

# Washington

## State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

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**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, low vision or deaf blind. 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 2023: A LETTER FROM THE SRC-B CHAIR

Dear Rehabilitation Services Administration Commissioner Danté Allen, and Washington State Governor Jay Inslee,

I am pleased to present the 2023 Annual Report on behalf of the Washington State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC-B).

This completes my third and final 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 allows for connection via either computer or phone.

As with last year, our membership committee, chaired by SRC-B Vice-chair Linda Wilder, has been able to keep all but two position full, not an easy endeavor with some people completing their term in September, 2023.

Below is a list of continuing members, the persons leaving us, and the new members joining us, along with the positions they hold.

SRC-B Committees continue to be a strong working and functioning force within the SRC-B.

1. All current members are continuing in their current committee role; and all new members have been assigned to a committee.
2. The SRC-B Executive committee meets monthly; all other committees have agreed to make a commitment to meet quarterly between each SRC-B meeting with the exception of the policy committee which meets when policy needs are designated.

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.

CONTINUING MEMBERS

ANDY ARVIDSON REPRESENTING: BUSINESS, LABOR, AND INDUSTRY  
*Anacortes, WA*

CATHY WILSON REPRESENTING: BUSINESS, LABOR, AND INDUSTRY  
*Tacoma, WA*

CHRISTOPHER ZILAR REPRESENTING: SECTION 121 NATIVE AMERICANS  
*Spokane, WA*

JACOB KAMAUNU REPRESENTING: BUSINESS, LABOR, AND INDUSTRY (BEP OPERATOR)  
*Seattle, WA*

JENNIFER BEAN REPRESENTING: CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM  
*Bellingham, WA*

JULIE BRANNON, 2023 SRC-B CHAIR REPRESENTING: CURRENT OR FORMER RECIPIENT OF VR SERVICES  
*Puyallup, WA*

JULIE HARLOW REPRESENTING: BUSINESS, INDUSTRY, AND LABOR  
*Graham, WA*

KRIS COLCOCK REPRESENTING: CONSUMER ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION  
*Bainbridge Island, WA*

KRISTEN GEARY REPRESENTING: COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROGRAM SERVICE PROVIDER  
*Seattle, WA*

LARRY WATKINSON REPRESENTING: CURRENT OR FORMER RECIPIENT OF VR SERVICES  
*Olympia, WA*

MICHAEL MACKILLOP DSB EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (EX-OFFICIO MEMBER)  
*Seattle, WA*

REBEKAH 'BEK' MORAS WA STATE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL  
*Lacey, WA*

SARA LOGSTON BLIND, WITH MULTIPLE DISABILITIES  
*Vancouver, WA*

NEW MEMBERS

KARA THOMPSON REPRESENTING: CURRENT OR FORMER QUALIFIED VOCATIONAL  
REHABILITATION COUNSELOR (EX-OFFICIO MEMBER)  
*Tacoma, WA*

SHAWNDA HICKS REPRESENTING: PARENT INFORMATION AND TRAINING CENTER  
*Tacoma, WA*

EXITING MEMBERS

CHRIS ALEJANO REPRESENTING: STATE WORKFORCE INVESTMENT BOARD MEMBER  
*Seattle, WA*

JILL MCCORMICK REPRESENTING: PARENT INFORMATION AND TRAINING CENTER  
*Puyallup, WA*

LINDA WILDER, 2023 SRC-B VICE-CHAIR REPRESENTING: CURRENT OR FORMER QUALIFIED  
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELOR  
*Tacoma, WA*

SEAN MCCORMICK REPRESENTING: STATE EDUCATIONAL AGENCY  
*Vancouver, WA*

STAFF

MEREDITH STANNARD

DSB APPOINTED LIAISON

*Seattle, WA*

YVONNE VERBRAAK

SRC-B STAFF ASSISTANT

*Olympia, WA*

DRAFT

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

The SRC-B met four times during 2023. Meetings were held via the Zoom platform, with connection information advertised ahead of time to allow interested consumers to take part regardless of where they live throughout our state. In addition to special presentations and subcommittee updates, meetings consisted of a report from the DSB Executive Director about progress towards goals outlined in the state plan and a report from the SRC-B Chair about Council activities.

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 Washington State citizens who are blind, low vision or deaf blind.

Agenda items this year included:

- We said goodbye to 3 council members whose positions termed out in September of 2023; and have one of those positions filled, one position awaiting governor approval and one still open in regard to replacements.
- SRC-B Committees continue to be a strong working and functioning force within the SRC-B. We had full and functioning committees this year; new SRC-B members will be choosing their committee choices in early 2024.
- Elections for chair and vice-chair were held at the December SRC-B meeting: Andy Arvidson was elected chair by acclamation; and Kris Colcock was elected vice-chair by acclamation. Both will serve for one-year terms.
- DSB staff member reports for this year included:
  - Matt Hines, DSB Pre-ETS Manager
  - Lisa Wheeler, Assistant Director of Vocational Rehabilitation and Workforce
  - Kim Canaan, Independent Living Program Manager (with Sophie Watson, Independent Living Program Coordinator and Tricia Eyerly, Assistant Director)
- It was decided that at each meeting, at least one council member will give a report from the entity they represent, this year reports were given from:
  - Sean McCormick, representing State Educational Agencies
  - Kristin Geary, representing Community Rehab Program Service Providers
  - Kris Colcock, representing Consumer Advocacy Organizations
- At our December meeting, we had an hour presentation outlining the Combined Statewide Needs Assessment results provided by Kathe Matrone and Kelly Franklin from the Center for Continuing Education in Rehabilitation.
- The SRC-B gave input for the combined state plan in 2023. We revised the previous process, providing suggestions for category focus for DSB. The SRC-B executive committee spearheaded this process with input from all SRC-B members. Several explanations and topic areas for each area of focus was presented. The three categories of focus were as follows:
  - Too many DSB participants leaving without employment



- Training needed for new DSB staff
- Increase services to Deaf Blind participants
- An SRC-B training for new and current members was held on April 28th, with 17 people in attendance. The training was developed by an ad hoc committee consisting of SRC-B members.
- The SRC-B chair presented about the SRC-B for the DSB New Employee Orientation in February.
- An SRC-B member will be involved in meetings to provide input regarding DSB's website redesign project in 2024.

### COMMITTEE ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2023

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

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This committee provides overall leadership, vision, and guidance. It includes the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Chairs of the other standing committees. Responsibilities include working with DSB staff assigned to the Council; 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 monthly to discuss committee needs and functions. Also, members of the Executive committee met before quarterly meetings to develop the quarterly meeting agendas.

The Executive committee spearheaded a new approach which provided three focus areas for DSB to address for the state plan. The Executive committee held a meeting with all SRC-B members to get input regarding the initiatives and focus areas chosen.

The Executive committee and interested SRCB members did develop another SRC-B training event in April 2023.

#### MEMBERSHIP AND COLLABORATION COMMITTEE

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The Membership committee works to maintain a strong, active, and high-functioning Council. This includes member recruitment; member training and support; public relations and outreach.

The SRC is still at full capacity until the end of the year. The Membership committee is working to fill only one position, which is the Workforce Board. The SRC-B is happy to report we have maintained a diverse council with more than half of the members being blind or visually impaired. We also have members from several different cultures, other disabilities, and ethnic backgrounds.

#### POLICY AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

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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.

This committee did not meet this past year as there were no policies to review or establish.

#### CUSTOMER SATISFACTION COMMITTEE

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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. Surveys were completed online. Participants are encouraged to include written comments 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. Last year, the Customer Satisfaction survey showed overall satisfaction with services from DSB, with an average rating between satisfied and very satisfied.

Overall satisfaction: for 2023 was 83%; for 2022 was 76%; for 2021 was 86%

Training offered: for 2023 was 90%; for 2022 was 79%; for 2021 was 80%

Accuracy of staff: for 2023 was 90%; for 2022 was 89%; for 2021 was 89%

Respectfulness of staff: for 2023 was 87%; for 2022 was 76%; for 2021 was 91%

The minimum target for all satisfaction measures is 80%.

Over the last couple of years, DSB distributed two topic specific surveys to all DSB participants, capturing responses from individuals in various stages of the vocational rehabilitation (VR) process. These surveys resulted in abundant and useful feedback, compared to the results from the current Customer Satisfaction survey, which have a limited sample size of closed cases and low return rate.

Inspired by the supplemental DSB surveys, our committee spent this year focusing on recommendations to update the Customer Satisfaction Survey. We advocated the survey be

sent to more participants, include participants in various phases of the VR process, use updated questions, and provide a broader range of satisfaction scoring options.

Our committee worked with DSB leadership and DSB's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Program Manager to draft new questions, which were shared with and approved by SRC-B members. We recommended DSB work with Washington State University to facilitate the survey and provide improved analysis of the response data, including comment analysis. We anticipate this will provide results that are more reflective of the participant experience and highlight trends.

Overall, we expect the new format will help the SRC-B, and DSB staff and leadership better understand and work to improve customer satisfaction. DSB is moving forward with implementation and will continue to work with our committee to ensure survey results are shared in an accessible and useful format.

We are excited to share the new survey questions:

**Scaled questions:**

1. Overall, I'm satisfied with DSB.
2. My counselor understands how my disability affects me.
3. My counselor understands what's important to me.
4. \*My counselor understands my disability barriers to employment.
5. DSB moves quickly enough for me.
6. I am receiving the Assistive Technology (AT) services necessary for me to achieve my employment goal.
7. I am receiving the training services (O&M, Independent Living) necessary for me to achieve my employment goal.
8. DSB staff provides me with necessary information and training on work readiness, vocational training, and employment opportunities to achieve my employment goal.

**Five response options:**

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

**Comment questions:**

1. Overall feedback, comments, and recommendations about your DSB experience.
2. How has your experience with DSB changed and/or impacted your life pathway?
3. \*Follow up to question 4 above: What do you want DSB to know more about your disability barriers to employment? How can DSB better serve you?
4. If you exited the program before reaching an employment outcome, why?
5. What non-disability barriers have you experienced when accessing DSB services?
6. What can DSB do to remove and/or alleviate those barriers?

## DSB PROGRAMS MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN OUR COMMUNITY

### A NATIONWIDE EMPHASIS ON PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION

A national emphasis in the VR program is providing services to ensure a smooth transition for students with a disability 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:

- Job exploration counseling
- Work-based learning experiences, which may include in-school or after school opportunities, experiences outside of the traditional school setting, and/or internships
- Counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs
- Workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living
- Instruction in self-advocacy

In 2023 DSB was able to offer pre-employment transition programs and workshops in person as well as virtually. Some specific programs and workshops included:

- The Bridge Program is a five-week on campus residential summer program located at Eastern Washington University in Cheney, Washington. The goal of the Bridge Program is to allow students to explore a college preparation program through a curriculum that focuses on independence, self-advocacy, and social situations traditionally encountered in the college setting. In 2024 this program will expand to include an option to attend online workshops over eight months leading up to the campus experience at EWU.
- Youth Employment Solutions 1 (YES 1) is a program held at the Washington State School for the Blind in Vancouver, WA. Participants received instruction in the fundamental areas of job readiness including strategies for searching for jobs, preparing a resume and cover letter, gaining experience through filling out employment applications, participating in mock interviews, and taking inventory of various professions through small discussion and 1-on-1 interviews with professionals.
- Youth Employment Solutions 2 (YES 2) is a multi-week summer program held in Seattle, WA. It is focused on career exploration by providing experience, opportunity, career preparation, and paid internships for Washington's blind and visually impaired young people. In addition to the internships, participants spend their off-work hours experiencing residential living in the YES residence in Seattle. Students have many opportunities to practice self-advocacy through financial and life management skills learned during the program.

In 2023, DSB provided a variety of services to 368 students with a disability.

[Youth Services webpage](#)

## GETTING PEOPLE TO WORK AND HELPING THEM KEEP THEIR JOBS

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Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is for people interested in finding or maintaining employment. The comprehensive program considers the needs of each individual and provides quality services to participants rather than just placing people in jobs. The participant takes an 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 2023, 104 participants achieved successful employment outcomes with an average hourly wage of \$30.41. Sixty of these participants received job retention assistance in order to keep a job that was at risk due to their visual disability. Ten participants who got or kept a job are Honorably Discharged Veterans. Eighty participants now have all of their medical health insurance paid by their employers, as a result of employment through DSB services. Eighteen participants are no longer relying on Public Assistance as their primary source of income. The eldest participant was 83 and needed assistance retaining their position as a plumber. DSB assisted 83 participants with their higher education tuition.

A few examples of employers include Amazon, Apple, Boeing, Camp Fire USA, City of Kalispell Police Department, City of Richland, Clark College, Expeditors International, H&R Block, Heathman Lodge, Lucid Software Inc, Mirabeau Park Hotel, Ocean Beach School District, Olympic Medical Center, Pasco School District, Quality Food Centers (QFC), Salal Credit Union, Seattle Public Schools, Social Security Administration, University of Washington, WA State Department of Services for the Blind, WA State Department of Social and Health Services, WA State School for the Blind, Whatcom County Superior Court.

A sampling of DSB VR success stories:

- AT Specialist Donna Elkins in the Spokane office has been worked with a DSB participant and an employer in the mental health field to make the software used for recording sessions more accessible to the participant, while also remaining HIPAA compliant. This employer is hopeful to make this software more accessible not only for the participant but for future employees who may be blind/low vision as well.
- DSB Seattle had a previous participant come back to DSB to open a case. He has had two previous low vision evaluations. O&M Instructor Maureen Reggie asked him to bring in the equipment he had in the past so that she could evaluate them with his new glasses that he just got this week. After trying many things, she replaced one bulky item for

near vision acuity with a much more streamlined one. As he started to read, he began to cry. He said things have not been that clear in such a larger field in years. He was so grateful. It's always nice to have more current evaluations to make sure vision hasn't changed or if their tools are outdated. Maureen said that making him cry tears of joy is why she loves her job!

- Joy D., VRC in Lacey, shared that RB came to DSB in 2022 seeking job retention services after a sudden change in her vision. She was not supported by her previous employer to use assistive technology and ended up losing her job. Joy sent her the employment opportunity for an Administrative Assistant position with DSB in Lacey Headquarters. RB applied, interviewed, and accepted the job in March. She's shared that she's happy to be at DSB with the opportunity to spread the word about their services.

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

#### OTC GRADUATES ARE CONFIDENT, INDEPENDENT, AND SUCCESSFUL

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The Orientation and Training Center (OTC) at the DSB is primarily a residential and commuting 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 their homes, schools, jobs, and in their communities.

The OTC achieved the following successes during the past year:

- Served students that ranged in age from 18 to 83 years old.
- Offered several well attended Intensive Workshop weeks that included classes in Braille, Home Ec, Mobility, and Computers.
- Life in Action Days in 2023 included snowshoeing, rock-climbing, a self-directed visit to the WA State Fair, an excursion using the WA State Ferry System, and attending two job fairs among other activities.

- OTC students and staff attended a meet and greet session with Governor Jay Inslee, and were able to share their personal experience and success stories from their time at the OTC.
- Continued partnership with a local gym to provide fitness opportunities to the 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

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The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides training and opportunities for qualified 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 2023 the BEP continued to experience the lingering effects of the pandemic. A large percentage of the predominant customer base for the enterprises located in federal, state, and county government buildings continued to work from home throughout 2023. Based on a feasibility study completed earlier this year, it is clear that the BEP needs to explore additional vending opportunities and lessen the program's reliance on food service.

With the money allocated by the Legislature in 2022, the BEP Rebuild project put out for bid and has completed construction projects at two locations in Olympia on the Capitol Campus. The work has added space for Micro Market vending machines to be installed and completed a consolidation and upgrade of the kitchens. Food regulations and permitting have changed considerably over the past few years, and DSB was able to hire a chef consultant who has assisted with developing new menu items, writing food prep documentation, and food safety plans that are required before a facility can re-open.

BEP statistics for 2022:

- Median BEP vendor income for 2023 was \$39,457.64
- 22 facilities combined had total gross sales of \$3,498,061.41
- Sales tax collected from all facilities was \$413,046.94
- Payroll tax from all facilities was \$941,288.15

[Business Enterprise Program website page](#)

## LIVING INDEPENDENTLY WITH VISION LOSS

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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 2023, IL served five 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.

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 2023 came to a close, the program's IL service providers statewide served 802 clients. Overall, IL service delivery to underserved minority populations has increased and more outreach work is needed but the program is moving in the right direction. An initiative that was implemented last year to develop a partnership with Washington Talking Book and Braille Library to deliver loaned technology devices more seamlessly to participants who need them has been met with resounding success! The recent pandemic 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.

DSB had submitted and was granted a state budget request for additional IL funds to increase the number of clients served, vendor compensation, and number of vendors. The IL program runs on a small pool of funds received from the State Plan for Independent Living that has not been enough to serve all clients who've applied for services in the past couple of years, resulting in a wait list to be approved for services. Currently a small number of vendors serve large geographic areas, and clients in certain areas may have to wait several months until they can see an IL provider once they're approved for services. The increase in IL funds have allowed the IL program to increase vendor rates, add more travel costs compensation, and hire additional vendors in critical areas.



Sister Sandra's IL Success Story:

Sister Sandra is an 89-year-old legally blind woman in Eastern Washington with a positive outlook toward life. Bright and vivacious, she enjoys dancing, long walks, and playing pinochle and bingo with the other residents in her assisted living facility. Recent health complications spurred Sister Sandra to apply to the Independent Living Program, including a recent hip replacement. Her movement was limited, and she wanted to learn strategies to better connect with others and engage with hobbies in her residence.

With that, Sister Sandra's Independent Living (IL) provider worked to obtain assistive technology devices and training to improve Sandra's quality of life. The IL provider started by helping Sister Sandra navigate her iPad through Siri, compose emails, and make Facetime calls. This possibility excited Sister Sandra as she wanted the opportunity to widen her community while she was unable to travel long distances. At the same time, Sister Sandra's IL Provider requested a CCTV from the Independent Living Desktop Video Magnifier (CCTV) Lending Program ran in partnership with the Washington Talking Book and Braille Library. Previously, Sandra had often walked to her local library to use their publicly available CCTV. Since she began using her wheelchair, the journey to the library was too difficult. Sister Sandra was excited to have a CCTV to use at home, on her terms. With it, she could read her mail and newsletters, and even use her iPad by placing it in the CCTV's field of view.

By the end of services, Sister Sandra could successfully handle her own communication needs. She was so pleased that her world had widened. When asked about her experience with the Independent Living Program, Sister Sandra expressed that she was so grateful for the CCTV lent to her and that she uses it every day. More than that, Sister Sandra was thrilled that she could do so many new things independently and on her terms.

Jamie's IL Success Story:

Jamie is an athletic 32-year-old man who loves hiking, swimming, and long-distance running in his downtime. Diagnosed with optic nerve hypoplasia, Jamie is considered legally blind, and his vision has gradually declined over time. Jamie felt added anxiety about an upcoming move to Spokane with his long-term girlfriend. With a history of mood disorders, Jamie knows that he can become overwhelmed with significant changes and disruptions to routine. Having used Independent Living (IL) Blind Services before, Jamie reached out to the provider in his area in hopes that they could offer a helping hand while he adjusted to his new home.

Jamie told his IL provider that he wanted to take more responsibility in the kitchen to support his partner. He visited his IL provider's office, where they began working on strategies around peeling vegetables and safely using knives. While first feeling hesitant and uncomfortable when chopping vegetables and trying out several different blades, Jamie started to feel more

confident when using a non-serrated knife. From there, they progressed to cooking on the stovetop and oven. Jamie's IL provider showed him strategies to cook safely, like sweeping his arm over the stove top to check for any blockages and checking the temperature of a burner by holding his palm a safe distance above the pan. They also covered clean-up skills to ensure Jamie was able to prepare a meal from start to finish. The IL provider also showed him how to use apps like Be My Eyes and Seeing AI to identify ingredients and read instructions.

Combining these skills, Jamie and his IL provider were ready to tackle making a full meal of potatoes, eggs, and bacon. Jamie's partner loves breakfast foods, which motivated him to master the task of cooking for her. With practice, Jamie was able to prepare the meal on his own much to the delight of his girlfriend. They agreed that Jamie would begin preparing a meal for them at least once a week. These newly found cooking skills improved Jamie's confidence; he felt better prepared to handle tasks independently. At the end of their time together, Jamie was preparing for parenting classes for his future family.

#### Samantha's IL Success Story

Samantha, a 57-year-old woman in Snohomish County, was no stranger to Independent Living (IL) Blind Services when she reached out for help in July of 2023. Samantha was diagnosed with macular degeneration when she was 16 and has been steadily losing her vision. When Samantha originally signed up for IL Services in 2021, she had no remaining vision in her right eye and had difficulty reading with her left. At the time, she felt ready to start using a white cane in her day-to-day life and wanted help with developing orientation and mobility skills.

Together with her IL provider, they got Samantha the right cane and worked on getting her comfortable with the grip, walking in step, identifying traffic and crosswalks, and walking up and down steps safely. Over the same year, Samantha reached out to her IL provider a few times as new goals came up in her daily life. Her IL provider opened new, shorter cases to help Samantha tackle tasks like using a tablet as a magnifier to fill her insulin pump, managing her type one diabetes, and using accessibility features on her cellphone.

When Samantha found herself hospitalized due to diabetes complications in 2023, her IL provider was one of her first calls. Because of Samantha's changing vision, she had been unable to use her previous magnifier to correctly fill her insulin pump, count her carbs, or read her glucose levels. When her IL provider brought a new handheld magnifier with greater magnification to her hospital room, Samantha could once again manage her glucose levels independently. This allowed her to be discharged from the hospital and return home. Despite any changes that occur in Samantha's life, she knows that she can rely on Independent Living Blind Services to be there for support.

## A LETTER OF REFLECTION FROM THE DIRECTOR OF

Dear Rehabilitation Services Administration Commissioner Danté Allen and Washington State Governor Jay Inslee,

As we come to the close of 2023, it is a privilege to reflect on the accomplishments achieved at the Washington State Department of Services for the Blind (DSB), and to also commend the agency's State Rehabilitation Council and their impact on the agency's efforts to improve the services we offer to the Washington State public.

This past year has been marked by notable achievements and persistent challenges, demonstrating the resilience and commitment of our internal teams and external partners. We sought and received direct – if at times difficult – feedback from the community, RSA partners and the SRC-B throughout this past year. We are refining and evolving our processes to ensure we provide customer-focused, individualized, meaningful and effective services that support an individual who is blind, Deaf Blind or has low vision to get, keep or promote in a job within their chosen career field.

The Department of Services team has navigated through many complexities posed by the long-lasting effects of the recent pandemic. We are not striving for a return to normalcy but instead we are attempting to maximize this unique opportunity to revise, revamp and improve the way we provide services to and for the Washington State public.

We successfully implemented a new intake process that drastically reduced customer time from referral to eligibility. Over 75% of all applicants now have the intake process completed at the time of their call, and are scheduled for eligibility determination within two weeks of that initial call. Further process changes are scheduled for 2024 to expedite the planning process and to get DSB customers more rapidly into meaningful and effective services. We are also looking at how to shift work tasks, so DSB team members are better able to incorporate more frequent and meaningful interactions that adapt to changes in the individual's vocational path as they gain new skills, and keep the individual focused and consistent on their career path.

To meet the needs of WIOA's dual customer tenets and the need to infuse an individual's career pathway with contemporary labor market, recruitment, and business-driven training program opportunities, we have identified the need to expand our Business Relations program. To manage high numbers of new staff, we have assessed a need to expand internal onboarding and internal training methods. A 2024 planned expansion of staffing has been made possible through negotiating an increased percentage of the State VR grant money and a one-time funds transfer of \$3 million among our general VR partner, DVR. This is indicative of our commitment to securing resources that directly benefit our internal team capacity and, by extension, more effective services for our agency customers.

The acquisition of state funding to overhaul the BEP existing sites has allowed us to completely overhaul two BEP facilities on the Capitol Campus into more modern food service options that meet the needs of the State employees in the vicinity, and increase the likelihood of profitability for the BEP vendors who operate the sites. Other facilities are slated for similar overhauls and modernizing food service operations to meet a smaller footprint of customers who have higher expectations for convenience and

quality. A research study was completed that lays out a plan for expansion of micro-markets across the state in sites where the number of potential customers would not sustain operations in the historical model.

Another achievement lies in the successful recruitment of State Rehabilitation Council members, a testament to the dedicated efforts of our team, particularly led by Linda Wilder during her tenure as the chair of the Membership Committee. To have all SRC seats filled with active and engaged stakeholders offering a broad spectrum of perspectives has been useful for the agency in its work to improve our processes and ensure we provide the best customer experience.

We acknowledge that our journey in 2023 has not been without challenges.

Staffing shortages and the difficulties in hiring replacements following retirements, have posed obstacles. Since 2020, over 75% of the agency staff is either new to the agency or in a new role within the agency. The change in the makeup of our team members provides an opportunity to reimagine how we provide our services, and also creates a deep need to address on-boarding and on-going staff training. From customer feedback, a vacancy or change in staff is one of the most disruptive experiences to the customer feeling successful in making progress to their goals.


The State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind has rightly highlighted the agency's need to enhance participant outcomes. Shifting our focus to ensure that a majority of our participants exit with employment is a goal we ardently pursue. Improving the clarity and alignment of our VR process in outreach and throughout our on-going customer interactions; boosting job readiness; and addressing gaps in services to the Deaf Blind community remain paramount.

As we reflect on the highs and lows of the past year, we are energized to face the challenges ahead. The commitment of our team, the support of our partners, and the resilience of our participants inspire us to continue our pursuit of excellence.

In the coming year, we aspire to build on our successes, address our challenges head-on, and strive for greater inclusivity and effectiveness. I express huge gratitude to each internal agency team member and external community partner who has helped the agency move forward in its path towards providing the highest quality, effective services possible, and heartfelt appreciation to each individual customer of the agency who has taken the courageous step in seeking services – individuals who have done the hard work to gain skills and confidence towards their career goals, and businesses that are seeking to create workplaces of belonging for individuals with visual disabilities.

I anticipate the work of 2023 will show big impact in the effectiveness of our services in 2024.

Gratefully,



Michael MacKillop, Executive Director