WORKING STRONG

MINNESOTA

STATE SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

2013

ANNUAL REPORT

In 2013 . . .

- **101 customers in our Workforce Development Unit found jobs** that met their employment goals.

- **2,958 seniors across the state discovered greater independence** because of the tools and training provided by our Senior Services team.

- **More than 650 dedicated volunteers in the Communication Center contributed** almost $2,000,000 in in-kind contributions.

More important than these numbers are the people behind the numbers. We would like to extend our thanks to Vanderbilt University junior Kelby Carlson, New Ulm senior Bonnie Schirlinger, Communication Center volunteer Ron Tabar, state employee Lori Thompson, and small business owner Doug Veilleux for sharing part of their stories for this annual report. Multiply their stories by the numbers above, and you'll get a glimpse of the difference that State Services for the Blind is making throughout Minnesota and beyond.

Note from Director Richard Strong

As I write this at the close of November 2013, I am just days away from retiring after 31 years here at State Services for the Blind. It has been an honor and privilege to work with staff, partners and volunteers in serving SSB's customers: Minnesotans who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind. Our customers, who come from every corner of the state and all walks of life, represent the heart and soul of this agency and the reason staff and volunteers show up each day doing good work. Students, seniors, job seekers, business owners, workers in the public and private sector, Minnesotans raising families, paying taxes and making a difference in their communities — SSB customers are as diverse as our state. My life has been incalculably enriched by knowing so many of them.

As I reflect on these last three decades, the work done at SSB in 2013 exemplifies the best of what we do. The following pages tell success stories of some of our customers and highlight the work of some of our volunteers. At the outset, I can give you a brief snapshot of a few significant accomplishments in 2013.

MINNESOTANS AT WORK

■ Exploding past its goal, our Workforce Development Unit achieved a very impressive 101 successful case closures. Our customers found jobs in fields as diverse as accounting, law, graphic design, and medicine.

■ Marking another milestone, three small-business owners in our Business Enterprises Program (BEP) exceeded $100,000 in net profits. The BEP graduated two new operators this year and added eight locations. The 43 BEP operators now cover 193 locations in Minnesota.

SERVING SENIORS

■ This year, SSB partnered with the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs' Public and Nonprofit Leadership Center to begin to answer the question of how we can serve the growing number of seniors with vision loss without an increase in resources. The study, just released to us by the Humphrey team, yielded useful insights that we are assessing and will begin to implement over the coming years.

■ This year our Senior Services Unit assisted 2,958 Minnesotans in maintaining or increasing their confidence in living independently.

CONTINUED

Note from Director Richard Strong (CONTINUED)

PROMOTING ACCESS

■ Audio Services launched an important pilot project to scan published materials and format e-texts, giving students and other customers more options for receiving materials in accessible formats. In addition, they have been hard at work implementing a new streamlined process that will provide our customers a seamless interface for receiving equipment and books from SSB and the Braille and Talking Book Library in Faribault.

■ The Braille Section brought together a new group of volunteers to proofread materials so that customers ordering leisure materials can have their orders filled more quickly.

■ Our engineering unit had to contend with water damage to our Radio Talking Book (RTB) equipment at the Worthington sub-station. They also retrofitted a booth for broadcasters who prefer to stand, and you can now find your local RTB carrier via Google Earth.

As a whole, the Communication Center provided approximately 13,000 customers with:

- More than 941,000 pages of braille;
- 11,367 hours of Radio Talking Book programming; and
- More than 175,000 print pages transcribed into audio.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

■ This year SSB launched a new process to assess the work of the vendors who partner with our agency to provide rehabilitation training services to our customers. This process gives both SSB and our vendors the opportunity to refine the services we offer our customers to better meet their diverse needs.

■ The State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind which guides and gives direction to our work had a very productive year as it implemented new methods to play a more proactive role in helping to shape the work we do.

THINKING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD

In the years that I have had the privilege of working as an advocate with and for persons with disabilities, both here at SSB and before that in the state of New York, the advances in opportunity and access have been unprecedented. Certainly, each of those advances was hard-won through the tenacity and determination of Americans with disabilities. This has been especially true for people who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind. Minnesota, with its rich history of civic engagement, has been at the forefront of positive change in both law and culture.

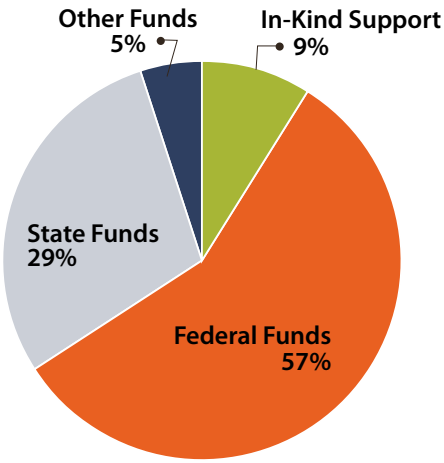
I believe that for persons with disabilities, if one were to pick a time and place to live, there is no better time than now, and no better place than America in 2013. Yet the work isn't finished until the playing field is leveled, opportunity is shared by all, access to information and technology is unfettered, and each of us has the opportunity to participate fully in the communities where we live and work. I am confident that in the years to come, SSB, working with its customers and partners will continue moving closer to such a day.

2013 Budget Breakout

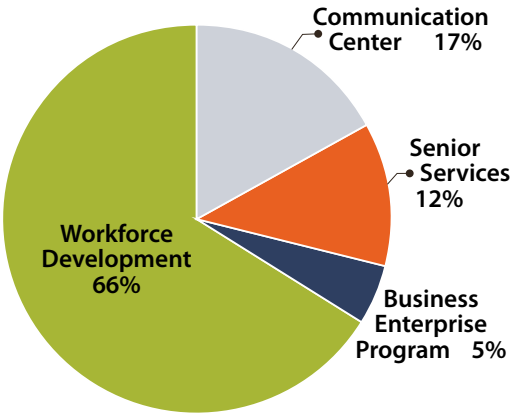
SSB Funding Streams
FISCAL YEAR 2013

Federal Funds	
Basic VR	$10,573,000
Supported Employment	$92,000
Training Grant	$44,000
Independent Living	$57,000
Independent Living — Older Blind	$657,000
Special Education Agreement	$520,000
Total Federal Funds	**$11,943,000**
Total State Funds	
State Funds	$5,925,000
Other Funds	
Gifts/Bequests	$267,000
Telecommunications Access MN	$100,000
Communication Center	$149,000
Business Enterprises	$494,000
Total Other Funds	**$1,010,000**
In-Kind Support	
From Volunteers	$1,905,000
Total All Funds	**$20,783,000**

SSB Funding Streams
FISCAL YEAR 2013



Funds Distribution
FISCAL YEAR 2013



Audio Services by the Numbers:

- In 2013, Audio Services structured and transcribed over 175,000 pages of standard print;
- 94 percent of customers requested their audio be delivered on cartridge or via file transfer download.
- We filled approximately 644 customer orders.
- Of the 644 customer orders, about one-third were textbooks and two-thirds vocational and leisure.
- Audio Services volunteers (recording, structuring, E-text, mailroom) contributed over 8,883 hours.

Lori Thompson

Most of All, Don't Give Up

"If we ever had to let Lori go," says Pat Eggers, Office Manager at the Minnesota Board of Pharmacy, of her office specialist, Lori Thompson, "the whole building would be mad at us. Lori knows everyone here, and everyone likes her. She has tremendous people skills."

Thompson is one of the 101 customers of SSB's Workforce Development Unit whose case was closed in 2013 as a result of finding and keeping a job that fit their career goals. Along with strong administrative skills, energy and determination, Thompson attributes her success on the job to her ability to get along with anyone.

"It's really important to have good social skills," Thompson says as she considers what advice she would give to other blind, visually impaired and DeafBlind Minnesotans seeking work. "Being friendly and able to help people feel comfortable will help a lot."

Thompson will be the first to admit that finding a job as a person with a visual impairment wasn't easy. The process took her over two years. When she got an email back from the Board of Pharmacy, she was so discouraged that she nearly ignored it. She thought it would turn out to be yet one more false lead.

But, she happened to mention the email to SSB's Carol Pankow, who said that at least having a contact would be worth the effort of following up.

Eggers remembers when she realized Thompson was visually impaired she had initial misgivings. Then, she remembered a presentation she attended some 15 years ago. As it turns out, it was a presentation from SSB staff members dispelling some of the myths and fears about hiring blind and visually impaired workers.

More than a decade later, having attended that presentation paid off for both Eggers and Thompson.

Thompson uses a combination of assistive technology and ingenuity in performing the diverse functions of her job. She uses screen reading software and a scanner to read print that can otherwise be too small for her to see, and she has created a system for remembering where things go and how documents are filed.

Though Thompson has had Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) since she was 15, the process of adjusting to vision loss has been a slow one for her. All through high school in Illinois, she says she was in denial about her deteriorating vision, and the school's guidance counselor, Thompson remembers, "had no idea how to help." She decided to go to trade school in the area of travel and tourism with a dream of being a travel agent. She soon realized that the ease of online booking had made the work of travel agents nearly obsolete.

Lori Thompson

Meanwhile, Thompson was busy raising two young children. When her youngest started school, Thompson went back to school too. On graduating with a teaching certificate, she realized that she needed to finally learn how to do things without relying on her vision. She had heard of Blind Inc. in Minneapolis and persuaded her counselor for Rehabilitation Services in Illinois to make it possible for her to move to Minnesota with her children so that she could go to school there.

Thompson finished her training at Blind Inc. in six months. She credits Blind Inc. with teaching her confidence and competence for her life and career.

Following graduation she worked for several years at Blind Inc., but she was also looking for greater challenges. She became a customer of SSB and began the process of looking for a new job.

After more than a year at the Board of Pharmacy, Thompson's job still brings her those challenges she was looking for. "It's just a matter of being willing to work hard," she says.

The Workforce Development Unit of SSB provides employment services to Minnesotans who are blind, DeafBlind, or who are experiencing vision loss. Our employment services team works with both job seekers and with anyone whose vision loss is making it difficult to keep the job they have. We offer our customers a full range of employment services from resume writing, to tips on discussing a visual impairment with a prospective employer, to training and retooling, to making worksite modifications, to skills building to an assistive technology assessment. Last year our customers found work in fields as diverse as law, customer service, office administration, graphic design and medicine.

Thompson remembers a conversation with her youngest daughter some years back when her daughter announced that she was sure her mom was lying about not being able to see. "You're more independent than anyone," was her pronouncement.

Further reflecting on the advice she would give to a blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind job seeker, Lori says, "Get your interviewing skills down. You have to be able to sell yourself. You are valuable and have a right to be out there. Most of all, don't give up!"

Blind, Visually Impaired and DeafBlind Minnesotans at Work

- Our Workforce Development team assisted 1,056 Minnesotans with training, resources, job-seeking skills, and coaching toward achieving their employment goals. Our 101 successful closures represents the number of our customers who found employment in the competitive marketplace that met their employment goal.
- These jobs pay an average of $15.03 per hour with an average of 29 hours worked per week.

Kelby Carlson

"Hit it Out of the Park"

Spend five minutes talking with Kelby Carlson, a junior at Vanderbilt University and a customer in SSB's Transition Program and you'll be feeling more optimistic about the future. Multi-talented — his interests range from music to philosophy to law — thoughtful and energetic, Carlson presents confidence and poise that belie his 20 years. Along with a full load of courses in pursuit of a double major in both music and philosophy, he also makes time to sing in a barber shop quartet, swim with a master class, perform in the theater, and post music reviews as well as critical essays on a number of blog sites.

Kelby grew up in Woodbury, Minn. and graduated from Woodbury High School. In 2012, he took part in the Summer Transitions program. The transitions program at State Services for the Blind works with young adults between the ages of 14 and 21 to support them as they prepare for college and careers.

"At the Summer Transitions program," Carlson says, "I got to know some great people, and the college prep help was very valuable to me." What's more, through SSB Kelby received both the technology training and equipment he needed to tackle his college courses.

For any student, the transition from high school to college can be daunting, but for students who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind, college can bring extra challenges. Through high school, others, such as teachers of the blind and visually impaired, make sure that textbooks are transcribed into an accessible format, but at the college level, this becomes the student's responsibility. This requires getting the syllabus ahead of time, and allowing for the extra time it takes for books to be converted to braille or recorded.

Carlson has high praise for the support for students with disabilities at Vanderbilt. But even at a school such as Vanderbilt which has a commitment to accessibility, knowing how to advocate for yourself is still an important skill. "You have to know what your needs are," Carlson says, "and you have to speak up. You also have to know that things will go wrong some times, and you have to just prepare for that."

The Summer Transition Program is held annually in June for students who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind. College and career-bound students who have been recommended for the program live together in a dorm, attend classes and lectures and get hands-on experience as they prepare to navigate the post-high school world.

Sponsored jointly by SSB and the Minnesota Department of Education, the Summer Transitions Program offers students an

intensive emersion into career planning, college prep and independent living. During the program, SSB's Workforce Development Unit helps students plan how to address their disability with prospective employers, provides opportunities for resume writing and practice interviewing, and works with students to assess career interests and goals. The Communication Center explains how to submit material to be transcribed, and offers tips on developing listening skills for learning through audio. Our assistive technology team introduces students to devices and software programs available and helps students determine which options will best meet their needs.

With a year of college under his belt, Carlson has advice for high schoolers preparing for college. "As soon as you know where you'll be going, be in touch with Disability Services at the college," he says. He also is glad that he decided to look at schools both within Minnesota and out of state, and he encourages students who are beginning the college application process to keep an open mind about all possibilities.

Kelby is quick to credit his parents for his strong work ethic and the values they instilled in him. "They encouraged me to do things I wasn't comfortable with, and they taught me how to win and lose gracefully," he added.

In much that he does, Carlson is usually the graceful winner. Thinking about the challenges that come with being blind, he knows that often the bar for success is set a little higher. "You have to hit it out of the park every time," he says. "Things are a lot better after the ADA, but still you have to prove yourself."

Developing an electronic version of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) that can be transferred between a braille notetaking device and a computer is among his many interests. To catch up on his other interests, you can read Kelby's musings on several blogs, including "ArtNash", where he writes about music, and the "Vanderbilt University Torch", where he shares his philosophical perspectives. Carlson hopes to go to law school after graduation and has a particular interest in disability law.

Braille Services in 2013

- We turned out a lot of dots in 2013 — more than 850,000 pages of braille.
- We had an on-time rate of 99% getting textbooks and other materials out to students across the state who rely on our services.

Ron Tabar

Making Poetry of Chemistry

To cover the breadth and scope of material produced by the Communication Center requires diverse skills and talents of volunteers from a wide variety of backgrounds. Ron Tabar is one example of a volunteer whose particular skill sets are very much needed. "When I came in to take the reading test," Tabar says, "I had a hard time getting through the poetry; but when I got to the list of chemistry words, I shot right through it."

With a background in science and engineering, Ron Tabar is one of the go-to volunteers for math and science textbooks. For Audio Services, in addition to having readers who can handle the nomenclature of the hard sciences, as Tabar can, it is also critical to have volunteers who can describe diagrams, graphics and pictures in a way that will be useful to students.

"The first book I had to read was an Algebra book with lots of pictures, graphs and diagrams," Ron recalls. "I had to study each one carefully to decide how best to describe it."

In the years since Tabar first took the reading test, he has gotten to know almost every corner of the Communication Center. "I started out mostly reading textbooks," Tabar remembers, "And then Tony got ahold of me to fill in on reading the newspapers for the Radio Talking Book. Not long after that, Allison found out I could read calculus and so I started proofreading Braille math books."

While many volunteers in the Communication Center might say that it is easier to read text that is not interrupted by pictures and diagrams, for Tabar it's different. "Reading something that is just text is hardest for me. I always enjoy the books with diagrams and pictures that break up the text. I also enjoy reading the paper on air, because you have the sense of a live audience listening."

In 2013, SSB's Audio Services section recorded 175,000 pages of materials, including textbooks for secondary and college students, and materials that our customers needed on the job.

"When we have books or other materials that include charts or graphs or diagrams, our customers rely on us to provide a clear and accurate summary of the information," said Annette Toews, supervisor in Audio Services, "For a student preparing for an exam, or an employee learning the technical aspects of a job, this is critically important. Having someone like Ron to turn to, who can clearly and succinctly describe a visual image is invaluable to us."

When the Communication Center switched to digital recording Tabar was pleased by the improvement in his reading speed "It is so much easier now to go back and correct a mistake," Ron notes, "I've really increased the number of pages I can go through in a session."

Ron Tabar

While recording books for audio services allows for correcting mistakes, reading the newspaper live on air affords no such opportunity. "I enjoy reading the paper though because it's live, and you know your listening audience is tuned in," Tabar says. "It has the feeling of being more interactive."

Each morning and evening staff and volunteers for the Radio Talking Book (RTB) read from local, state and national newspapers. In addition to volunteers like Tabar, who read at our St. Paul studios, the RTB has regional studios in six other locations around the state where volunteers read the local and regional newspapers for that part of our state.

If he's not in a recording booth, you might find Tabar in the Braille Section reading aloud from the print edition of a math or science textbook as Allison O'Day, a braille proofreader at SSB reviews it against the braille copy. Science and math textbooks brailled at SSB are subjected to a rigorous proofreading standard, since a mistake in a decimal point or an improperly formatted equation could have unfortunate consequences for students. O'Day, who is certified in Nemeth Code, the set of braille conventions for writing scientific and mathematical notation, appreciates Ron's familiarity with the subject matter. "It's really helpful to have Ron as a reader," says O'Day, "He's very familiar with subjects like calculus, so he knows what he's reading. And that can make proofreading much easier and help improve our turnaround time for getting a book to a student."

Tabar's love of learning extends to other areas in his life. Retired from a career with 3M, Tabar and his wife are actively involved with the lifelong learning program at the University of Minnesota. They also organize a dining group, which gives them the opportunity to try out various cuisines, edit a travel newsletter, and have led trips to northern and southwestern Minnesota.

A volunteer of 11 years at SSB, Tabar notes there are some drawbacks to volunteering at the Communication Center: "I've come in and read part of a book here, and then found myself so interested in it that I had to go out and buy the book so that I could read the rest of it!"

Interested in volunteering at the Communication Center?
Visit us online at **www.mnssb.org**
and follow the link to
"Braille, Radio, Talking Book, and News."

Communication Center

- Our more than 650 volunteers contribute close to two million dollars in in-kind support to SSB. With their tremendous support we are providing access to news, information, learning and career advancement to blind, visually impaired and DeafBlind individuals across Minnesota.

Doug Veilleux

No Typical Day

When you come right down to it, more than anything, Doug Veilleux is a logistics manager. As a small business owner — Veilleux manages 20 vending locations scattered throughout the Twin Cities metro — he's also a lot more than that. With one full-time and one part-time employee, Veilleux is also a boss, HR manager and payroll specialist. Every day he's loading trucks, filling machines and troubleshooting issues. But as important as all these roles are, he says logistics is the key. "I'm always looking for ways to be more efficient," he says. "Every day I'm thinking through what my best strategy will be."

Veilleux is a 2009 graduate of the Business Enterprises Program (BEP) at State Services for the Blind. Before beginning his training, Doug had to first complete a comprehensive application and evaluation process. Once enrolled in the program he studied all aspects of small business administration, from business law to strategic planning to managing employees. He also was able to get hands-on experience by working with vendors whose businesses were already established. But Veilleux will tell you that there are some things you can only learn on the job.

In the few years that Veilleux has been a business owner he has taken advantage of several opportunities to grow his business. "He's a very thoughtful and savvy businessman," says John Hulet, BEP supervisor at SSB. "He's always thinking about ways to improve his service, strengthening sites that are doing well, pruning others, thinking about what changes need to be made, and how to grow his business. Like so many of our business entrepreneurs, Veilleux provides a quality service for customers who rely on his vending sites."

One of the aspects of the business that Veilleux appreciates is that it gives him a chance to get out and be active. "There's no such thing as a typical day," he says, "but I like to be out moving around and getting things done."

Growing up in New Brighton, Veilleux always enjoyed doing things outdoors. It was a 1997 snowmobile accident that would change his life. In surgery to restore his leg, it was found that Veilleux had an embolism that damaged the optic nerves in both of his eyes. "You're used to living life a certain way," he says, reflecting back on the time following the accident. "Then suddenly all that is changed. I had to get used to doing things in a whole new way. I had to figure out who I am in a whole new world."

He now puts that same ingenuity, determination and creativity to work as a small business owner. "I start out the week looking at my calendar, and map out where I need to be each day," he says. "Usually the day begins at the warehouse in Blaine, with Veilleux and an employee loading up what they will need

Doug Veilleux

for the day. Then, it's out to any of his 20 locations from the local Department of Driver and Vehicle Services office, to Normandale Community College, to Fort Snelling, to the Brooklyn Park WorkForce Center. "You try to get in and out, but inevitably there will be a problem with a machine," Veilleux says.

At the end of the day, Veilleux still has another hour or so of work to do from his home office. But even though the hours can be long, he finds the work rewarding. "I like solving problems"

Under the Randolph-Shepherd Act, legally blind Americans are given priority for providing vending services on federal property. State Services for the Blind manages the program in Minnesota, and sites within the state include both federal and state properties. You may have shopped at one of our vending locations at the Department of Motor Vehicles, a community college, the state capital or a government building.

In 2013, the 193 vending locations across the state brought in a profit of about $7 million. Together the 43 licensed business men and women contribute more than $450,000 in taxes and employ 56 Minnesotans. This year the BEP reached a milestone as three of its graduates earned a net profit of more than $100,000.

Veilleux will admit to wanting a day off now and then. Like many small business owners, Doug knows that it's not always possible to plan a

vacation. But, even with the long hours, logistical snags, and physical work, Veilleux loves his job. "I would highly recommend it," he says. "It has certainly changed my life for the better and given me an opportunity to test my abilities."

More information about the Business Enterprises Program can be found on the SSB website:
www.mnssb.org

The Business Enterprises Program

- The 43 small business owners in the Business Enterprises program had a 2013 sales volume of $6,858,965 from the 193 vendor locations across the state. They recognized a net profit increase of 4.85 percent and contributed over 8,883 hours..

Bonnie Schirlinger

Full Speed Ahead

Yes, pictured here is SSB customer Bonnie Schirlinger in the co-pilot's seat of a Piper Comanche. While she doesn't actually fly airplanes, Schirlinger does fly through life with enthusiasm and energy. In 2013, working with SSB, she began using a computer with screen reading software. While learning to use a computer is daunting to many, Schirlinger regards it as a great adventure.

Schirlinger, blind since age 25, lost her sight due to type 1 diabetes. Over the next three decades she raised her daughter with her husband and led her busy life in New Ulm, but she had no easy way to write. Neuropathy had made reading and writing in braille out of the question for her. Daily tasks were difficult. She would write out a grocery list for her husband to read, but the process was slow and laborious. And she wasn't able to review what she'd written. What's more, Schirlinger, full of life and ideas, had plenty of things she wanted to write about, but she didn't have a way to set down her thoughts.

As a senior, Schirlinger finally had the opportunity to write anything she wanted. Through SSB's Senior Services Unit, she met Linda Bohlke, an SSB staff member in Mankato. Bohlke helped her get a computer and provided her with JAWS, the screen reading software, and some training.

"Some people said JAWS would be hard to learn," Schirlinger says. "But I took to it right away. You shouldn't make assumptions about what people can or cannot do."

Now she writes all the time: poetry, speeches she gives at Lion's Club meetings, and emails with people around the world, including a friend in China and her daughter in London. "It truly has opened up the world to me," Schirlinger said.

Full of life, Bonnie Schirlinger is a person who gives back. She's passionate about her community, creating a warm and welcoming home, and making a difference. She radiates a positive outlook that is infectious.

"You do have to develop a level of patience as a blind person," Schirlinger says. "But, if I can't do something the first time, I'll try again. Just stick with it. You'll get there."

This approach served her well as she adjusted to blindness. "I remember the beautiful explosions of color in the visual world," Schirlinger says. "I'm glad I had that. I still would love to see color, but you can't dwell on what you lost. There are so many other facets of life. I thought to myself, 'Blindness is not terminal. I am blessed to be here."

Thinking back on those early days, Schirlinger offers practical advice to anyone dealing with loss or sudden change. "It's okay to feel sad or afraid or angry, but don't let yourself get stuck in those moments. It's all about your attitude."

Bonnie Schirlinger

At that time, doctors advised Schirlinger and her husband against having children. "Not being able to raise a child was harder to bear than losing my sight," she remembers.

Despite warnings from the medical field, Schirlinger became pregnant. With the help of medical experts dealing in "high-risk" pregnancies, she gave birth to a healthy, beautiful baby girl. Her daughter is now in her 30s, married and working in London. "There's been nothing more satisfying than the joy of being a mom — of having held our newborn baby and watching her grow up and achieve her goals," Schirlinger says.

Providing seniors with assistance in learning technology is one of the services that SSB offers. "Our goal is to provide seniors who are blind, visually impaired, or experiencing vision loss with tools, technology and training to enable them to live as independently as possible," says Ed Lecher, supervisor of SSB's Senior Services Unit. "In the long term this results in greater savings to the state of Minnesota, as well as offering a better quality of life to customers across the state. I look at the tremendous contribution Bonnie makes to the New Ulm community, and I'm glad SSB has been able to help her, in a small way, do the work she does."

Through the Lions Club of New Ulm, Schirlinger works to raise money and awareness for research to find a cure for causes of vision loss. "Many people don't realize that diabetes is one of the leading causes of blindness," she says. "There is tremendous research being done now on vision saving techniques. If we could eradicate at least one cause of blindness, imagine what a difference that would make."

Schirlinger has had many years to adjust to blindness and develop her own techniques for managing her busy life. "Sometimes I get a little offended if people think my husband must do everything for me," she says. "We operate as a team, like any couple. Blind people can be professionals, parents or whatever we want to be."

For seniors experiencing vision loss, SSB's Senior Services Unit offers assessments and training to help our customers lead full and active lives. "We meet with people and figure out what equipment and training would help them the most," says Lecher. "We tailor what we do to an individual's specific needs and circumstances."

There's still one dream that SSB cannot yet help Schirlinger achieve. "I'd love to be able to drive again," she says. "I'd like to be able to drive fast down an open road." While Schirlinger may not yet get behind the wheel, she's nonetheless taking on life at full speed. Now, with access to email, the Internet, and writing, her energy, enthusiasm, and joy for living are flying all the way around the world.

Serving Minnesota Seniors

- We provided assistive devices, training and tips for living with vision loss to 2,958 Minnesota seniors. That's an average of 184 customers for each of our 16 Service Providers. In addition, our counselors dedicated 1,430 hours to outreach, getting the word out across the state that we have resources to help Minnesota seniors experiencing vision loss to live more independently and productively.

A Profile of Richard Strong

Not Less, but Greater

Dick Strong told the story of how he first heard about State Services for the Blind of Minnesota. It began with a job announcement on a bulletin board in Hoople Hall at Syracuse University. Not just Hoople Hall, but Gordon D. Hoople Hall, Strong recalled. Suddenly he was doing a Google search to confirm his recollection of just who G. D. Hoople was.

You don't have to talk with Dick Strong very long before you realize that his mind works associatively. He has the gift of making connections, or, to put it another way, he thinks like an historian. Strong's 40-plus year career expanding opportunities for persons with disabilities spanned years of tremendous cultural and political change for Americans with disabilities. In one of his first jobs after college, Strong worked on a project to integrate students with significant disabilities into the mainstream classroom in Maryland. "This was well before the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 that promised a free and appropriate education to children with disabilities. We had to be very careful and strategic because there was a lot of resistance and anxiety surrounding serving these kids," he remembered.

Prior to starting his work on Masters' degrees in rehabilitation counseling and public administration at Syracuse University, Strong worked with adults with significant intellectual and other disabilities who were starting their lives all over again outside the walls of an institution. "There was a woman named Althea, who I will never forget," he said, "She was determined to get out on her own and, as she put it, 'be my own boss.' She eventually did it. I remember seeing her walk to her job in the midst of a terrible Central New York snowstorm. She was absolutely fierce about achieving and maintaining her independence."

Sitting in his SSB office one morning in late November 2013, a few days away from finishing his working career, Strong reflected back on some of the people who had been influential in forming the core principles that guided his work. Burton Blatt, a scholar, advocate and teacher at Syracuse University was one of the foremost champions of the rights and dignity of all persons, especially those with severe cognitive disabilities. Likewise, Wolf Wolfensberger, also of Syracuse University, did groundbreaking work showing the effects of marginalization and dehumanization on persons with disabilities.

This commitment to the worth of each individual's contribution to society marked Strong's tenure at State Services for the Blind. The job posting he discovered on the Hoople Hall bulletin board in 1981 led him to a position as supervisor here for the Rehabilitation Program for DeafBlind youth and adults. From there, Strong served in multiple capacities across the agency, supervising the Independent Living Center

A Profile of Richard Strong

that SSB maintained, and the former Field Operations Unit. In the mid-1980s, Strong was a key part of SSB's administrative rule making project, and then went on to direct our Administrative Services and then the Senior Services Unit and the Communication Center. In 2009 he took the post of director for SSB.

The 31 years of Strong's tenure with SSB represented a sea of change in opportunity for blind and visually impaired Americans. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 helped to create a more level playing field in access to education, employment and services. But perhaps the greatest gains for blind and visually impaired persons came in the area of technology. Whole new worlds of opportunity opened up for blind and visually impaired persons through access to the digital world.

"I believe there is no better time in history to be living as a blind or visually impaired person than right now," Strong said, "And probably no better place than here in Minnesota, where we have a strong and proactive blind and visually impaired community, and where we have a rich track record of civic engagement and citizen participation in public services."

As 2013 drew to a close and Strong headed into retirement, the numbers bore out his optimistic view. In 2013, 101 customers of SSB's Workforce Development Unit found new jobs, a significant increase over recent years. The Communication Center turned out more than 175,000 of print pages in digital audio format, and close to one million braille pages. Meanwhile, nearly 3,000 seniors facing vision loss learned new skills for daily living, and received tools and technology to maintain the highest possible level of independence.

Looking back over more than four decades of advocacy and service with and for blind, visually impaired, DeafBlind and other disabled Americans, Strong knows firsthand just how far we have come. At the same time, he has never lost track of how far we have yet to go. At a day-long working retreat with the State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind Dick laid out the challenges facing SSB and Minnesotans who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind. While advances in technology have indeed been stunning, still, barriers related to technology block opportunities for employment. SSB, he noted, has a role to play in educating employers about building accessibility into proprietary software from the ground up. In addition, Strong said in his

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A Profile of Richard Strong (CONTINUED)

report to the Council that SSB must continue to build its networking relationships with employers, since these relationships can be key in reaching successful employment outcomes for more of our customers.

As he begins his retirement, Strong looks forward to spending more time with family, including his grandchild. Along with family time, he will volunteer in a program that helps immigrants gain literacy skills, earn their GED diplomas and achieve citizenship.

At a December reception to honor Strong, former SSB Director Chuk Hamilton had high praise for him, and for the principles that guided his work at SSB. "Mr. Strong is the most principled leader I have ever known and always a teacher," Hamilton said. "He is motivated by social justice and equality for all. And, he always strove to do the right thing."

Hamilton concluded his remarks by quoting the Athenian Oath, an ancient text that the citizens of Athens used in swearing allegiance to their city. It's reproduced in many places, including in the foyer of Strong's alma mater, the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. It also hung in Strong's office. The concluding lines of the oath:

> *"We will strive unceasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty. Thus, in all these ways, we will transmit this city not only, not less, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."*

"Dick Strong, has transmitted SSB not only less, but greater, better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to him," Hamilton added.

State Services for the Blind Mission/Philosophy

Mission

To facilitate the achievement of vocational and personal independence by Minnesotans who are blind, visually impaired or DeafBlind.

Philosophy

Blindness is a natural part of the human experience, a characteristic, like the hundreds of others that, taken together, mold each of us into a unique human being.

People who are blind are a cross-section of society as a whole, mirroring society in every way with the same hopes, interests and desires, the same dreams, abilities and potential as everyone else.

Most all the physical limitations associated with blindness can be overcome by learning and using alternative techniques for doing without sight what you would do with sight.

With appropriate education, training and opportunity, persons who are blind can achieve in the world of work, can be independent in their home and community, can have and take care of a family, can be a tax paying and participating citizen and can be in every way a contributing member of society who can compete equally with his or her sighted neighbors.

Everyone has different dreams and expectations, attitudes and aptitudes, potential and possibilities — so an important ingredient to our programs is customer choice.

Our job is to encourage high expectations and independence and provide the services needed to achieve customer goals while respecting customer choice. Success depends greatly on the effort and commitment by the customer.

STATE SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

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

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