Report to the Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

Of the

Needs Assessment Task Force

For the Meeting Held on Thursday, April 3, 2025

Submitted on Thursday, March 20, 2025

For almost a year, the Needs Assessment Task Force had been preparing to conduct a comprehensive statewide needs assessment (CSNA) through an external vendor identified through a competitive bidding process. We had been preparing a detailed request for proposals, but changes in budgetary conditions have derailed our plans. Changes in the federal government lead us to be unsure if a CSNA will be required by the federal government in the future.

Regardless of what the federal government will require, Minnesota’s State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B) and State Services for the Blind (SSB) exist to ensure that all blind Minnesotans are served as well as possible. We continue to identify a CSNA as part of the process of providing the services that blind Minnesotans deserve. We can conduct a CSNA for our own uses, and we will also ensure that our CSNA fulfills the requirements previously upheld by the federal government.

For the purposes of this report, we use the term “blind” under a functional definition of blindness, such that anyone who is blind enough that they may benefit from receiving services from State Services for the Blind, including the acquisition and use of the alternative techniques of blindness, is therefore a blind person and part of the blind community.

What does federal law tell us to do? Section 101(a)(15), (17), and (23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to provide an assessment of:

1. The VR services needs of individuals with disabilities residing within the State, including:
2. Individuals with the most significant disabilities and their need for Supported Employment;
3. Individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program;
4. Individuals with disabilities served through other components of the workforce development system; and
5. Youth with disabilities, including students with disabilities and their need for pre-employment transition services. Include an assessment of the needs of individuals with disabilities for transition career services and pre-employment transition services, and the extent to which such services are coordinated with transition services provided under IDEA.
6. Identify the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the State.

The Task Force is committed to collecting information about these prioritized populations as part of a broader effort to collect information about the needs of all blind Minnesotans. Since there is no duration of residency requirement, a person can be considered a Minnesotan immediately upon arrival in the state with intent to reside, regardless of immigration status or ethnic background.

To gather data about the needs of the blind community in Minnesota, it is important to consider how the blind community is organized and how information flows through the blind community. Not all identities work the same way. Blindness is a horizontal identity, meaning that most blind people do not share the blind identity with their parents (Solomon, 2012). In communities organized around horizontal identities, community organizations of people sharing that horizontal identity play a major role in gathering and expressing the collective lived experiences of people with that horizontal identity (Solomon, 2012). While we do not assume that all knowledge about the needs of the blind community will be contained in or expressed by community organizations of blind people, the Task Force recognizes that the input of these organizations is valuable and should be centered in the assessment of the needs of the blind community. Organizations of blind people should be invited to spaces where data is collected about the needs of the blind community.

To use SSB staff resources in gathering data about the needs of the blind community efficiently, we are currently recommending that multiple large-scale listening sessions be offered to allow members of the blind community to come express their needs. These listening sessions could use the same communications infrastructure as an ordinary SRC-B meeting, complete with the hybrid attendance options that we use for ordinary SRC-B meetings. These listening sessions could be recorded and transcribed, and then themes within the data can be merged to distill and articulate the needs expressed by the community. This process can help the SRC-B to generate goals and priorities.

We understand that State Services for the Blind is about to undertake a process to update the program rules for its services. This process will include at least one public meeting to gather feedback in the rulemaking process. The discourse that emerges from the rulemaking process may also bring out important ideas relating to the needs of blind Minnesotans. Therefore, the information gathered through the rulemaking process can also be used as input toward our CSNA.

For minoritized communities that are prioritized under the federal requirements listed above, we will reach out to leaders of those communities and ask them how to best gather information from them, likely in a space that is sovereign for them. We will take direction from the minoritized communities about how best to work with them. Some groups may need certain communication supports, like interpreters for American Sign Language, Hmong, Somali, etc. We must be ready to provide those language-related supports. While many of the people of Minnesota are concentrated in the Twin Cities metro area, we aim to include the needs of blind people in greater Minnesota in the CSNA. A listening session with an in-person option located outside the Twin Cities metro area may be part of the strategy to include voices from greater Minnesota.

Understanding the needs of community partners may also offer some valuable information about how to best support the community partners. While the needs of the blind community must be centered in this process, the community partners may express needs that relate to the sustainability and evolution of their programming. We can hold separate listening sessions with community partners using the relational framework that Susan Kusz has already developed with quarterly community partner forums and monthly community partner cafes.

We are grateful for the opportunity to work together in these uncertain times and welcome input from the community as we develop our new CSNA.

Respectfully submitted,

Justin Salisbury

Chair

Needs Assessment Task Force

Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

Reference

Solomon, A. (2012). *Far from the tree: Parents, children and the search for identity*. Simon and Schuster.