



STATE SERVICES  
FOR THE BLIND  
2010 ANNUAL REPORT

## Director's Report — Richard Strong

I am delighted to present State Services for the Blind's (SSB) 2010 annual report. As we pause and reflect, we know the future holds challenges as well as new opportunities. Certainly there will be changes in the services we provide and how we do our work. One thing that will endure is our commitment to our customers and to the difference – the profound difference - we make in the lives of the people we serve.

SSB is a unique organization, resulting from a rare blend of talent, technology, dedication and resources. Our staff, together with hundreds of volunteers and community partners, do fantastic things that have a lasting impact on our customers.

This is true for the student needing textbooks transcribed into braille or audio, for the job-seeker needing adjustment to blindness (ATB) training and for the senior whose been told by their ophthalmologist that there is simply nothing more that can be done for them. We come together, bringing our specialized and well-honed gifts, to meet these needs wherever they exist in Minnesota.

There are challenges ahead. Funding for our services will be increasingly stressed. The current state and federal economic conditions makes that very clear. The truth is that in the future we may not do all the same things we do now in the same ways we always have done them. We must increasingly explore new, better and creative ways to do the fantastic things our customers deserve.

We see our veteran staff growing older and we continue to recognize and tap their wisdom and experience. We are fortunate to have an infusion of new talent and we continue to welcome and benefit from their energy, enthusiasm, skills and life experiences.

We also know that technology continues to play an increasingly important role in the educational and vocational lives of blind and visually impaired Minnesotans. And technology also plays an increasingly important role in the way SSB staff do their work, from computer-based braille production to digital radios to Internet-based downloads of DAISY recorded materials.

This past year the Workforce Development Unit met 111% of its placement goals with more blind Minnesotans than expected going to work. The Senior Services Unit served over 3500 people in 2010, an all-time record. We are somewhat secure in our belief that Federal funding for our vocational rehabilitation program will not be decreased.

We can look back on 20 years of the Americans with Disabilities Act and 35 years of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (initially passed as The Education of All Handicapped Children Act) and realize just how far we have come. And we also realize how far we have yet to go before all Minnesotans enjoy true equality.

We have the new Radio Talking Book (RTB) radios and see the resulting improvement in service for our listeners. The new National Library Service (or NLS) playback machines and the advent of the Braille and Audio Reading Download or BARD system make it even easier for blind people to access information quickly and thereby increase their ability to participate in this great thing we call democracy.

We know that SSB has a great capacity to adapt. This is not the first time in our history that we are faced with making do with less. This current economic crisis will not last forever, but its impact on the way we do business may be lasting. We will continue to focus on the end result and find creative ways to adapt to the circumstances. If we stay true to our mission, then the successes we facilitate will continue making a positive difference for blind, visually impaired and DeafBlind Minnesotans.



Richard Strong,  
SSB Director

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Strong". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Richard Strong, Director  
State Services for the Blind

A letter  
from  
Council  
Chair, Judy  
Sanders

## Dear Reader:

As you are introduced to State Services for the Blind you should be aware of the important role played by the very people who are the recipients of the services that SSB provides. SSB is very open to working closely with its customers and the blindness community to make sure that its work is truly beneficial. One of the ways that this happens is through the work of the Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind whose members are appointed by the governor and who come from throughout the state to provide counsel to SSB. In addition to the governor's appointees, we have an active committee structure that allows volunteers in the community to lend their support. Here is a sampling of the support we give.

**Customer Satisfaction:** We work with SSB to analyze the results of surveys that gauge whether customers find SSB's services valuable. In addition, we help develop the goals and priorities for the agency.

**Minority Outreach:** We help the agency reach out to underserved populations in the state to upgrade services for everyone. An example of this effort focuses on how to better serve new citizens to our country. Innovative programs are being developed that teach both braille and English at the same time.

**Deafblind services:** We are helping SSB rewrite some of its brochures so that they can be better understood by speakers of American Sign Language.

**Services to youth:** We are brainstorming methods to introduce teenagers to the world of work.

**And the senior population:** We have a committee who advises our Senior Services Unit on ways to serve an ever-growing population of blind people. With little money and lots of need their creativity is priceless.

**Further advice:** One unit of SSB that touches almost every customer is the Communication Center. We keep close track of its many programs and provide positive reinforcement for their good work.

**Monitoring service providers:** SSB contracts with many community rehabilitation programs and instructors that teach blind customers the skills needed to maintain their independence. We evaluate these providers through feedback from the users of these programs and share this data with future customers.

We are pleased that SSB values the opinions of the blind community and this Council is a major force in guiding SSB.

Our meetings are open to the public and more information is available on SSB's website.

While the members of this Council rotate, our interest and dedication to insuring a quality service from SSB never flags.

Judy Sanders, Chair

**Back Row:** Richard Strong,  
Tom Scanlon,  
Steve Ditschler,  
Jeffery West,  
Kenneth Trebelhorn,  
Craig Roisum,  
Coralmae (Coke)  
Stenstrom,  
Lisa Vala

**Front Row:** Jan Bailey,  
Fannie Primm,  
Judy Sanders (Chair),  
Jeff Mihelich,  
Kathy Hagen,  
Steve Jacobson

Members not present:  
Michael Malver,  
Connie Lee Berg,  
Joan Breslin-Larson,  
Jamie Taylor,  
Felix Raymond Montez

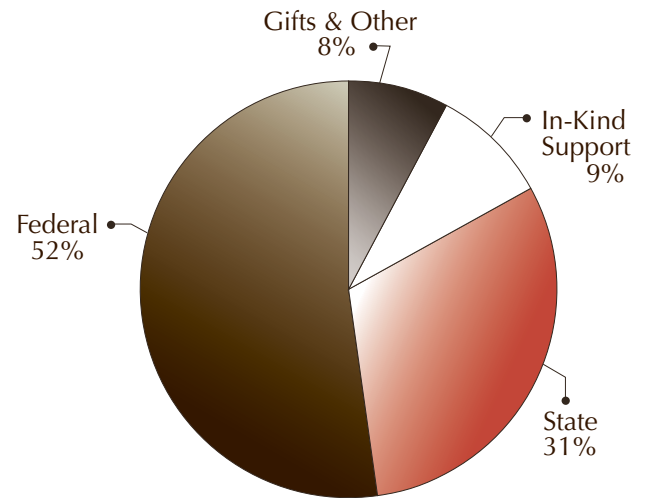


# 2010 Budget Breakout

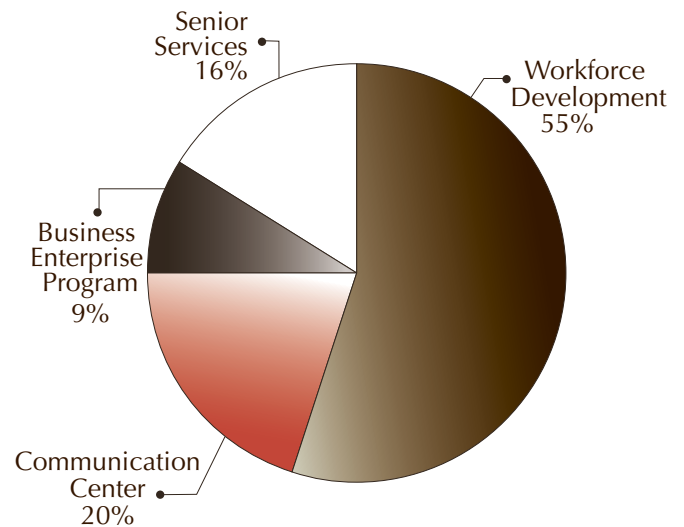
## SSB Funding Streams Fiscal Year 2010

		Percent of Total Funding
<b>Federal Funds</b>		
Basic VR	\$8,499,000	
Supported Employment	\$29,000	
Training Grant	\$64,000	
Independent Living	\$56,000	
IL-Older Blind	\$535,000	
Special Education Agreement	\$490,000	
<b>Total Federal Funds</b>	<b>\$9,673,000</b>	<b>52%</b>
<b>Total State Funds</b>	<b>5,897,000</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Other Funds</b>		
Gift/Bequest	\$388,000	
Dept. of Commerce – Telecommunications Access MN	\$93,000	
Special Revenue		
Communication Center	\$408,000	
Business Enterprises	\$626,000	
<b>Total Other Funds</b>	<b>\$1,515,000</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>In-Kind Support</b>		
In-Kind Support from Volunteers	\$1,746,000	9%
<b>Total All Funds</b>	<b>\$18,831,000</b>	<b>100%</b>

## SSB Funding Streams— Fiscal Year 2010



## SSB Funding Distribution— Fiscal Year 2010



**F**or customers such as Megan Bening and Gene Riebe, the Workforce Development Unit of State Services for the Blind (SSB) ensures delivery of rehabilitation services individuals need to prepare for, seek, gain or retain employment. Services take many forms and may include:

- vocational assessment and counseling;
- training in adjustment to blindness, braille, use of assistive technology, job seeking skills and vocational skills;
- job placement assistance; and
- job adaptation assistance.

The customer and counselor work together to produce the right mix of services for an employment plan. A new customer, for example, may need the full spectrum of services, including assessment, cane travel, braille and adjustment to blindness training before enrolling in an educational program that will lead to employment. A future baker may need to develop vocational skills and learn about professional food-related organizations. Such services are addressed in reaching an employment goal.

The services are provided by rehabilitation counselors in 11 field offices, 10 WorkForce Centers and a network of private vendors across Minnesota.

The Business Enterprises Program (BEP) is also included in the Workforce Development Unit. BEP provides training and support to blind Minnesotans so they can become self-employed. These small businesses include operating snack bars and counter operations, in a franchise-like manner with SSB and providing vending machine services in multiple locations. BEP blind vendors operate businesses at the Capitol, in state buildings, at rest areas and travel information centers statewide, on multiple MnSCU campuses and in several private industry locations. Professional, technical and clerical staff provides training, management assistance and technical support to these legally blind vendors. ●

## Workforce Development Unit Statistics

	FFY 2010	FFY 2009	FFY 2008
Successful Closures	80	78	93
Weekly Salary Change Application—Closure	\$228.85	\$231.49	\$250.57
Average Wage per Hour	\$11.40	\$15.24	\$13.82
Number Served	1,062	1,064	1,015
BEP Sales Volume	\$7,039,025	\$7,206,168	\$7,453,884
Average Net Profit	\$35,417	\$39,471	\$39,092

**M**innesota State Services for the Blind (SSB) has found a creative way to engage the business community and empower our clientele. While job fairs are common, the SSB placement team felt that removing some of the pressure from employers and prospective employees was a better way to go. In June of 2010 it hosted an Informational Interview Expo.

The event brought together blind and visually impaired participants with business professionals, advocates, human resource representatives, assistive technology specialists and SSB staff.

The event had four goals. The first was to mix visually impaired professionals with business professionals with little or no experience encountering blindness. Each group would have the chance to see the other as peers. The second was to give blind participants an opportunity for a one-on-one informational interview with business professionals. This allowed human resource representatives to dispense advice about resumes, career paths, and training. Attendees learned what companies want and how to distinguish themselves. The third was to offer a demonstration for sighted individuals of what blind and visually impaired people are capable of as employees. The fourth was to create a resource area where attendees could learn about finding employment and internships and talk to advocates.

The event was a smashing success with clients able to network and gather information about particular careers in a low pressure environment while participants from the business sector learned more about the capabilities of blind and visually impaired job seekers. Evaluation forms from professionals indicated that their perspective of the abilities of persons who are blind or visually impaired improved and their awareness of services offered has increased.

Each business professional asked to come back. One is working to find a position for an attendee and another is facilitating a work experience for an attendee. A third professional was unaware of the breadth of services SSB provides and requested our help to identify worksite accommodations for a new hire. Two other participants will be providing job shadowing opportunities. Several professionals indicated that they were able to use this as part of their company's diversity initiative.

Creative events such as this can be successful at engaging and educating the business community, promoting the agency, dispelling myths, empowering attendees, all while fulfilling a real need in a pressure free environment. ●

**I**f you ever find yourself at the MN Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and craving a snack, Eugene "Gene" Riebe is the man to see.



Gene Riebe

Riebe worked for the MN Department of Revenue for 27 years as an auditor. In 1985 he lost his right eye, due to diabetes. Then in 2004 his life changed completely. He didn't realize it at the time, but the retina in his left eye was barely attached. Riebe had surgery but retained only a 10% field of visual acuity.

After surgery his doctor referred him to SSB's Rochester office. Riebe, like many SSB customers, went to an adjustment to blindness (ATB) training center where he learned skills including cane travel, braille, use of assistive technology and daily living skills. During his ATB training, Riebe met Emily Zitek whose husband had a vending business through the Business Enterprises Program (BEP).

The BEP is a SSB program that provides profitable vending business opportunities to eligible blind Minnesotans. Additionally, the BEP provides on-going support to each licensed business operator.

When Riebe heard about the program he decided it was the opportunity he was looking for. He applied to the program and was accepted. While waiting to start the six-month long training segment, Riebe worked for Zitek's husband John, gaining valuable experience that would serve him well in the future.

In 2008, shortly after completing the training program and becoming licensed, Riebe became the Operator of a vending business at Lino Lakes prison. A year later he took over the business at the DNR headquarters. The DNR business includes a small convenience store and several vending machines.

Riebe says he is doing great and enjoys his new profession. His store sells books, cards, food, beverages and his best seller, Public Recreation Informational Maps (PRIM ). People come to DNR for licenses and often end up in his store purchasing the maps. He enjoys interacting with customers, a real change after working as an auditor for so long. He also enjoys meeting other BEP Operators and serving as a mentor whenever possible. He thinks that with the training he received through SSB and the BEP along with his experience adjusting to his blindness, he'll be at the DNR for a long, long time. ●

Teenagers often get asked what they will do after high school, but it's not very common for them to say they want to go to a college such as MIT. Those that do have such high aspirations usually have a list of accomplishments to go with those aspirations. This would certainly describe Megan Bening.

Bening, now 16 years old, has been blind since birth due to a condition called Leber's Congenital Amaurosis. She attends Sibley East High School in Arlington and is taking a full load of college prep courses. Her favorite activities are reading, listening to music, hanging out with friends, skiing and technology. And, she's maintaining a 3.84 grade point average.



Megan Bening

Bening has many accomplishments. She has competed in the National Braille Challenge eight times. The Braille Challenge tests blind students on various braille competencies. Of the eight years she has competed, Bening has placed third, second and, in 2008, she scored a first place. In six of those eight years she made it to the finals.

In the summer of 2009, Bening entered a national letter writing competition sponsored by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). The goal was to challenge students to write a letter to the president of the United States about the importance of braille literacy issues. Once all submissions were gathered that fall, the NFB would select the top 100 letters, bundle them and present them to the Secretary of Education who would then pass them to President Obama. Bening's letter was selected to be among the 100 letters sent. She is not sure the President has seen them yet, but is considering sending a copy directly to the President herself.

This year Bening was also asked to present to the annual Minnesota state-wide Lions Convention. Hundreds of Lions from around the state listened to Bening's eloquent description of how her blindness is really just a trait. She explained that although she does things differently than sighted people, she doesn't have less of a life. This is evidenced by one of her favorite activities—skiing! Through a program of Mankato's Center for Independent Living (SMILES), Bening took an adaptive skiing course and is now hooked on the sport.

"You need to learn self-advocacy early in life because you will find otherwise that no one else is going to do it for you," Bening explains. "But, early on in life I had great and creative support and help," she adds. She received mobility instruction and braille instruction from the earliest age.

State Services for the Blind (SSB) has been there since very early on as well. Bening's mother Jean heard about SSB from a friend who worked in the same building where SSB offices. She contacted Maureen Toonkel of the SSB Mankato office to learn more about its services. Jean was told that when Megan reached 14 years old she should apply for rehabilitation services. By working with SSB and her local school, Bening could gain a clear understanding of her strengths, abilities and goals. She would be prepared for the transition from high school to the post secondary environment that best meets her needs and aspirations.

Toonkel and SSB have been a great asset to Bening. Toonkel has always been a participant in Bening's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. SSB has provided technical assessments and recommended devices such as a braille note taking device to help her with her school work. Bening has attended the Summer Transition Program (STP) that is a camp-like experience that brings blind youth together to explore their post-high school paths. STP is a program jointly hosted by the Department of Education and SSB.

"It's (SSB) an awesome resource and you need to build groundwork early on to get ready so that when you want to go to college you don't have to worry about all the preliminary steps," Bening says. It doesn't take too much to realize that Bening is preparing herself to take the next steps towards a bright future, a future that may include spending time studying at MIT. ●

# Communication Center

The Communication Center is a wonderful resource for individuals who are blind, visually impaired, Deafblind and print-disabled. This expansive public library is located at State Services for the Blind (SSB) St. Paul Midway office. Through transcription and reading services, customers now have access to the same print media as sighted Minnesotans!

## The Center:

- transcribes textbooks for hundreds of Minnesota students of all ages, and leisure reading books (braille or recorded);
- lends and repairs special radio receivers;
- lends and repairs audio players through the Library of Congress Talking Book Program; and
- broadcasts a 24-hour radio reading service — the Radio Talking Book (RTB) — through a closed-circuit radio network that includes six Greater Minnesota outreach sites:
  - Fergus Falls
  - Duluth
  - St. Cloud
  - Mankato
  - Rochester
  - Grand Rapids

These outreach sites allow the Center to broadcast local news from publications such as the Fergus Falls Daily Journal, Mankato Free Press, Duluth News Tribune, Rochester Post-Bulletin, St. Cloud Times, Grand Rapids Herald-Review and others. RTB is also streamed on the Internet.

The complete program schedule for the RTB is available online at the SSB Web site: [www.mnssb.org](http://www.mnssb.org).

Customers of the Communication Center can also access in via telephone to two 24-hour audio newspaper reading services. Dial-In News is available for metro-area newspapers. To access local Minnesota and 250 national newspapers, customers can call into NFB-NEWSLINE®. These services are supported, in part, by funds from the Department of Commerce's Telecommunications Access Minnesota Fund.

The Center provides all of these audio, braille, print and digital communication services through SSB staff and a network of over 650 volunteers. These highly valued volunteers are honored with recognition events every year. ●

## Communication Center Statistics —

	FFY 2010	FFY 2009	FFY 2008
Braille Pages Provided	933,000	976,962	1,000,188
Radio Talking Book Receivers Placed	5,879	5,890	6,057
Audio Equipment Maintained and Circulated	26,000	27,022	18,927
Number of Customers Accessing Audio Services	13,014	13,608	13,896



**E**ight years ago, former Braille Unit supervisor Mary Archer “volunteered” braille proofreader Allison O'Day for a new task: join an international group that was creating standard rules for how tactile graphics are formatted by providers of braille in North



Allison O'Day

America. Tactile graphics are used to tactually illustrate maps, graphs and other illustrations that cannot be described in braille. There was no documented and accepted standard for their format that could guide the work of tactile graphics providers. Agencies and tactile graphics providers varied how they represented information to braille readers. Differing formats are often confusing to the users of braille materials. A standard approach was needed, thus the international group.

In 2002, O'Day began her tenure as a member of the Braille Authority of North America/Canadian Braille Authority Joint Committee on Tactile Graphics. O'Day was the only blind member of the group.

The group met every Monday from 4 to 6 p.m. via teleconference for about four years and on a more spaced out schedule thereafter, writing the text and refining examples. The manual started out with about 60 tactile examples of how materials should be formatted. So, many considerations had to be thought out, argued over and agreed on. A variety of small but important things, like where to place a north pointing arrow in a map key, needed to be hashed out.

In the end, the manual was pared down to 38 examples in a tactile format and 350 pages of text. Colored print illustrations accompany each of the tactile graphic examples so that users understand the process of changing the print illustration into a tactile format.

“The Guidelines and Standards for Tactile Graphics” underwent peer review in 2009. Helen Skovran and Darlene Plante, SSB braillists, participated as reviewers. Revisions were made, and the committee finished its work in September 2010. On Oct. 31, 2010, the Braille Authority of North America officially adopted the standards.

O'Day says, “Sometimes I cursed Mary Archer for volunteering me, but it was well worth the time, and I am really proud of what we created.”

Organizations doing the important work of creating tactile illustrations will soon apply the new standards, and braille readers throughout North America will benefit from the decade-long work of the international group. ●

## Andy Virden



Andy Virden

If you visit St. Cloud and happen to mention the word “blind,” you’re likely to hear about Andy Virden.

Virden, 82, lost vision in one eye before his first birthday due to micro atrophy, and by age 16 his vision was gone completely. In 1934 he started “sight saving” school in St. Cloud. That was also when he started accessing services so he could read despite his vision loss. He remembers using a phonograph player, provided by the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically

Handicapped (NLS), to listen to “Alice in Wonderland.” In 1946, he started at St. Cloud State, majoring in social science and history. After graduating from college, he continued on to the Minneapolis Society for the Blind for training in blindness skills, such as travel training and other alternative techniques. In 1955 he completed additional training and became a licensed vendor in SSB’s Business Enterprises Program. For 38 years he operated Virden Vending and Concession, with a stand at the St. Cloud post office and 40 vending machines throughout the city. He says he remembers selling cigarettes for 25 cents a pack.

When it comes to blindness many people are apprehensive because they have little, if any, experience with it. It’s an unknown, but people have come to learn through Virden how blindness is simply one of numerous traits a person possesses.

When it comes to being a well-rounded and involved citizen, Virden walks the talk. “You have to be active and involved and not in just blind groups, although they are very important, too,” he explains. In 1971 Virden was elected the first president of the Central Minnesota Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind, serving for three years. He was again elected president in the mid-1990s and continues to serve in that capacity. In 1995-1996 he served as chairperson for the Waite Park Community Celebration along with sitting on the board of directors for RSVP, a senior volunteer organization. And there’s more: Virden belongs to the Knights of Columbus, is active in his church, St. Joseph of Waite Park, and is an outspoken proponent of public transportation.

Virden is retired, but he stays connected with the help of the Communication Center at SSB. Virden uses just about every part of the Communication Center. He says he’s not great at braille, but he can read some. He uses the NLS Audio Book Program, and he uses NFB Newsline pretty much on a daily basis.

He has been using Radio Talking Book for at least 15 years, enjoys hearing the St. Cloud Times being read by local volunteers and likes listening to the Sunday newspapers. On his new NLS audio book machine – a far cry from the phonograph player he used in the last century – you will find the book “West of Appomattox” all cued up and ready to go.

In his ninth decade, Virden doesn’t seem to be slowing down. If anything his ongoing attention to staying connected and involved has made him an even more positive force in the St. Cloud community. ●

**M**any years ago persons who were blind, visually impaired or print disabled used phonograph machines to play the vinyl records that audio books were recorded on. Then came cassette tapes and cassette machines. Those machines were durable and simple to use and remained the method for many years...until now.

2010 ushered in the new National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS/BPH) Digital Talking Book machine. The machine comes in two different versions; standard and advanced. Both versions of the machines play standard and advanced. The books are contained on a single USB flash cartridge, rather than the multiple cassettes required on the older cassette player. The machines are portable, and are equipped with a rechargeable battery and an AC power cord. Audio instructions are built into the machines and each control, located on the top of the machine, has raised indicators for tactile navigation. Each player includes a variable speed control that permits speeding up or slowing down playback without changing the pitch and a sleep function that will automatically turn off the machine after the designated time has elapsed. The advanced digital player allows the user to navigate through the structured levels of the book, ideal for vocational or academic materials. SSB's Audio Services Unit produces textbook materials in an audio format that fits the NLS/BPH player.

Throughout the evolution and improvement of the talking book machines, SSB has been part of the team that makes machines and books available to NLS/BPH users. The NLS/BPH is a Federal program and has libraries in each state. In Minnesota, the library is located in Faribault and is operated by the Minnesota Department of Education. The library houses and distributes, via the US Postal Service, all the audio books as well as braille volumes, sheet music and some large print texts. The library shares a campus with the academies for the blind and the deaf.

SSB's part in this process has always been to distribute and maintain the book players whether they are phonographs, cassette machines and now the new digital players. At the outset, due to an initial shortage of players, priority for the new machines was given to veterans, students and centenarians. That prioritization has now ended. Machines are being sent to new customers and current cassette machine users that have requested the new machines. Users of the cassette machines that wish to continue to use them can do so for at least a few more years.

The design and production of the digital players took many years and included a great deal of thought and pilot testing on the final player. The final product has been very well received by users and promises to be around for many years. ●



**B**lind, visually impaired or Deafblind Minnesotans aged 55 and older who wish to pursue personal independence are served by the Senior Services Unit. Customers like Russell Betsinger have found these services useful. The staff in this unit provides three levels of services:

- general information;
- direct provision of needed services exclusively by SSB staff; and
- more extensive training and other services by SSB staff and/or external vendors.

In the more extensive services, the customer receives help via a plan for needs ranging from braille and cane travel instruction to money and household management skills. SSB uses a number of locations, or “hubs,” across the state where customers can visit to receive services and try various aids and technologies available to them. ●

Senior Services Unit Statistics			
	FFY 2010	FFY 2009	FFY 2008
Number Served	3,625	3,305	3,199

**I** could go on and on about what I learned in those (Adjustment to Blindness) classes,” says Russell Betsinger of Spring Valley. “There are so many little tricks that you would never think of.” Betsinger has had trouble with his vision for years due to diabetes, but the last five years it has gotten a lot worse and according to his doctor, there are no more surgeries that can help.



Russell Betsinger

In 2010, with the urging of his counselor, Diane Swanson, he enrolled in an Adjustment to Blindness class taught by former SSB employee Jan Bailey. Betsinger along with four other students, all women, spent five weeks under sleep shades learning how to do a number of different things. In the class participants learn to cook, use tools, and travel safely using a white cane, all without sight. They also learn to use access technology and read some braille. He was especially impressed by the bar code scanner device and some of the other talking devices. He now uses ZoomText magnification and speech software to help him with his computer and he uses the National Library Service audio book program and Radio Talking Book to stay connected.

Betsinger has high praise for Jan Bailey. He often hiked along a walking trail that passes by his home, but he was having a hard time figuring out when to get off the trail when he returned to his home. With Bailey’s assistance, he decided that they would leave a radio playing outside his house so when he returned from a trail hike, he would hear the radio and know when he was home.

He feels strongly that what he learned is essential to his future. This isn’t just something nice to say either. Betsinger is a busy guy! He enjoys traveling and has visited the Balkans, Germany and Kenya. He is planning a river cruise in Russia this year. He enjoys cooking and stays in touch with his other classmates by exchanging recipes. He helps with church functions and does all his own yard maintenance and house work. He also babysits his grandchildren.

“There is life after blindness,” he states plainly. “I would recommend this (Adjustment to Blindness classes) to anybody who knows that their vision is going to be an issue. If you are willing to try, there is a way to do just about anything.” ●

**S**itting around a table at the SSB office in Marshall, the five older folks gathered together seem like a group of siblings reunited after a long separation. The group is warm and welcoming and eager to hear about each other. One group member begins to express a thought, and before she can finish, the others jump in to reinforce her idea. What they really are, however, is a group of seniors who have been struggling to come to grips with vision loss. The group consists of Wilbert Werner, Gene Hochhalter, Lloyd White, Anne Rockman and Eunice Hanson.



Marshall ATB Group

This group came together for eight weeks in 2010 to go through an adjustment to blindness class taught by rehabilitation teacher Sylvia Diers, who is a contractor for SSB. The class teaches blind and visually impaired people to learn new ways to do the things that will allow them to remain independent. They learn cooking techniques, technology, skills of daily living and white cane travel. "It shouldn't be called adjustment to blindness," says Hochhalter. "Maybe something like, adjustment to vision loss would be better." The group did agree that when presented with the idea for a group by Lynne Zick in SSB's Marshall office, the term "blindness" sounded scary, but they realized the value of the class once they were there.

What was the most important thing the members learned? Each member pointed to specific things they liked such as working with tools or using their fingers to feel their way through a problem, eating without self-consciousness or learning to cross the street safely. In the end, though, the overwhelming consensus was that the class was important to teach confidence and acceptance of their vision loss. They agreed that creating a comfort level with the loss was essential for moving on with their lives.

One member, White, has been blind all his life. He has always had a guide dog and came to class to learn cane travel skills. The group agreed that White's attitude and example of having lived such a full life was an inspiration and helped them realize that they didn't need to be afraid of blindness. White says, "If you get upset, you compromise your ability." Well, he sure got through to Rockman. Before the class she was having difficulty adjusting to her blindness and was considering selling her home. In fact, her son and daughter had been staying with her to provide support. After the class, she says, "If something else happens, I know I will be prepared to deal with it." She now is happy living just where she is, in her own home. ●

## Accessibility is the Law of the Land

Sept. 1 was a great day for all Minnesotans. The state officially adopted a set of standards on that day that will improve the accessibility and usability of information technology products and services offered by the state of Minnesota. As specified in HF1744, which passed into law in May 2009, the accessibility standards incorporate the Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG) and section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The change came after years of concern, frustration, advocacy, negotiation and hard work. Adoption and implementation of the standards will go a long way toward creating accessible websites, documents and software for current and future employees. These standards will assist the state in attracting job candidates who previously could not use systems at work because they were inaccessible. Additionally, the public will have greater access to public information.

State Services for the Blind (SSB) played a significant role in this process. Chuk Hamilton, former director of SSB, was instrumental in bringing interested parties to the table and convincing others of the importance of accessibility.

David Andrews, director of the Assistive Technology Unit at SSB, was a persistent and critical advocate, helping to identify gaps in accessibility. He worked closely with Hamilton to start the process and keep it moving.

Many others were also involved in the effort. Meredith Anderson, formerly with the Department of Employment and Economic Development, was an early player and suggested many ideas for improving accessibility. Colleen Wieck, executive director of the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, developed an ad hoc state committee on accessibility that sought ideas and solutions. Mary Hartnett, executive director of the Commission of Deaf, Deafblind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans, led advocates who initiated and moved the accessibility bill through the Legislature. Dana Badgerow, former commissioner of the Department of Administration, supported the bill and was forceful at critical points in the legislative process. DEED Commissioner Dan McElroy, Deputy Commissioner Paul Moe and Legislative Director Lynne Batzli listened to input from SSB and Vocational Rehabilitation Services and opened doors at the Governor's Office. SSB and Vocational Rehabilitation Services, led by Director Kim Peck, funded the accessibility standards development project requested in the legislation.

Of critical importance were Rena Rogers at the Office of Enterprise Technology and Betsy Hayes at the Department of Administration. They participated in the accessibility standards development project and were leaders in getting the standards to the finish line.

Finally, all this could not have happened without state Rep. Bill Hilty and state Sen. Ann Rest, who introduced the bill in the Legislature and fought hard for approval.

These standards will have a profound, life-changing impact in the lives of Minnesota citizens. They will help level the playing field for those who are blind, visually impaired, Deafblind or have other disabilities. ●

**D**avid Andrews (pictured), chief technology officer for State Services for the Blind (SSB), received the C. Stanley Potter Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Association of Audio Information Services (IAAIS) at the annual convention in June, 2010.



The award recognized Andrew's work during his 30-year career furthering the mission of IAAIS. The group supports services that make printed information available in audio formats to those who cannot read conventional print because of disabilities or health conditions.

Andrews has pioneered new technologies that have increased access to information for blind and visually impaired people.

He has been with SSB for the past 15 years. Prior to joining SSB, Andrews held a variety of positions that supported information access for persons with disabilities in other states.

Due to his efforts in 1983, the New Jersey Library for the Blind and Handicapped was the first to put a TV SAP (Secondary Audio Programming) radio service on the air, making it possible for more people to access audio services.

In the 1990's, he led the conversion of SSB's Communication Center technology from analog to digital. The SSB Communication Center broadcasts 24 hours daily to more than 7,500 listeners in Minnesota and South Dakota through its Radio Talking Book Network.

Andrews is recognized internationally for his expertise in audio services and he has shared his knowledge with officials from as far away as China to help them establish audio information services.

The award was named for C. Stanley Potter, a Minnesotan who was the longtime director of SSB. Potter is best known for establishing Radio Talking Book, the first radio reading service in the world when it was created in Minnesota in 1969.

IAAIS membership consists of about 140 audio information services in the U.S., United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Africa. ●

# State Services for the Blind

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  
651.642.0500

[www.mnssb.org](http://www.mnssb.org)

This information is available in  
alternative formats by calling

- 651.642.0500
- TTY 1.651.642.0506
- Toll Free: 800.652.9000
- Toll Free TTY: 888.665.3276

## SSB — 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. ●

POSITIVELY  
*Minnesota*  
Department of Employment and Economic Development

An equal opportunity employer and program provider.