Greetings Council,

I hope you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving holiday!

# What’s Happening Nationally

*Subminimum Wage Phase Out*

This week, our Federal partners at the U.S. Department of Labor announced a proposed rule that would phase out the issuance of certificates allowing employers to pay some workers with disabilities less than the federal minimum wage for the work they perform.

The rule proposes to gradually eliminate certificates employers can apply for under Section 14(c) of Fair Labor Standards Act that allow them to pay certain workers with disabilities subminimum wages. The rule proposes to discontinue the issuance of new certificates and establish a three-year phase-out period for employers with existing certificates once a final rule becomes effective.

Interested parties can submit comments at Regulations.gov. All comments must be received by 11:59 PM EST on January 17, 2025, for consideration in this rulemaking.

*WIOA Reauthorization*

On Thursday, November 21, leaders of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee and House Education and Workforce Committee staff announced that they had reached a bipartisan, bicameral agreement to reauthorize the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for the next five years. The state of play is as follows, the Senate is in Recess now and the compromise WIOA package will be expedited and there will be no mark-up or regular order of procedures as they are trying to get the bill passed and to the President’s desk before the end of the year.

The Stronger Workforce for America Act (Bipartisan, Bicameral Package) makes critical updates to WIOA that will improve the skills development of workers provided under the law, strengthen connections between employers and the workforce system, and put more Americans on the pathway to a successful career:

* Creates a new definition of “opportunity youth”, to replace “out-of-school youth”, by including youth experiencing homelessness and youth in foster care in the definition regardless of school enrollment status.
* Establishes the Youth Apprenticeship Readiness Grant (YARG) program to increase youth participation in new or existing apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs and support high-quality career pathways for in-school and opportunity youth. Provides $65 million annually to support these partnerships by repurposing existing resources at the Department of Labor.
* Authorizes studies of pressing issues such as the employment conditions of WIOA program participants, improving workforce services for individuals with disabilities, the effectiveness and use of emerging technology in the workforce development system, alignment between education and workforce development systems, and the effectiveness of Job Corps.

The vast majority of the changes do not impact the VR program; however, one negative change is that the reauthorization had proposed to remove the requirement that vocational rehabilitation serves on the Governor’s Workforce Development Board.

*Anticipating a New Administration*

The messaging has been loud and clear that there are plans to eliminate the US Department of Education. Linda McMahon has been nominated for the Education Secretary post. McMahon is the former co-founder and CEO of the WWE professional wrestling franchise who led the Small Business Administration (SBA) in a previous administration. As we know, despite being the smallest of any cabinet-level department and on the receiving end of just 2% to 4% of all federal funding there is an unwavering appetite to ensure this happens in the new administration.

On November 21, 2024, U.S. Senator Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) introduced the “Returning Education to Our States Act” which would eliminate the U.S. Department of Education and redistribute all critical federal programs under other departments. If enacted, the VR program will move to Department of Labor. The likelihood of this being passed in the lame duck session is minimal but we know in the 119th Congressional Session, CSAVR will have to track/monitor as we are sure many more bills will be introduced and reintroduced to eliminate the Department of Education.

What’s Happening with the Minnesota Budget

Minnesota Management and Budget officials released the November 2024 Budget and Economic Forecast Wednesday morning, offering a two-sentence preview of their detailed presentation scheduled to begin just before noon. “MMB forecasts a $616 million balance at the end of the FY26-27 biennium, $1.1 billion less than prior estimates,” the agency wrote. “Projected reductions in income and sales tax revenues combined with higher spending for long-term care and special education result in a growing structural imbalance throughout the budget planning horizon.”

Potential policy shifts at the federal level create additional forecast uncertainty. A statutory allocation of part of the remaining FY 2025 surplus to the budget reserve reinforces the state’s financial standing. U.S. Economic Outlook. The outlook for U.S. economic growth has improved since Minnesota’s Budget and Economic Forecast was last prepared in February 2024, but there are signs of economic weakness in the long term.

The forecast provides a detailed update of the state's financial health that sets the stage for the upcoming legislative session by providing lawmakers preliminary numbers needed to create Minnesota’s budget for the next two years.

 A revised forecast is to be released in February and give officials the most current fiscal data available as they work to draft, debate and eventually vote on the budget bills that comprise the biennial budget that’ll take effect July 1, 2025.

That process may be even more complicated than usual given the uncertainty about how the House of Representatives will function with a 67-67 split between DFL and Republican members, pending legal challenges, after the November election.

# DIF Grant Update

The last few weeks have included many meetings as we continue to settle into better understanding our responsibilities and preparations for EvolveE:

* We have started talking with MNIT and WF1 partners about how to set up tracking grant recipients, data collection, reporting, expenditures, and other aspects of documenting the grant.
* We met with the DIF community of practice which is intended to provide all DIF grantees a forum to share information, work out problems, and support each other over the next five years.
* We met with the RSA grant team who have initiated “office hours” sessions for updates, technical advice, reminders, and other critical elements of implementing and running the grant.
* We met with ICI to discuss the scope of work that they will support us with, which will include training on the progressive employment model, working out how to self-sustain our model for the time when the grant is completed, and guidance on the rapid engagement coordinated team approach.
* Jon has reviewed the applicants for the project manager position and is following up with HR for next steps.

# Administrative Updates

## Community Partnerships

Susan has been busy working on restarting and upgrading our site monitoring with contracted community partners. We’ve started with a pilot and have completed 5 CP monitoring events so far. We are taking a short pause while we incorporate some upgrades into the process that we’ve learned were needed after conducting those first 5 monitoring visits. We should be ready to continue with reviews in January – February.

We have 3 Request For Proposals currently in progress including: the reposting the P/T Master Contract for ATB and Employment Related Services, a P/T contract for third party agency to conduct Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA), and a P/T contract for Person Centered Services training for the WDU.

The contract required with the Institute for Community Inclusion(ICI) our partner in the new DIF grant, is almost complete. An RFP for contracts with community partners resulting the DIF grant will need to be started very soon.

We are starting the process of a contract with COMPAS who has a grant to provide art programming and career services to SSB transition students. The grant received by COMPAS would cover the majority of costs and only require a small donation from SSB.

There are currently 7 requests for amendments and 1 of those is in the processing stage.

The website remodel and vendor manual update has been making progress. Please continue to check out the website and provide feedback to us.

Finally, we are preparing for our next Community Partners + SSB Staff Forum on January 14th at 8:30 to 9:30 AM. Feedback on the change in time has been positive so the forums will continue to be held at the new time.

## Outreach

Since the last SRC-B meeting, the outreach team has:

* Held vendor booths at 3 conferences.
* Traveled across the state sharing information about SSB services with technicians and eye doctors at eye clinics.
* Presented information about the Communication Center to the MN Department of Education.
* Worked on the SRC-B Annual Report.
* Conducted interviews and wrote stories for the 2024 SSB Annual Report.

Other tasks have been sending out the bi-weekly and monthly newsletters, submitting proposals to present at upcoming conferences, keeping up with website updates and changes, and working on SSB departmental flyers and brochures.

SSB was notified today that we need to transition away from our mnssb.org URL. We still get to have a shortened URL, which will be ssb.mn.gov. Here’s what will happen over the next month or so:

1. MNIT will point our current URL (mnssb.org) to our new URL (ssb.mn.gov).
2. Folks will still be able to type mnssb.org and get to our site until November 2025.
3. The Lisas will begin spreading the word about the change.
4. We should also be spending this next year then looking at all your materials and determining what needs to be reprinted with the new URL.

## Facilities

\*Cafeteria is finished and ready for training to begin.

\*Parking lots in the front and back have been repaved.

\*Ramp on west side will be widened in the spring

\*New First Aid kits placed around the building

## Fiscal

As we near the end of the second quarter of the state fiscal year, our expenditures are on track, totaling 40% of the budget, which aligns with expectations. However, this leaves no room for any unplanned or unexpected expenses. The Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2023 ended on 9/30/24, and we are in the process of cleaning our expenditures to submit the final report in January. For FFY 2024, we have a carryover balance of $1,077,000, but $907,000 of this is encumbered, leaving a small available balance of $170,000. The Federal Fiscal Year 2025 began on 10/1/24, but we have yet to receive our final award notice. We are not expecting an increase on the award.

What does this mean for SSB? We live within our means, we prioritize needs vs wants, we make sound budgetary decisions at all levels of the agency, and we carefully monitor our budget to ensure we are set up for the years to come. We have all experienced the impacts of inflation, especially at the grocery store. VR service provision is no different. We continue to see an increase in service delivery costs, and with an ever-increasing number of applicants, we know that the huge cushion of funds we experienced during COVID is soon no more. Effective the summer semester, we will be reinstating our post-secondary fee schedules. We are not, however, reinstating customer financial participation requirements. We are also pausing on the program services reconfiguration project, as that is a want, not a need. We will see some salary savings in the VR program when we begin implementing our DIF grant. A portion of some of our staff salaries will be going towards that grant instead. This amounts to about $100,000 per year.

# Communication Center Updates

## Audio Services

We’re seeing an increase of inquiries from K-12 teachers around the state, possibly the result of increased outreach efforts by Lisa Larges and Lisa Rogers. On a related note, Lisa L, Lisa R, Molly McGilp, and I met on December 3rd with teachers from MDE who specialize in helping students with disabilities. They were quite interested to learn we are serving students who may be fully sighted but have other qualifying print disabilities.

Books converted to audio continue to be the predominant request we receive, but we’ve seen a few cases recently of requests for Large Print and e-Text, which we have been able to fulfill.

And, a warm welcome to our new Volunteer Coordinator Rebecca Glassing! We wish her the very best as she learns her new position!

## Braille

Braille Services Provided to Minnesota Students Kindergarten through Grade 12

From 07/01/24 To 12/04/24

* **Number of students served: 33**

* Number of braille titles purchased from other states: **116**
* Number of braille titles newly transcribed by CC:  **102**
* Number of braille titles reproduced and reused by CC:  **198**
* **Total number of braille titles provided: 416**
*

Number braille pages purchased from other states**: 108,288**

* Number of braille pages newly transcribed by CC:  **8,410**
* Number of braille pages reproduced and reused by CC:  **56,077**
* **Total braille pages provided to Minnesota students: 172,775**

## Engineering/Radio Talking Book

After a long and bumpy journey, we believe that we have resolved all outstanding issues with the new equipment in SSB’s Conference Rooms. We are now working on more complete documentation.

Speaking of the Conference Rooms, three Engineering Unit staff received DEED Achievement Awards for their work on the new conference Room setup. They are Joe Niffen, Ed Stofferahn and Isaac Hanninen. Thank you for seeing this one through!

Radio Talking Book has hired a new Intermittent Broadcaster, Andrea Mirenda. She’s been a volunteer reader at RTB for 14 years. She’s nearing the end of her training and will be ready to work solo shifts soon.

*Development*

For two decades, SSB’s Development Director, Angela Bodensteiner, has been working with Liz and Ed Kolstad and their family to help carry out their wishes to support the Communication Center with a generous gift through their estate. This week, the first part of that gift, which will total more than $400,000, was received by SSB.

Angela has many fond memories of the Kolstads, who were born a day apart in 1920. Ed (Roald Edgar) passed away in 2013, after 93 very active years. Liz passed away just 5 days after her 103rd Birthday.

Ed was an especially avid consumer of the Radio Talking Book and SSB’s audio services. Angela also remembers how Liz, then in her 90s, carried Ed’s very heavy CCTV down the stairs to pass it along as a donation to anyone who might need it.

# Program Services Updates

## Business Enterprise Program

* The BEP submitted a bid proposal for the dining/cafeteria services at Camp Ripley. We hope to know if our bid is successful by January. This is the first bid proposal for a military dining contract the program has ever submitted. The program would like to thank BEP operator Mike Colbrunn for his interest in this business opportunity and his willingness to pursue this opportunity with a teaming partner.
* The BEP continues to update interagency agreements with its Minnesota State College and University partners as these agreements expire. The BEP continues to remove the commission requirement language from these agreements, which will increase the profits for the BEP operators providing services at these campuses.
* The BEP continues to train Jane Kelly in the part time BEP bookkeeper role.
* The BEP is in the process of updating its BEP brochure. This document is used to educate all BEP stakeholders about the program by spotlighting the personal stories of several current BEP operators.
* The BEP has completed the process of issuing $4,000 vacation checks to every current BEP operator. These dollars are disbursed from the set-aside funds based on the direction of the BEP elected committee of blind vendors and the vote of all BEP operators.
* The BEP is in the process of collecting the data required to complete the RSA 15 report submitted annually to RSA. This report needs to be completed and submitted to each year by December 31. The program is confident it will have the report submitted on time and looks forward to sharing its 2024 program statistics in the coming year.

## Senior Services Unit

Not a lot to report from Senior Services. Things are humming along as usual. We are fully staffed in the Unit but waiting for the Orientation & Mobility shared position to be filled. Stacy Shamblott is continuing her work to help communities build support group opportunities for our low seniors. We are also putting the finishing touch on our federal report to the Rehab Services Administration the 7OB. They ended the year with 3,919 people served. Amy McClellan (SSU – Duluth) will be taking over Ed’s spot on the State-wide Independent Living Counsel.

## Workforce Development Unit

### Data

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Data Set | July 1-Present |
| Applications Received for Services | 112 |
| Individuals Being Served (**WDU** Open Cases) | 817 |
| Applicants (**WDU** Pending Cases) | 9 |
| Successful Closures | 28 |
| Unsuccessful Closures  | 54 |
| Total Closures | 82 |
| Average Caseload Size per Counselor **WDU** | 52.6 |

## General Updates

The Workforce Development Unit is hopping back aboard the Evolve VR train after having made the decision to move forward in-house instead of with outside consultants on the referral, intake, orientation, and eligibility staff functions. WDU leaders and counselors will be meeting later this month to dig in on how we can best manage these important initial steps with customers.

Kate Flick started employment as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor on November 13, 2024. She is already off to ATB and working on her module training. She is our bonus Counselor pilot project. We intent for her to provide leave coverage to counselor caseloads and back up the referral/orientation/intake team and other counselor work to keep busy. If we are unable to occupy her time with those tasks, she will take on a metro caseload. So far Kate is enjoying and appreciating her ATB learning.

Ann Malz started as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor on May 8, 2024 and is now fully onboarded with a caseload!

Jessica Fordyce has returned to WDU as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, covering the Southwest Metro area, on October 28, 2024 and is currently building up her caseload. SSB is happy to have her back!

Sara Kreiling, WDU Rehabilitation Counselor Supervisor & Deafblind Outreach, is back from presenting on Communication Access and Leadership alongside Elise Knopf, VRS Regional Area Manager, at the 2024 Southeast Regional Institute on Deafness held on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina.

Sara, Elise, and another VRS staff member are planning to host a VR Community Learning Connections series training session on January 30, 2025. This session is designed for VRS, SSB, and Community Partner staff, focusing on topics related to Deafness, Deafblindness, and/or vision loss. Further details and the official announcement will be shared later this month or early next month.

*Employment & Training Team*

* The O&M Instructor was posted for a second time on 12/4 and closes 12/11. Due to lack of qualified applicants the first time around, this time we are including a $5,000 hiring incentive.
* Small Business Specialist Alana Strickler is working on draft for revamp of self-employment policy at SSB. Goals of the policy rewrite include updates to create a more streamlined process, including:
1. Plain language to ensure that it’s more easily understandable (for internal and external stakeholders) and accessible to all.
2. Better aligned with Evolve VR and national trends in self-employment.

Staff training on changes and supporting resources will take place after final approval and implementation.

* In January 2025, SSB and VRS will run another Pharmacy Technician training program in partnership with CVS and Thryv. We have begun having conversations with CVS at the corporate level and our partners about exploring accommodations for blind individuals. While we aren’t there yet, we are hopeful that this will be an opportunity.

*ERAF*

In the first quarter of FY25, we approved 20 applications with over $120,000 reimbursed to employers, which is an incredible increase compared to Q1 of last year. So far, in Q2 we’ve already surpassed Q1’s totals with 16 approved applications and over $142,000 reimbursed. We’ve also collaborated with the Minnesota Council on Disability, CONVO, and local business leaders.

## Pre-ETS

The Career Networking Event on October 5th was a great success. Over 40 students and parents attended at the Minneapolis North CareerForce Center to chat and learn from 18 different blind, low vision, and DeafBlind adults about their career and personal journeys. The Pre-ETS Blueprint for FFY 2024-2025 was released and shared with the council. A few Pre-ETS staff attended White Cane Day in Rochester, with Sheila and Shane sharing words to all of the attendees to kick off the event. Staff attended all three of the Low Vision Clinics, which allows students and their families to participate in a free low vision exam with an optometrist. MDE helps coordinate this event and SSB attends to share information and resources. SSB also hosted a virtual College 101 workshop where high school students hear from college students about the tools and tips that have helped them navigate college life. Pre-ETS staff are meeting to identify prospective students for summer internship and work experience programs.

*View from the Field*

As a special inclusion of this Director’s Report, I’d like to turn it over to Rob Hobson, who is the appointed SSB VR counselor on this Council, to share his observations on what’s been going on in the field. ---

Thank you!