

Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Summary of SRC Involvement--Submitted by Harriet hall, SRC Chair

FFY 2018 was an exciting and productive year for the work done in partnership with the SRC and DBVI. The SRC met in-person every other month and held executive meetings on the alternate months. The entire SRC and DBVI staff met for an all-day combined meeting in June.

The SRC began the year in October 2017 by reviewing the new WIOA Performance Measures. The SRC learned how the new AWARE case management program will capture most of these data to meet the new reporting requirements. The DBVI AWARE system went "live" in September 2017. We also reviewed upcoming goals for the year including plans for the Town Meeting event and statewide consumer satisfaction survey.

In December the SRC meeting included a review and revision of DBVI Goals and Strategies. The membership had many ideas about connecting with partners including the Department of Labor and the Agency of Education. Ideas included continuation of DBVI initiated work experiences with employers. Current results include many individuals bridging from a work experience to employment. Other people learn new skills for their resume. It is also a great way to educate employers about the abilities and assistive technology used by people who are blind. There was also a strong recommendation to collaborate with the DOL work experience and on-the-job training programs. DBVI was also encouraged to find employers who are interested in job carving opportunities where a person can bring their strengths to the employer. The Agency of Education representative also offered many tools available to staff about personalized learning plans and graduation requirements. The Chair of the Policy Committee also updated the SRC about WIOA related DBVI policy revisions that are in process. The meeting ended with a recommendation to have fewer strategies and keep them focused on the key goals.

In February 2018 the SRC dedicated the meeting to updating the goals and strategies based on the Town Meetings, Statewide Consumer Survey, and the CSNA. The meeting began with a review of the WIOA performance measures. Then the SRC discussed each of the 14 DBVI current strategies. After a detailed discussion about each of the strategies the group made a list of top priorities.

Some highlights from the strategy discussion include ideas about a comprehensive outreach strategy. The SRC believes that DBVI should make efforts to inform key organizations about the services that are available. This includes outreach to businesses, minority groups, and DOL partner programs. They also had ideas about ways to share DBVI planning resources by using some of the channels at AOE like the WIKI Transition page. This resource is well used by school staff and is a good way to share information with LEAs.

In addition to outreach and sharing information the SRC supports DEVI's ongoing efforts to create consumer-driven events and opportunities. The next event will be planned with consumer input and will be held in the fall. A new initiative is to create a listserv that connect clients to share ways they are using technology. There was also

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interest in creating podcasts that highlight some key technologies and examples of how people use technology to accomplish tasks at work or for independence.

There was an in-depth conversation about the best strategies to connect with the workforce system and American Job Centers and all DOL partners. The intent of the group is that there should be concrete steps and a plan to connect DBVI consumers to these programs and to have a referral process that keeps all partners involved rather than a hand-off to another organization.

One topic that is part of every CSNA is transportation. The SRC is very interested in a new initiative at the VT Department of Transportation that connects travelers with all the resources and potential rides in each area. This is in beta form and is being designed for accessibility. It was decided to invite VTRANS to the SRC meeting in April to discuss the tool.

The meeting ended with a discussion about identifying the top strategies. They include:

- Partnering with all DOL—Implement a plan for staying connected.
- Pre-Employment Transition—Share the DBVI tools that can be used for student transition planning.
- Outreach—Implement a comprehensive plan that includes businesses, eye doctors, and other human service organizations.
- Technology—Create a listserv to connect DBVI consumers and the blind community.

In March 2018, with SRC approval, and public hearings DBVI submitted the Program Section of the Vermont Unified State Plan.

In April 2018, the SRC meeting included a guest speaker from the Vermont Transportation Department. A Transportation Consultant from VT-Trans presented about several new programs recently launched on the “Go Vermont” website. This includes details about a new web-based trip planning website that allows travelers to enter their starting location and destination into a search engine. They then receive results with all the transportation options including fixed routes and on-demand services. There are also several new ride sharing vans and car pool options that can be accessed through the web portal or by calling a toll-free number to get information. They can assist with matching to find car and van pool options as well as fixed routes and para-transit.

In June 2018 the SRC held a combined meeting with the full SRC and the DBVI staff. The meeting began with a presentation from DBVI staff with a review of recent SRC and DBVI projects that involved the Voice of the Customer. An example shared by DBVI staff was the Employment Guide that was created to create clear expectations for consumers about the Vocational Rehabilitation process and the focus on employment. Many drafts of the Employment Guide were shared with consumers and the SRC to understand and incorporate the Voice of the Customer in the final design. DBVI also reviewed a similar process that was used to create the outreach banners that feature DBVI consumers at their worksites. This agenda topic ended with a preview of the new initiative for using career assessments to help individuals better understand their career interests and

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strengths. A DBVI team will be working on this throughout the year and they will plan to involve consumers and the SRC for feedback as the process is developed.

The next topic was a discussion about creating a Public Service Announcement. Both organizations believe that this will help to get the word out about how DBVI can help people of all ages reach their employment goals. The idea is to have blind or visually impaired individuals share a some of their success story with the intent of letting the public know about these services. We want to make sure that everyone knows that DBVI services can help people reach their employment and independence goals. We then discussed the importance of strong collaboration wit the Department of Labor. We want to make sure that DBVI consumers have opportunities for internships and job training through DOL.

The SRC looks forward to the upcoming year where DBVI participants are “Better Off” with improved circumstances and services are delivered well.

Respectfully Submitted,
Harriet Hall, SRC Chair

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Division Philosophy

DBVI assists individuals who are blind or visually impaired to meet their employment and independence goals. DBVI uses a holistic rehabilitation approach that helps people to meet their goals, build new skills, and improve their circumstances. The goal is for all participants to achieve or sustain economic independence, self-reliance, and social integration consistent with their interests, abilities, and informed choices.

Division Overview

DBVI helps working age individuals achieve economic independence by obtaining livable wage jobs and income. This involves training to improve employment skills and higher education that leads to degrees or certificates. DBVI helps transition high school students from school to the world of work. DBVI's statewide approach for younger students helps to ensure that all blind and visually impaired high school students have pre-employment transition skills. DBVI also helps individuals of all ages to build adaptive skills related to their visual impairment through assistive technology, low vision, orientation and mobility, and independent living skills.

Staff and Partners

DBVI services are provided by highly qualified professionals who possess specialized training and understanding of the implications of visual loss. Services are provided by ten staff from regional field offices in Montpelier, Burlington, Springfield, and Rutland. Each office has a rehabilitation counselor and a rehabilitation associate who deliver individualized services. One rehabilitation technology trainer covers the entire state teaching people how to use assistive technology. The Director of DBVI oversees the statewide program.

DBVI partners with several organizations to accomplish our mission. The major provider of direct instruction for teaching blindness-related skills is the non-profit Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI). Their staff include certified blindness professionals who are highly trained in the areas of Orientation and Mobility, Low Vision, and Rehabilitation Therapy. For other DBVI partners please visit www.dbvi.vermont.gov

Recent Developments and Accomplishments

This year DBVI organized several events around the state to educate the public about White Cane Safety Awareness. The white cane is a symbol of strength and independence, used by people who are blind as they travel independently. Members of the public received training in safe travel techniques from an Orientation and Mobility Instructor, increasing awareness of what it is like to travel with the white cane. The main events were held in Barre, Burlington, Springfield, and Castleton University. Each included a walk guided by an Orientation and Mobility Specialist to demonstrate proper use of the white cane and safe travel techniques. These events are great opportunities to educate the public and to have meaningful discussions about how blind and visually impaired individuals travel within their communities independently.

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DBVI has an ongoing commitment to facilitate consumer-driven events. This year the theme of the Great Expectations Conference was “Resiliency.” The planning committee was mainly comprised of individuals who are blind or visually impaired. They chose resiliency because it is essential to bounce back after vision loss. The workshop was designed to give participants “Hope” by learning from others and exploring strategies that work for achieving independence and career goals. Several individuals shared their stories and explained the adaptive training and assistive technology that have helped them achieve their goals. The overall message was to keep working towards your goals even when it seems tough. Many practical strategies were shared by consumers and DBVI staff. This event occurs annually and DBVI consumers will identify the next steps and theme for next year.

In addition to consumer-driven events, DBVI created partnerships with workforce service providers to create opportunities for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. These partnerships make it possible to expand opportunities for individuals we serve:

- Working with the Vermont Department of Labor staff to make recommendations for universal design and accessibility of DOL programs. This included recommendations for specialized equipment that will allow DOL participants with disabilities to access printed information in an accessible format.
- Collaborating with DOL to access programs that will assist individuals to participate in employment and training opportunities.
- Participating and assisting with the Voc Rehab Vermont Transition Core Teams Conference. This event brought together Transition Core Teams from around the state to share ideas about how to assist students with disabilities with their employment goals.

DBVI also has a commitment to ongoing training of staff to deliver services well. This year two DBVI staff completed their master’s degree as Blind Services Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors. They learned the latest techniques and strategies to help individuals explore and find a great career match.

Future Directions

DBVI believes the best path forward includes a solid foundation in technology. Relevant new technologies emerge every day, and our staff stay current to determine the solutions that help our customers achieve their employment and independence goals. Several new products have emerged recently. For example, an app called the KNFB-Reader allows people to have access to print documents. The user simply takes a picture of the paper document with the camera in the phone and the app converts it for speech output. This also works for electronic documents that are in an inaccessible format. The app can use optical character recognition to convert the document to a format that can be accessed by speech output. This technology provides access to information and makes it possible to accomplish tasks independently. DBVI staff will stay current and maintain a strong foundation in new innovations.

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In addition to exciting new door-opening technology, DBVI realizes the importance of helping clients learn more about their own interests and strengths for employment. DBVI recently established a workgroup called the Investigation Empowerment Improvement Team. The purpose of this group is to provide DBVI consumers with increased opportunities for self-knowledge through assessment tools. This initiative will help participants to:

- Learn about interests, skills, and abilities for future career direction;
- Increase knowledge of Visual Impairment;
- Identify adaptive skills training that will decrease functional limitations;
- Increase self-knowledge;
- Provide information for consumer career decision making; and
- Identify transferrable skills.

The team will evaluate the assessment tools and use the ones that are accessible and provide meaningful information for individuals who are blind. DBVI believes that gaining self-knowledge will assist individuals as they pursue their employment goals.

Programs and Services

Vision Rehabilitation Employment Services

The goal of DBVI's vocational rehabilitation services is to help people with vision loss to retain, return, or secure employment. Individuals meet with a DBVI counselor to identify goals and develop a plan to improve their functional independence.

DBVI counselors provide guidance related to employment and help people explore interests and abilities. On their individual path to employment, most people who work with DBVI:

- Build and strengthen vocational skills
- Learn new adaptive skills to remain independent regardless of vision loss
- Learn to use specialized technology needed to do their jobs
- Receive services to maximize visual function
- Help with a job search and provide training in job skills
- Assist with attending college
- Provide technology and training that allow people to access printed materials and complete work tasks

DBVI is exceptionally proud of the accomplishments of our customers. To read some success stories of our customers and their experiences with DBVI, visit our website: www.dbvi.vermont.gov.

Services for High School Students

DBVI's 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 (DVR), VABVI, ReSOURCE, and the Gibney Family Foundation. DBVI is also working with partners to make sure

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that all blind or visually impaired high school students are building solid pre-employment skills.

The LEAP (Learn, Earn, and Prosper) program provides paid summer employment for youth in a residential setting. LEAP empowers students to take charge of their employment future by gaining early employment success, and helps students make a successful transition from school to work.

Independent Living Services

DBVI helps individuals maintain independence. A DBVI rehabilitation associate meets an individual in his or her own home to discuss the individual's goals and develop a plan to achieve the highest possible degree of independence in activities such as traveling, preparing meals, and managing medications. Direct instruction is provided by certified blindness professionals through a grant agreement with the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI). VABVI also administers the Older Blind Program to provide specialized vision rehabilitation services, serving 862 individuals over the age of 55 in FFY 2018.

Technology

Effective use of assistive technology is critical for many people with vision loss. DBVI invests significant effort to stay current in new assistive technology to help people with employment, participate in their communities, and eliminate other barriers caused by vision loss.

Results

Performance Measures

How many people we serve (FFY 2018):

- 259 individuals received services to assist them to maintain or find employment as a result of their vision loss.

How well we serve them:

Customer Satisfaction: Results of a statewide random survey of all participants in the DBVI Vocational Vision Rehabilitation program in 2017 (conducted by Market Decisions—next statewide survey scheduled for 2020).

- 93% of respondents said they are satisfied with the DBVI vocational rehabilitation program.
- 93% of respondents said overall, they are better off as a result of the services they received from DBVI.
- 95% of respondents said that DBVI staff treated them with dignity and respect.

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- 94% of respondents said that DBVI helped them achieve their vocational rehabilitation goals,
- 92% of respondents said that DBVI services met their expectations.
- 89% of respondents said that DBVI vocational rehabilitation services helped them become more independent.
- 84% of respondents said that DBVI helped them reach their job goals.

Our approach in assisting individuals who are blind or visually impaired on their path to employment and independence begins with the belief that each person can achieve their goals. We know that the “voice of the customer” is important and our strategies are geared to meeting those needs. Each staff member is committed to delivering services well and to making a difference in the lives of the people we serve.

How are people better off:

- 48 blind or visually impaired individuals closed their DBVI case in SFY 2018 with successful employment.
- 59% had a wage above 125% of the minimum wage.

In annual closure surveys DBVI participants shared examples of how their new skills have helped them adapt to vision loss, maintain employment, and improve their quality of life. They reported being better off because they can now:

- Obtain their employment goals
- Access printed material with the use of specialized blindness 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

WIOA requires DBVI to use 15% of the federal grant award to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). This new federal requirement created an opportunity for DBVI to expand Pre-ETS services in the core areas:

- Job exploration counseling
- Work based learning opportunities
- Counselling on post-secondary educational opportunities
- Workplace readiness training
- Instruction in self-advocacy

DBVI has been very successful in expanding Pre-ETS services for students who are blind or visually impaired by providing work-experiences, internships, and job

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readiness training to build skills necessary for career development. Learn, Earn, and Prosper (LEAP) is a program developed by DBVI to achieve these goals. Most students participate by living and working in the Burlington area in the summer. Other students participate to build job readiness skills during school year retreat and work experiences in their local communities. Our efforts to include more students led to a higher increase in the number of participants than the number of training hours:

- The number of participants increased from 18 in 2014 to 82 in 2018.
- The number of work-based learning and job readiness training hours increased from 15,000 in 2014 to 23,000 in 2018.

The LEAP summer work experiences and school year retreats have resulted in significant skill gains for students developing employment and independent living skills that are essential for future employment. Each student receives a report of their progress which is shared with school teams, teachers of the visually impaired, and DBVI counselors. Students learn to identify their strengths and areas of vocational interest. They also learn specific job readiness skills including: respect in the workplace, assistive technology, transportation strategies, workplace relationships, personal finance, interview practice, building a strong resume, networking, and more.

Students also received specialized services necessary to develop adaptive skills related to their blindness including Orientation and Mobility (O&M), Vision Rehabilitation Therapy, and Instruction in Assistive Technology. This resulted in a significant positive impact in their mobility skills in the community and at the work site. LEAP students received over 200 hours of O&M Instruction this summer.

DBVI has also successfully expanded our services overall to youth. The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services has grown from 17% of people served in SFY 2014 to 29% of people served in SFY 2018.

Providing real work-based learning experiences in actual employment settings is one of the most effective ways to prepare youth for long term success. Therefore, DBVI has invested more resources in providing real-world internship opportunities. Internship placements at Vermont businesses include: The Sarah Holbrook Center, The Flynn Theatre, Sangha Yoga Studio, ReSOURCE, The Burlington Free Press, The Farm at VYCC, Burlington City Arts, The ReStore, Salvation Farms, Habitat for Humanity, Maple Wind Farm, King St. Youth Center, Mt. Mansfield Media, and more.

- In 2018, 80% of the interns had enrolled in college programs, and the remaining 20% were working with their DBVI counselors to match their skills to a career path.
- A DBVI intern at the Burlington Free Press stated:

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“Without LEAP, I wouldn’t have been able to have this experience. I am more prepared for my dream. Someday, I hope you will be listening to my words and reading what I’ve written – about sports, news or anything else that matters to people here in Vermont.” This student is now enrolled in college and studying broadcasting in Vermont.

DBVI staff work towards continuous improvement by listening to the voice of customers and using that information and data to improve performance. An updated DBVI State Plan with new goals and strategies was completed and approved by the State Rehabilitation Council in December 2017 and can be found at <https://dbvi.vermont.gov/resources/publications>. Please also visit the success story link on the DBVI website at www.dbvi.vermont.gov to see real examples of people reaching their goals.