

Washington

State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind



Department of Services for the Blind
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ANNUAL REPORT INTRODUCTION

The Washington State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B) is an advisory group of volunteers appointed by the Washington State Governor to provide counsel and guidance to the Department of Services for the Blind (DSB). In Washington State, the DSB has primary responsibility to deliver Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP), and Independent Living (IL) skills training to individuals who are blind or visually impaired. DSB provides services for individuals that can cross one's entire life span.

The purpose of the SRC-B is to review, evaluate, and make recommendations to DSB on its plans, policies, and activities to ensure that people in our state who are blind, low vision or deaf blind receive the most effective and efficient rehabilitation services possible.

In addition to providing direction to the Director of DSB on behalf of the public and participants the SRC-B also advises and reports to the Governor and makes recommendations to the State Legislature about services that impact the lives of blind people. The SRC-B works closely with other state councils, agencies and organizations to enhance the services, opportunities, and rights of Washingtonians who are blind.

The SRC-B is established and authorized under the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended under the 2014 Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA). Under local Washington State law, the SRC-B is authorized in statutes [RCW 74.18.070 through RCW 74.18.100](#).

REFLECTING ON 2021: A LETTER FROM THE SRC-B CHAIR

Dear Acting Commissioner Carol Dobak and Washington State Governor Jay Inslee,

I am pleased to present the 2021 Annual Report on behalf of the Washington State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B).

This has been my first year as Chair of the SRC-B. We continue to experience a high level of dedication by Council members to our work. This year we continued holding our meetings by utilizing the Zoom platform, which of course allows for connection via either computers or phone.

A most satisfying development this year came through the hard work of our membership committee, who with diligent outreach and work were able to fill all vacant seats on the SRC-B. This year, we filled the Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP), three business and labor positions, an educational representative, and a representative of Tribal VR. This is the first time in years all positions have been filled.

Due to so many new members, our mention of focused training in last year's annual report letter continued in 2021 with another training in April, open to new and ongoing members as a refresher.

We said goodbye to a longtime SRC-B member, Jerry Johnson, our CAP representative who has served in this role with the SRC-B for 18 years. We will miss his passion, expertise and historical knowledge greatly, but he has promised to serve in a consultation role. However, he made sure in the hiring of his CAP replacement Jennifer Bean that we have a passionate, dedicated and excellent person to replace him in his role on the SRC-B.

SRC-B committees have been a strong focus during this calendar year:

1. All members have been assigned to a committee.
2. All Committees have agreed to make a commitment to meet quarterly between each SRC-B meeting.
3. Via a vote at our December meeting, the name of the formerly Program and Evaluation committee was changed to the Customer Satisfaction Committee to align more with its function.

The membership committee is also actively working with the governor's office to ensure terms are properly staggered so not all member terms expire at the same time.

Starting at our June meeting, we decided it would be informative and beneficial to have Michael MacKillop report on Policy Review and State Plan at each subsequent meeting.

With every council member having the option to give input via their assigned SRC-B committee, input was provided to DSB interim executive director for our segment of the State Plan with SRC-B input and inquiries. This input along with DSB's responses were provided to SRC-B members at our December meeting.

Sincerely,

Julie Brannon, Chair

Washington State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

GET TO KNOW OUR COUNCIL MEMBERS

The Washington State Governor appoints Council members for no more than two 3-year consecutive terms. The Governor actively encourages the Council to seek demographic and ethnic diversity of membership in addition to meeting the federal requirements for representation.

CURRENT MEMBERS

ANDY ARVIDSON:

BUSINESS, LABOR, AND INDUSTRY

Anacortes, WA

Andy is an OTC graduate and holds a Master's degree in Martial Arts and Physiology from the World Moo Duk Kwan Academy. Currently a business owner in Anacortes with his wife, and a DSB contractor for Sightless Self-defense classes.

CATHY WILSON:

BUSINESS, LABOR, AND INDUSTRY

Tacoma, WA

Cathy has lived in Tacoma since 1989 after living in CA and Germany, and has a B.S. degree in Accounting. Her vision loss occurred over 20+ years, and Cathy attended the OTC after becoming legally blind in 2011. At the OTC she developed a passion to assist and encourage others with their vision loss; and she now works in HR at the Lighthouse for the Blind where an essential part of her job is to recruit talented people who are blind or low vision. Cathy has been active in the Pierce County Association of the Blind (PCAB) since 2013.

CHRIS ALEJANO:

STATE WORKFORCE INVESTMENT BOARD MEMBER

Seattle, WA

Chris Alejano is the Education Policy Advisor for City of Seattle Mayor, Jenny Durkan. He works with city programs and efforts in early learning, K-12, and post-secondary education. Chris brings a unique background that spans the entire educational system from the local to the federal level.

CHRISTOPHER ZILAR:

SECTION 121 NATIVE AMERICANS

Spokane, WA

Christopher joined Spokane Tribe's Vocational Rehabilitation Program in 2016 as the director. He has previously worked for public health and for a small chamber of commerce focused on diversity and inclusion. Christopher has completed three medical mission trips to Rwanda. He has six kids (two sets of twin boys) and resides near Spokane Indian Reservation with his family.

COREY GRANDSTAFF:

CURRENT OR FORMER RECIPIENT OF VR SERVICES

Vancouver, WA

Corey is a graduate of the University of Northern Colorado. Since 2012, he has been employed at the Washington State School for the Blind (WSSB) as a Residential Program Assistant and teacher.

JACOB KAMAUNU:

BUSINESS, LABOR, AND INDUSTRY (BEP OPERATOR)

Seattle, WA

Jacob is currently a restaurateur and a member of the Washington State Business Enterprise Program (BEP) where he received his certification as a blind vender. Jacob has been able to manage and maintain his small business operations out of the heart of Seattle for the past six years, providing employment opportunities to all who are able with no exclusion to those who are blind.

JENNIFER BEAN:

CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Bellingham, WA

Jennifer Bean has been working in the Vocational Rehabilitation field for 20+ years. Her work experience includes being an Independent Living Counselor, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, Benefits Specialist and Regional Trainer at Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). Additionally, she was a Rehabilitation Coordinator with the Washington Client Assistance Program (CAP) and became the Executive Director of CAP in August 2021. Jennifer has a MA degree in Rehabilitation Counseling and has years of experience with training and teaching.

JERRY JOHNSEN:

CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Seattle, WA

Jerry was the CAP Director for 38 years and also served on the DVR SRC and the Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment (GCDE). Jerry loves photography, cycling and hiking. Jerry retired from CAP and the SRC-B in June 2021.

JERRI CLARK:

PARENT INFORMATION AND TRAINING CENTER

Vancouver, WA

Jerri has a Bachelor of Science degree in journalism from the University of Kansas. She has served families as a resource coordinator for Partnerships for Action, Voices for Empowerment (PAVE) since 2017. She leads a grassroots advocacy movement, Mothers of the Mentally Ill (MOMI).

JULIE BRANNON, 2021 SRC-B CHAIR: CURRENT OR FORMER RECIPIENT OF VR SERVICES

Puyallup, WA

Julie retired in 2019 after working for over 40 years in the fields of social work, teaching and program management. She has been involved in working with persons who are blind and blindness issues for approximately 25 years, both as a teacher and program manager for DSB; as well as in a variety of leadership roles with one of Washington State's consumer organizations, the Washington Council of the Blind, in which she's currently serving as president.

KIM CONNER:

STATE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL (SILC)

Olympia, WA

Kim is Executive Director of the SILC. She previously worked as a consultant providing strategic planning, program development, and partnership building for non-profits and small businesses.

KRISTEN GEARY:

COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROGRAM SERVICE PROVIDER

Seattle, WA

Kristin has spent the last four years working with Washington Vocational Services who contracts with the DSB's youth services summer internship program. Since moving to Seattle in 2008, Kristin has worked, in some manner, supporting people who are blind with and without additional disabilities, specializing in teaching daily living and employment readiness skills.

LINDA WILDER, 2021 SRC-B VICE-CHAIR: QUALIFIED VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELOR

Tacoma, WA

Linda has a Bachelor's degree from Seattle University and a Master's degree from Chapman University. In 2017, Linda retired from DSB after working 30 years as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor.

MARCI CARPENTER:

CONSUMER ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION

Seattle, WA

Marci Carpenter is the President of the National Federation of the Blind of Washington. A Washington native, she has been a lifelong advocate for blind children and adults. Marci also serves as Chairperson of the Seattle Transit Advisory Board.

MICHAEL MACKILLOP:

DSB ACTING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (EX-OFFICIO MEMBER)

Seattle, WA

Michael MacKillop was appointed Acting Executive Director of DSB in January 2020. Michael has served as agency Deputy Director as well as other executive and direct service positions over the past 20+ years. He believes deeply in the philosophical backdrop of the Disability Rights and Independent Living movements, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 that all have been key in shaping the agency's mission of "Independence, Inclusion and Economic Vitality for individuals with Visual Disabilities".

SEAN MCCORMICK:

STATE EDUCATIONAL AGENCY

Vancouver, WA

Sean is the Director of On-Campus Education at the Washington State School for the Blind (WSSB). His path in education includes serving as a Paraprofessional, Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments, an Orientation & Mobility Instructor, Associate Principal, and Principal. In his current role, Sean oversees the educational programs held at WSSB's campus through both day and residential opportunities for students. Sean is an active member of WA's Special Education Advisory Council, Washington Unified English Braille Committee, and the Council of Schools and Services for the Blind's Principals subgroup.

SHEILA TURNER:

BLIND, WITH MULTIPLE DISABILITIES

Pasco, WA

Sheila is employed as an Independent Living Skills teacher for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Kennewick. She is working towards dual certification as a Teacher of the Visually Impaired and

Orientation and Mobility Specialist at the University of Northern Colorado. She is the parent of two children who are blind; one has multiple disabilities.

STEVE FIKSDAL:

BUSINESS, LABOR AND INDUSTRY

Federal Way, WA

Steve is the owner of Fiksdal Strengths, which provides strength identification and coaching to individuals and teams. Steve says DSB played a significant role in the establishment of his new company and career by providing him the resources and tools to succeed in a sighted world and embark on a new and exciting career.

STAFF

MEREDITH STANNARD

DSB APPOINTED LIAISON

Seattle, WA

Meredith worked as a vocational rehabilitation counselor and supervisor for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in Seattle, and retired from her position as Regional Area Manager at the Washington Department of Services for the Blind in 2017. She is entering her fifth year as the liaison to the Washington State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. She has a Master's Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from Seattle University.

YVONNE GRIMES

SRC-B STAFF ASSISTANT

Olympia, WA

Yvonne came to Services for the Blind in 2017 with a diverse work background, and says she has been able to put everything she's ever learned to use at DSB. Yvonne is a lifelong Washingtonian and currently lives in Olympia. She feels very fortunate to have landed at a state agency that holds the same values as she does, and enjoys supporting the SRC-B and its members as part of her work.

A CHANCE TO CONNECT, LEARN FROM, AND WORK WITH EACH OTHER

The SRC-B met four times during 2021, all meetings were held remotely due to the coronavirus pandemic. All meetings were open to the public.

Meetings were held via the Zoom platform, with connection information advertised ahead of time allowing interested consumers to take part regardless of where they live throughout our state. In addition to special presentations and subcommittee updates, meetings consist of a report from the DSB Acting Executive Director about progress towards goals outlined in the state plan and a report from the SRC-B Chair about Council activities. Beginning at our June meeting, we decided to include at each meeting a policy review report from the acting director.

The agenda always offers an opportunity for public comment on subjects related to Council business including the Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living Programs, and issues impacting the employment or independence of blind Washington State citizens.

Agenda items this year included:

- Welcomed several new Council members filling the following positions: Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP), three business and labor positions, an educational representative, and a representative of Tribal VR. This is the first time in years all positions have been filled.
- Voted on term limits for SRC-B Chair that were agreed to by the Council in 12/2019.
- Created a new training committee.
- Developed a training for all SRC-B members which was held on April 19th, 2021.
- Said goodbye to an 18-year member representing the Client Assistance Program.
- Presentations given by three rehabilitation teachers as to how they're doing their job during Covid. (Two field and one center-based teacher shared).
- Discussed the purpose and needed content for the State Plan and Annual Report, outlining what was required from SRC-B members for these documents. Both the inquiries from the SRC-B and the DSB responses for the State Plan were overviewed at our December meeting.
- Discussed and voted on the value of visual self-description at our SRC-B meetings.
- Presentations were made by: the new director of the Client Assistance Program and the new director of the Orientation and Training Center from DSB.
- Held elections for the SRC-B Chair and Vice-Chair positions.
- A bylaw change was voted on to change the name of the program and evaluation committee to align better with its actual function.
- A bylaw change to the election process was tabled until the next meeting with the request for review and input from the SRC-B executive committee.

COMMITTEE ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2021

The SRC-B has four standing committees that do the work of the Council. Every member is expected to serve on a committee. This year, all new members were assigned to committees to allow for every member's involvement. Committees have been asked to meet quarterly, before each SRC-B meeting.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

This committee provides overall leadership, vision, and guidance. It includes the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Chairs of the other standing committees. Responsibilities include: supervising SRC-B staff; developing and managing SRC-B resources; planning meeting agendas; strategic planning and work plan development; meeting federal and state mandates on time and within budget; and submitting this Annual Report. This year the executive committee met regularly providing oversight for SRC-B process, and gathered and consolidated committee input for the SRC-B segment of the state plan.

MEMBERSHIP AND COLLABORATION COMMITTEE

This committee works to maintain a strong, active, and high-functioning Council. This includes: member recruitment; member training and support; public relations and outreach; and coordination of collaborative activities with partner councils.

This year, the membership committee worked diligently to assure that all open positions were filled, including: Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP), three business and labor positions, an educational representative, and a representative of Tribal VR.

The membership committee spear-headed the project to develop a more clear-cut and concise election process.

The membership committee is also actively working with the governor's office to ensure terms are properly staggered so not all member terms expire at the same time.

POLICY AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

This committee provides input to DSB's internal policies and practices by: identifying opportunities to engage in DSB internal workgroups; giving input on policy changes affecting DSB participants; and supporting DSB's State Plan forums.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION COMMITTEE (PREVIOUSLY NAMED PROGRAM AND EVALUATION)

This committee evaluates customer satisfaction and other DSB performance measures, and makes suggestions for program improvement based on their findings; coordinates opportunities for public feedback, and input to the SRC-B Annual Report.

This committee oversees the anonymous satisfaction survey for VR customers who exited services in the federal fiscal year, conducted by SRC-B staff. Surveys were completed online. Questions address categories identified in the Governor's Results Washington initiatives. Participants are encouraged to include written comment on their experience with DSB. This helps capture both analytical data and valuable feedback that allows DSB the opportunity to enhance their programs and customer service.

Overall satisfaction: for 2021 was 86%; for 2020 was 72%; for 2019 was 80%

Training offered: for 2021 was 80%; for 2020 was 84%; for 2019 was 81%

Accuracy of staff: for 2021 was 89%; for 2020 was 95%; for 2019 was 84%

Respectfulness of staff: for 2021 was 91%; for 2020 was 84%; for 2019 was 80%

The target for all satisfaction measures is 80%.

Over the last year, the Customer Satisfaction survey showed overall satisfaction with services from DSB, with an average rating between satisfied and very satisfied. Trends relate directly to the impacts of the pandemic. Customers were appreciative of the technology, tech support, and assistive technology they received. They report increased independence and ability to interact in a newly remote world, and feel more prepared for remote work options. Negative impacts of staff turnover, primarily related to the "Great Resignation" were also noted, including difficulty establishing a relationship with their new counselor and the new counselor not understanding the individual's disability and limitations. Below is a sampling of the comments.

- "I am able to do a lot of things independently, it helps me to have a more active life. It will help me continue to do the job I love and support kids and families in our community."
- "I feel I have been launched to the 21st century and more comfortable with the technology, more self confident and capable to deal with the challenges of ongoing change."
- "DSB helped me get the equipment and services I needed to continue working from home and managing my small business. Without their help, I would not have been able to continue! But today I am thriving and it's thanks to DSB."

- “With the tremendous support and empowerment, I now have a career that I love, can provide a good life for my family financially and have the means to make my dreams of the future a reality.”

TRAINING COMMITTEE

This committee was developed this year within the SRC-B, charged to make sure at least an annual training is provided for all members. This will be developed by looking at materials from former trainings and adding any new relevant material.

DSB PROGRAMS MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN OUR COMMUNITY

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF A HAPPY AND INDEPENDENT CHILD

The DSB serves children under age 9 who are blind or have low vision, and their families. DSB provides assistance in understanding the nature and potential impact of the child's visual disability to the often-overwhelmed parents of this most challenging population. Parents are trained alongside the children, receiving training in parenting techniques and understanding the child's developmental needs. Daily living skills are also taught to the child (and their family) to help the child become more independent at home and participate in household chores.

[Resources for Families webpage](#)

A NATIONWIDE EMPHASIS ON YOUTH TRANSITION

A national emphasis in the VR program is services to ensure smooth transition for youth who are moving from school to post-secondary activities. DSB helps students and their families think about and plan for life after high school. The DSB provides:

- Career counseling: including consulting on part-time employment and internships.
- Assessments and hands-on career exploration activities to help students determine their interests for their future careers.
- Information regarding services for adults, including job counseling and training in the adaptive skills of blindness.
- Collaboration with students, parents, and high school staff on Special Education Individualized Education Plans (IEP) development and post-school activities.
- Many programs are available year-round for students with a disability. Programs have different focuses and they progressively build on skills and career exploration depending on the age and needs of the participants. The youngest participants are often working on social skills and learning about different jobs that exist in the world, and the oldest participants are gaining work experience, awareness of workplace expectations, understanding and developing career pathways, and refining independent living skills as they prepare to transition to higher education and work.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, the established youth programs were again unable to be held in-person in 2021, but the remote programs that were established in 2020 were able to continue and be expanded upon. As was seen last year, one of the biggest benefits to offering remote youth workshops and programs is the opportunity to reach students who have been unable to travel to the in-person offerings when they are held.

In 2021, DSB provided a variety of services to 367 youth. DSB assisted 111 participants with their higher education tuition.

[Youth Services webpage](#)

GETTING PEOPLE TO WORK AND HELPING THEM KEEP THEIR JOBS

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is for people interested in getting a job or keeping a job. The comprehensive program considers the needs of each individual and provides quality services to participants rather than just placing people in jobs. DSB consistently gets higher wages than most other VR programs and consistently has the highest ratio of individuals who earn enough to reduce or eliminate Social Security financial benefits. The participant takes the active role in determining scope and goal among a wide-ranging set of services. Participants often need training in adaptive skills of blindness, computer technology for on-the-job success, career exploration and matching interests and aptitude to job types, or internships and other work experiences.

At the end of 2021, 55 participants achieved successful employment outcomes with an average hourly wage of \$23.39. Twenty of these participants received job retention assistance in order to keep a job that was at risk due to their visual disability. Two participants who got or kept a job are Honorably Discharged Veterans. Fourteen participants now have all of their medical health insurance paid by their employers, as a result of employment through DSB services. Five participants are no longer relying on Public Assistance as their primary source of income. The eldest participant needed help transitioning to working from home as a Social Services Specialist at age 68.

A complete list of jobs and employers can be found online, but a few examples of employers include: Amazon, American Family Insurance, Central Washington Disability Resources, Cloud One, Coastal Community Action Program, HCL Technologies, MultiCare Neuroscience Center, Providence Hospital, Salal Credit Union, Social Security Administration (SSA), University Of Washington, WA State Dept Of Social And Health Services (DSHS), and Yakima School District

[More information about VR services on Agency website](#)

OTC GRADUATES ARE CONFIDENT, INDEPENDENT, AND SUCCESSFUL

The Orientation and Training Center (OTC) at the DSB is primarily a residential program for vocational rehabilitation participants who need intensive daily instruction in adaptive skills of blindness, employment-related experiences, and adjustment to blindness services. While all skills trained at the OTC are also available through each field office, the OTC allows for intensive, daily training and practice of the necessary adaptive skills of blindness. Students

participate in a variety of classes while at the OTC including home management, computers and technology, orientation and mobility, braille, home maintenance, careers and education exploration, and discussion on blindness seminars. OTC students also participate in other activities and learning experiences such as tandem bike riding, kayaking, and rock climbing; these activities help students build confidence in their blindness skills. The skills students learn at the OTC enable them to be independent and successful in the homes, schools, jobs, and in their communities.

During 2021 the OTC continued to provide services remotely, and was able to welcome both instructors and students back to the in-person residential program the first week of November. While operating at 50% capacity to limit the students' and instructors' exposure, it is still a significant milestone in DSB's return to in-person services for all of the VR programs.

The OTC achieved the following successes during the past year:

- Effectively taught all classes virtually, including Braille, Computers, Technology, Orientation and Mobility, Home Economics, Careers, Literacy, and Seminar/Discussion
- Conducted a successful virtual Friends and Family Workshop
- Served students from 21 to 62 years old
- Provided new DSB staff with a virtual 3-day OTC experience
- Graduated eight students from the OTC program
- Led OTC students and instructors in a fitness challenge
- Served a record number of Long Distance Braille students
- Emphasized career readiness with the Career Development Program, with emphasis on resumé development, mock interviews, and career exploration

[Orientation and Training Center website page](#)

LEGALLY-BLIND INDIVIDUALS LEARN TO BE INDEPENDENT ENTREPRENEURS

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides training and opportunities for qualified legally-blind individuals to become independent entrepreneurs, operating successful food service businesses, including delis, cafeterias, and espresso stands, in government buildings. Over five to six weeks of online training and hands-on experience, participants complete training in all facets of food service facility operation to become BEP Licensees. They can apply to be operators of program locations and the program will provide the essential food service equipment and provide ongoing guidance to the operator. The Licensee of each location is solely responsible for the success of the business.

In 2021 the BEP continues to be the hardest hit program at DSB due to the impact of pandemic. The predominant customer base for the enterprises located in federal, state and county

government buildings continued to work from home throughout 2021, and thus the businesses remained shuttered and the blind operators remained without any revenues for the year. The BEP Manager and staff have facilitated weekly and ongoing conversations with the operators on how to plan for moving forward with their businesses in a completely changed working environment, as well as providing emotional support to folks who have had a closed business for almost two years now. Staff have continued to assist vendors with finding and applying for grant money and relief funds.

The BEP used funds allocated in the 2021 WA State budget to examine the program as it currently exists, and developed a set of recommendations on how to overhaul the existing operations to make them more profitable for the operators. The current model of cafeterias in government office buildings no longer fits the current reality of fewer employees onsite in buildings, and the established trend for faster, healthier food options. Based on this report, and historical program data, the DSB has made a significant State budget ask over the next four years starting in 2022 in order to completely revamp every operator's business to a more sustainable model, and be able to raise their profit margins from 7% to 20%.

BEP statistics for 2021:

- Median BEP vendor income for 2021 was \$16,495
- 22 facilities combined had total gross sales of \$1,894,165
- Sales tax collected from all facilities was \$81,026
- Payroll tax from all facilities was \$47,921

[Business Enterprise Program website page](#)

LIVING INDEPENDENTLY WITH VISION LOSS

The Independent Living Program (IL) provides the skills, the tools, and the confidence individuals with recent vision loss need to live independently in their homes and communities. IL providers offer a wide range of services, including training, brief counseling, info and referrals, and supplying aids or devices. For most participants, the goal is simply to regain what was lost: the ability to call a friend on the telephone, heat up leftovers in the microwave, know what time it is to get to a doctor's appointment on time, use a magnifier to look at pictures of a loved one, or take a walk in the fresh air.

The IL Program serves clients 18 years old to over 100 years old. In 2021, IL served seven centenarians! Most of the participants are 55 or older and the average age is 84 years old. Most participants live in their home or apartment rather than in a nursing or assisted living setting, and request services in order to continue doing so.

IL applications have gone up 30% in the past year, which is nice to see after being closed for six months in 2020. Continuing to provide IL services remotely is still challenging, with social distancing it remains difficult as all devices are literally hands-on. The most popular Assistive Technology devices provided throughout the year were handheld magnifiers, address books, and writing guides. Over the past year the IL Program has been able to increase the number of higher tech devices available, such as phones, tablets, and digital magazines.

As 2021 came to a close, the program's IL service providers statewide served 694 clients. Overall, IL service delivery to underserved minority populations has increased; more outreach work is needed but the program is moving in the right direction. One initiative has been to create foreign language materials for easier outreach; another has been to develop a partnership with Washington Talking Book and Braille Library to more seamlessly deliver loaned technology devices to participants who need them. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of being able to live independently at home rather than transfer to a residential assisted living situation, and emphasized the critical value of the Independent Living services to the health and safety of Washington State elders.

A LETTER OF RECOGNITION FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF SERVICES FOR THE BLIND DIRECTOR

Dear Acting Commissioner Carol Dobak and Washington State Governor Jay Inslee,
Representing a broad spectrum of Washington citizens, the agency's State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B) has been critically important in our agency's adjustment to continued impacts of the pandemic, as well as proactively finding ways to improve the agency's provision of services.

What we had thought of as "unprecedented" challenges due to the pandemic in 2020 continued to follow us throughout 2021 – while not quite achieving a "precedented" status in 2021, the challenges of the pandemic did become more familiar. Agency response to the ever-changing pandemic situation was a daily consideration for the entirety of 2021, with a need to adjust in each moment to find the correct balance between individual safety of participants/staff/public and the effective provision of agency services.

The pandemic has impacted the vocational rehabilitation path and progress of a number of participants, with many reporting a decision to exit services early due to emerging needs to manage family issues, such as managing children's education from home or health needs of a family member, that arose because of the pandemic. Many exiting participants also reported a reluctance to engage outside their known and secure social bubble, which influenced decisions to delay job seeking. The number of applicants for DSB services has been uncharacteristically low this year, with a brief period of increasing numbers during summer months when vaccines became more widespread and before worrying variants of the coronavirus emerged.

The SRC-B membership has been helpful in assisting the agency in its decision-making in response to the pandemic. With the support of the SRC-B, the agency worked to identify which services were priority for in-person provision. Throughout the year, the agency supported the refinement of remote service provision, and was eventually able to re-instate in-person options for all agency services. While remote services are often effective, and while the agency will continue to utilize a hybrid model for implementing services remotely in instances where service provision is enhanced, most adaptive skills of blindness, counseling and career services are much improved when provided face-to-face.

After full compliance with a state-mandated vaccination effort among agency staff (which included SRC-B members), the agency re-opened its doors to the public in October, with reduced capacity and hybrid work-from-home arrangements as necessary. Residential students returned to the Orientation and Training Center apartments at reduced capacity in November. The first in-person services for youth was conducted in collaboration with the state's blindness consumer organizations at state conventions in October and November. There is a feeling of

regaining normalcy step by step by end of year, with a cautious eye towards adapting to new situations as they emerge.

The new chair leadership of the SRC-B this past year of Julie Brannon has continued to deepen lines of communication among the agency, SRC-B members, and the public. With the SRC-B leadership support, the agency held a community forum to gather perspective, input and creativity to improve DSB services. A similar community forum is planned for early 2022.

The SRC-B leadership has worked hard this year to identify and secure a full board, filling seats that had been vacant long-term. With the influx of new members, education has been an important aspect to assure all members have a baseline understanding of the agency and its work, and the SRC-B leadership has worked to meet the need. The agency has been eager and grateful to join in the on-going education efforts. The need for acculturation among the SRC-B mirrors a trend among the agency itself, where a wave of retirements this past year has brought many new excellent staff who also need to gain a baseline to the importance and uniqueness of working in a blind VR agency. With the SRC-B's support, DSB leadership is anticipating a focus in 2022 on reviewing and revising DSB cultural values to retain those values that make us an effective and customer-focused agency while opening room for our new staff to identify and develop new values.

There is a strong emphasis on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion among the state, as led by Governor Jay Inslee. The SRC-B has shown interest in the agency efforts, and has provided supports towards DSB's work in examining our own internal biases that may prevent the full inclusion and opportunity for historically oppressed communities, as well as DSB's work to champion disability as a key aspect of the DEI efforts among our partner state agencies and stakeholders.

The focus of the SRC-B, along with the successful outcomes achieved by our professional staff, contribute to Washington's economic and cultural vitality by emphasizing the skills and abilities of all its citizens - including those with disabilities.

Every day, Washingtonians with vision loss are going to work in competitive jobs, starting up their own businesses and employing others, keeping their current jobs by acquiring new skills and assistive technology, and living lives independently and fully engaged in community activities and civic responsibilities. These individuals have taken charge of their lives, can support their families, pay taxes, and contribute to the vitality of their communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to recognize the dedication and value of the SRC-B membership in their work to improve agency services and processes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M MacKillop', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Michael MacKillop
Washington State Department of Services for the Blind
Acting Executive Director