular degeneration, glaucoma, or some other condition, we're here for them. The Aging Eyes Initiative partners with community programs and organizations throughout Minnesota to help seniors adjust to vision loss. Email us at [aging.eyes@state.mn.us](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 vision loss to live well after their diagnosis.
- If you are an employer, talk with our business relations team about finding the candidate who can be your next great hire. SSB has a pool of job-seekers with skills and experience to fill a diverse range of positions.
- If you or someone you know has difficulty reading standard print and/or handling a book due to vision loss, dyslexia, or a physical impairment, learn more about the services available through the Communication Center by calling 651-539-1425.
- Check out the wide range of volunteer opportunities available at SSB by visiting us at [mn.gov/deed/ssb/involve/volunteer](http://mn.gov/deed/ssb/involve/volunteer).

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

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

2200 University Ave. W. #240 | St. Paul, MN 55114

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

[mn.gov/deed/ssb](http://mn.gov/deed/ssb)



STATE SERVICES FOR THE BLIND