

2014 Annual Report

Vermont State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Introduction:

The SRC has had a very productive year. Again the past year has seen excellent collaboration between all services for the blind and visually impaired. Three highlights that stand out are the Town Hall Meetings, development of the Employment Guide, and a new cafeteria for the Randolph Shepherd Program.

- The SRC Council felt that the Town Hall Meeting results were very important as it brought us closer to the consumers and their needs.
- The Randolph Shepherd Program has resulted in helping to expand job opportunities for Vermont's blind and visually impaired.
- The Employment Guide, designed by the DBVI staff and Council to explain the DBVI "products" offered to consumers was completed.

Election of officers:

Chair: Robert Lanoue

Vice-chair: Harriet Hall,

Executive Committee Members- at-Large: Donna Stratton and Patty Shane.

Committee assignments:

Membership: Tom Frank

Outreach: Peggy Howard

Policies and Procedures: Kerry White

Committee activities:

Membership: Pam Schirner has been approved for membership.

Outreach: Represented the blind and visually impaired on Vermont Disability Day and participated throughout the state on White Cane Awareness Day. The Employment Guide to explain the products of DBVI was completed and is now being used throughout the state.

Policy and Procedure: The policy and procedure document has been reviewed and small changes have been made. It has been approved by the Council.

Reports:

VABVI:

- Children's Services is working with students to implement On-line testing.
- Met with DBVI Counselors to collaborate on transitional services and eligibility.
- Held a successful Tech Fair with many excellent vendors.
- Announced that "White Cane Awareness" Day was successful throughout the state.

VT Special Services Library:

- Started recordings for talking books with local volunteers.
- Demonstration on downloading availability by using a new cartridge cable.

- Working with the VABVI to start book clubs throughout the state with 12-14 members per club.
- A new currency reader is available to Vermont consumers through the library
- Theresa Faust has accepted another position in Ocala Florida and Jennifer Hart will be joining the council to represent the library.

DBVI:

- Openings were announced and filled for two positions in DBVI. Jean Palmer was hired as Counselor and Taya Tarr was hired as a Rehabilitation Associate in Burlington.
- The council reviewed questions on the annual needs assessment survey.
- The updated three-year plan was shared with the Council.
- The Council was informed of the 2015 Rehabilitation Administrative Services review of the state plan.
- Four regional town hall meetings and the results of a closure and a customer satisfaction survey were reviewed by the Council. Goals and strategies of the three year plan are being revised based on these results. The updated three-year plan is shared with the Council.
- A meeting was held with the Agency of Education to discuss transition of students with disabilities with implementation of independent living skills being introduced into the curriculum to be included in the IEP.
- A second café, sponsored by the Randolph Shepherd Program will be opening at the Court House in Burlington.
- An all-day staff-SRC workshop was held based on Steven Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Successful People" and was run by Jennifer Cohen.
- The Perkins School for the Blind presented a program on software accessibility and user-friendly data bases to VABVI and DBVI staff.
- The DBVI staff will have a workshop and discussion on various eye conditions by Darick Wright from the Perkins School for the Blind...
- It was announced that 15% of the DBVI budget is going toward student transition or independent living.

SRC Chair:

- Attended an AHS meeting on housing.
- Arranged for the Vermont Council for the Blind to use the DBVI web site for announcements.
- Served on the interview committee for hiring the new DBVI Counselor and a Rehabilitation Associate.
- Attended an informational session and later the launch of a new curriculum called "INCLUDE"

for all students to learn about disabilities.

- Attended all four town meetings throughout the state.

Working together:

The SRC and DBVI staff participated in a one-day training to learn about the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People authored by Stephen Covey. This training was designed to help the SRC and staff learn important habits that will be used during the year as we work together to evaluate performance data and update goals, strategies, and actions. The workshop teaches some specific techniques for evaluating information, planning, and carrying out a plan. It also contains specific tools for working together to discuss issues by including a variety of perspectives to create solutions that are collaborative.

Submitted by Robert Lanoue, Chairperson,
Vermont State Rehabilitation Council for the VT Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Mission and Philosophy

The Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) provides and oversees specialized services for people who are visually impaired using a rehabilitation model that starts when the person experiences vision loss. DBVI offers an array of services specifically designed for people who have lost visual function and independence.

DBVI's mission is to support the efforts of Vermonters who are blind or visually impaired to achieve or sustain their economic independence, self-reliance, and social integration to a level consistent with their interests, abilities and informed choices. Those who participate in DBVI services learn skills and become high achieving successful community members. Given appropriate adaptive skills training, and assistive technology instruction, many limitations due to blindness can be overcome. Quality of life, dignity, and full integration are the focus of DBVI.

DBVI practices a rehabilitation model that takes a holistic approach to working with the individual at the time of vision loss. The process begins with the individual and the DBVI counselor working together to develop an individualized plan aimed at helping him or her to achieve the highest level of independence and employment as possible. The rehabilitative process focuses on helping the individual to learn new adaptive skills that allow them to regain independence and self-confidence after the severe trauma of vision loss. DBVI services help people reestablish control and ability to complete independent living tasks that are usually taken for granted, such as preparing breakfast, getting dressed and navigating familiar and unfamiliar areas at work and in the community.

Organizational Structure and Staffing

DBVI services are provided by highly qualified professionals who possess specialized training and understanding of the implications of visual loss. Services are provided from four regional field offices in Montpelier, Burlington, Springfield, and Rutland where rehabilitation counselors and Rehabilitation Associates are responsible for ensuring that timely and appropriate services are delivered to people with vision loss. One rehabilitation technology trainer covers the entire state, teaching people how to use assistive technology such as screen readers and screen enlargement computer software. The director of DBVI is located in the Department's central office in Williston.

Programs and Services

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

The goal of DBVI's vocational rehabilitation services is to help people with vision loss to retain, return, or secure employment. Each individual meets with a DBVI counselor to identify goals and develop a plan to reduce the limitations that result from a vision loss. There were 70 people who met their employment goals in FFY 2013 and 74 in FFY 2014. Some of the services provided in DBVI's vocational rehabilitation programs include:

- Counseling and guidance
- Assessment of skills, interests, and abilities
- Transition services for students
- Assistive technology equipment, evaluation and training
- Low vision services
- Orientation and mobility services (Learning to use a white cane)
- Rehabilitation training
- Career exploration
- Vocational training
- Assistance with post-secondary education
- Job-seeking skills
- Employer assistance
- Small business development
- Job placement services
- Coordination of services and access to programs

Transition Services

DBVI transition services provide high school students with opportunities for learning independent living and job skills. DBVI collaborates with several partners including the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI), Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, ReSource, and the Gibney Family Foundation.

One specific transition program called LEAP (Learn, Earn, and Prosper) provides paid summer employment for youth in a residential setting. This program empowers students to take charge of their employment future by gaining early employment success that can be carried into future employment pursuits. The goal is for all graduates to enter college, obtain further training, or join the world of work. A new addition to the summer work experience is the requirement for students to secure internships in

their local community. The goal of the internships is to make connections in the local community where jobs will eventually develop and to expand a summer experience into year-long career exploration. LEAP has completed its seventh successful year.

Independent Living Services

For those people for whom employment is not a feasible goal, but whose independence is challenged by vision loss, DBVI provides assistance in maintaining independence. The DBVI Rehabilitation Associate will meet with an individual in his or her own home to discuss the individual’s goals and develop a plan for services to achieve the highest possible degree of independence. Plans may address activities such as traveling independently, preparing meals, and identifying medications. Once the individualized plan is developed, services are provided through a grant agreement with Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI) which receives both federal and state funds from DAIL to provide services to adults over the age of 55 with visual impairments. Direct services include orientation and mobility, low vision training, and rehabilitation teaching.

Performance:

- ***826 adults with a visual impairment served in FFY2013***
- ***847 adults with a visual impairment served in FFY2014***

Technology

Maximizing the power of assistive technology is critical to people with vision loss. DBVI invests significant effort in staying current about new assistive technology, which will revolutionize employment access and eliminate other barriers caused by vision loss. Assistive technology plays a critical role in allowing an individual with a visual impairment to be connected with society, continue employment, and pursue a tremendous range of careers in mainstream society.

Performance Measures

Employment Rate: Of all individuals who exit the DBVI program after receiving services, the percentage who are determined to have achieved an employment outcome.

	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>National Standard</i>
Employment Rate	71%	75%	77%	80%	79%	67.11%

Wages: Of all individuals determined to have achieved an employment outcome, the percentage who exited the DBVI program with earnings equivalent to at least the minimum wage.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	National Standard
% Above Minimum Wage	65%	67%	73%	70%	67%	35.4%)

Customer Satisfaction:

	2003 Market Decisions Survey (Formal)	2011 Market Decisions Survey (Formal)	2013 Closure Survey (Ongoing Informal)	2014 Closure Survey (Ongoing Informal)	2014 Market Decisions Survey (Formal)
Overall Satisfaction with services received	93%	92%			Available February 2015
Services provided met expectations	93%	90%			--
Staff were helpful to achieve vocational goals	98%	95%			--
DBVI delivered services well for me			92%	91%	
I did get the results I wanted from DBVI			93%	89%	

Story Behind the Curve

DBVI's primary indicators show a strong rehabilitation rate for people who are blind or visually impaired. While these results are above the national average in all areas, DBVI's objective is to help all customers reach their employment goals. For this reason, our SFY2015 research agenda includes an analysis to determine why some individuals did not obtain employment. We do know that the main reasons an individual did not obtain employment were the individual moved or was no longer interested in employment services due to severe health challenges.

DBVI also expects to help individuals get the best paying job possible. We realize that many individuals decide to develop their own small business,

which meets their lifestyle needs, but may not have a strong income return in the beginning. Our research agenda also includes a look at what types of professions are choosing and the incomes they are earning.

Vision loss causes a sharp initial decrease in independence and ability to do regular tasks previously done with normal vision. The DBVI program provides the opportunity for people to learn new adaptive skills to overcome functional limitations due to vision loss. For many people, the rehabilitation process takes months or years to learn new adaptive skills related to vision loss and to become ready for a job. Informal closure surveys show the top two services that help 'turn the curve' in building skills are Low Vision and Assistive Technology equipment and instruction. After individuals learn skills and use adaptive equipment, they can resume many activities and function more independently in the community and at work. Over 90% of DBVI customers surveyed at closure identified their attainment of new adaptive skills as the most important factor in their success. Customers share many examples of how their new skills have helped them adapt to vision loss, maintain employment, and improve their quality of life. They are better off because they can now:

- Obtain their employment goals.
- Access printed material with the use of assistive technology.
- Travel independently on the job and in the community with the use of the white cane.
- Use special magnification and lighting to access information on the job and at home.

Quotes include:

- "The best thing that happened to me while working with DBVI was that I got a CCTV to help me with my written material that I need to access for my job. I also learned how to use magnifiers as well."
- "I learned how to use a laptop and screen magnification to help me access information I need. It is great to have this new skill. "
- "Without the DBVI assistance with surgery I would have lost my vision and my job."
- "I learned to use assistive technology that allowed me the freedom to continue to run my business."
- "The technology has made an incredible difference in my life. Without it I am not sure what I would have done. It took a ton of stress off me."

- “I learned how to do a proper resume, how to interview well, and I did many informational interviews that helped me to increase my skills even further.”
- “I learned how to adapt and adjust to being a newly blind person. I can’t begin to tell you how valuable this experience was for me.”
- “Most important of all, I learned how to accept my disability by learning to adapt to it and give in to it rather than fight it and stay severely depressed. I now can live a fuller life because of this skill.”
- “I have learned how to use a CCTV and a portable hand held CCTV to read paperwork, do my bills, and such. I have learned many new ways to get things done.”
- “I learned many useful skills around the area of assistive technology that literally helped me to continue to work at the level I needed to do in my job. Without these new skills I could not have functioned in my position.”

The closure surveys also show that 92% of customers rated DBVI services highly, including the following:

- Staff are easy to contact.
- Services are timely.
- Services are useful.
- Services are easy to access.

Partners

DBVI considers the people we serve as partners. This year we conducted Town Meeting events in each of our 4 regions. The goal was to hear the “Voice of the Customer” about the results they expect from our program. A series of questions were designed to help us identify improvements and new strategies to help people obtain employment and improve their independence.

We also work closely with the State Rehabilitation Council, appointed by the Governor. The Council partners with us to evaluate data and to develop goals and strategies.

DBVI is encouraged that our partnership with the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired is helping customers to build the adaptive skills they need on the job and in the community. We are also encouraged that progressive employment strategies and our partnership with the Vermont Association for Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation is helping

DBVI to partner effectively with businesses to provide opportunities for blind or visually impaired workers to demonstrate their abilities in the workplace.

The DBVI partnership with the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps is helping students and young adults build the skills they need in the workplace. VYCC helps DBVI run a summer youth employment program that provides the opportunity for students to learn employment skills and Independent Living Skills. These early employment experiences help build the confidence needed to succeed in college, in vocational training, and in the workplace.

What Works

DBVI's customer satisfaction is a strength. These ratings consistently exceed 90% each year. Staff are described as responsive, easy to reach, and helping people meet their goals. Comments at each of the 4 Town Meetings acknowledged that DBVI staff and services "gave them hope."

Individuals who experience vision loss need to learn new adaptive skills, and DBVI strategies are designed to help people build these skills. In most situations, assistive technology is the key to opening the door for employment. Specialized software and hardware are often needed to access print, and specialized skills (including the use of specialized magnification and lighting) are needed to use the technology successfully. The combination of technology and the skills to use the technology helps individuals return to their jobs and community activities.

Our customers have used work experiences as a way to show employers that they can do the job. Many employers cannot conceive of how a blind person can do a particular job, until they learn that some simple low cost accommodations make it possible. This is also a great opportunity for people to build employment skills and to learn about jobs they like or don't like.

DBVI also makes a strong commitment to help individuals succeed in post-secondary and vocational training programs. These degrees and certificates usually lead to better paying jobs.

For students, DBVI's process involves strong communication with a team including the student, families, school staff, and teachers of people with

visually impairments. Each DBVI counselor guides students and teams to develop specific action steps depending on the path they will take toward either more training or directly into work. Our role is to help students make a smooth individual transition into the world of work.

Action Plan

DBVI staff and the State Rehabilitation Council are reviewing the 2014 Town Meeting results and other performance data and will revise goals and strategies for the period July 2015 - June 2018.

Our research agenda includes looking closely at data about customers who did not achieve employment in FFY 2014. Staff will be investigating what new strategies might be needed for those who were not successful. This may include strategies to educate employers about the skills these individuals can bring to the workplace. It also may involve finding new strategies to help individuals build the specific skills that are needed by employers.

DBVI has a commitment to customer-centered culture that continues to guide staff in making continuous improvements: listening to the voice of our customers, using this information along with performance measures to improve our current products and develop new ones. The new plan with new goals and strategies will be complete by July 2015.