

Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB)

2015 ANNUAL REPORT

**Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services**



Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

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MCB Mission Statement

The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) provides the highest quality rehabilitation and social services to approximately 27,000 individuals in the Commonwealth who are legally blind, leading to independence and full community participation. MCB accomplishes this critical mission by working in partnership with consumers, families, community agencies, health care providers and employers.

If you have any questions regarding MCB services, this report, or if you would like to receive the report electronically, please call 617-626-7583 or email Officeofthecommissioner@state.ma.us
Please include your name, telephone number and town of residence.



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Dear Friends,

On behalf of everyone at MCB, I am pleased to provide you with this first in decades' Annual Report for 2015. Here at MCB, our entire staff works tirelessly to help maximize the productive independence of our consumers. This report contains a brief overview of the range of critical services we provide, highlights agency accomplishments during the last year and features several of our remarkable consumers.

In an effort to increase awareness of MCB's services, we are sharing this report with our consumers, their families, non-profit providers, medical vision professionals, and key stakeholders. We are hopeful that this information will increase compliance amongst ophthalmologists and optometrists in their critical role of declaring eligible consumers determined to be legally blind.

There is a rich history of blindness services in Massachusetts, perhaps more so than any other state. Founded 110 years ago, MCB is the nation's oldest independent blindness agency, with Helen Keller serving as one of the original commissioners. Massachusetts can also boast of being home to many prominent blindness non-profits, each with deep histories and missions strategic to MCB.

A key ongoing MCB initiative is furthering collaboration amongst all of our collective partners. I look forward to future annual reports celebrating innovative collaborative accomplishments benefitting those who are legally blind. I hope you enjoy reading this report, and I thank you for your continued support of our agency. Please help us further our mission by letting others know of the services MCB provides.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "PAS".

Paul Saner,
Commissioner

Program Summary

MCB served approximately 16,000 consumers in 2015. This includes receiving services and case management under MCB's two principal programs: Vocational Rehabilitation and Social Rehabilitation. Additionally, consumers can access other unique services.

- Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services assist older students and adults to prepare for, achieve, retain or regain employment. The VR program is federally funded with a State match.
- Social Rehabilitation (SR) services assist in the adjustment to blindness and support maximum personal independence and living in community. SR services are targeted to children 0-13, seniors and anyone not served by VR. The SR program is State funded.
- Unique services include: issuance of Certificates of Blindness and MCB Blind Identification cards, referrals for other benefits such as the MBTA Blind Access CharlieCard, and Disabled Parking Placard/Plate for a vehicle.



Helen Keller, one of the first advocates for the establishment of MCB. Keller also served as one of the agency's first commissioners.

Services Summary

Central Registry

MCB's Central Registry was established in 1906 under the same statute that also created the Commission which requires that MCB keep a registry of individuals in the Commonwealth who are legally blind. The Registry staff provides necessary documentation such as certificates of blindness, agency issued ID cards and information on other benefits available to registered consumers. The certificate of blindness is essential for purposes such as real estate tax rebates and excise tax exemptions.

Assistive Technology

The Assistive Technology (AT) program provides critical computer and adaptive equipment training to consumers to gain/retain employment. Provided primarily to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) consumers, AT services include deployment and training on usage of devices such as screen readers that turn regular computers into talking personal computers. Assistive and mainstream technology has leveled the informational playing field for many legally blind consumers.

Orientation & Mobility

Orientation and Mobility training allows consumers to navigate within their homes, workplace and community. Instruction begins with an assessment of the individual's travel needs, motivation, visual and physical abilities. In addition to the long white cane, MCB provides a support cane for assistance in detecting inclines and obstacles in pathways. Falls prevention training is provided to the growing elderly blind population.

Rehabilitation Teaching

MCB's Rehabilitation Teaching services prepare individuals who are blind to perform daily living skills safely and independently in any environment. Specialized teaching services include training in activities of daily living such

as cooking, kitchen organization, safety and appliance use and self-care (grooming, clothing organization and care).

Children Services

These are services for children from birth to 13 years and include case management, information and referral, funding for afterschool socialization and recreation programs as well as other specialized services such as advocacy and technical assistance around Individualized Education Plans (IEP).

Blind Reintegration for Independence, Development and Growth for Elders (BRIDGE)

The BRIDGE program provides independent living services to elders aged 55 and older who are legally blind, including a statewide peer support group network. Each June, the BRIDGE program co-sponsors, along with the Massachusetts Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired, a well-attended Senior Connection conference.

Deaf Blind Extended Supports (DBES)

Historically referred to as the Deaf Blind and Multi handicapped unit, staff elected to change the name to Deaf Blind Extended Supports unit to accurately reflect the services provided. DBES provides residential and community services to consumers who are deaf blind as well as individuals who are legally blind with other severe disabilities, and along with the Department of Developmental Services, provide services to consumers who are legally blind and have cognitive challenges. In addition, MCB contracts with Deaf, Inc. to provide the Deaf Blind Community Access Network program that makes available community access to Deaf/Blind individuals.

Randolph-Sheppard Vending Facilities Program

Operating under the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act with VR funding, the program prepares individuals who are legally blind for a career in

concession management. There are approximately 30 vending stands operating across the Commonwealth. The newest stand opened in 2015 at 600 Washington Street in Boston. The agency also commissioned an evaluation of the vending program by a national expert in 2015. The Commissioner, with the active participation of the elected State Blind Vendors Committee, is working on a shared future vision followed by implementation of the recommendations.



Alan Lau, MCB consumer and Vending Facilities operator.

Talking Information Center (TIC)

MCB Continues to sponsor the Commonwealth's radio reading service through TIC, where sighted volunteer readers provide access to local and national newspapers, magazines, books, and community news.

2015 Key Accomplishments

Innovative Programming

- MCB's Summer Internship program is nationally recognized as a model that supports high school, college, post-graduate and non-traditional students who are legally blind to acquire work experience. In 2015, the program had the highest number of participants in its 12-year history with a total of 93 interns. Distinguished speakers included Executive Office of Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders as well as Undersecretary Alice Moore. Consumers Bill Henderson, retired Principal of Boston's Henderson School of Inclusion, and Kim Charlson, Director of the Perkins Library and President of the American Council of the Blind, were featured speakers at the opening and closing internship ceremonies. The internship program has produced more than 500 internships in collaboration with 283 business partners. More than half of the former interns who have graduated from school have achieved employment, with an 88% job retention rate.
- MCB became the first agency for the blind to sponsor Project SEARCH, a successful national 9-month program that provides internship experiences for consumers who are disabled. Our business partners that host the interns are the Cambridge Hospital/Cambridge Health Alliance and Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, with job support and development provided by the Carroll Center for the Blind and The Polus Center for Social and Economic Development.
- MCB convened a 2-day Cortical Visual Impairment Symposium with the Perkins School for the Blind to learn more about this condition, which is a leading cause of blindness in children. More than 80 MCB case workers, special educators and medical practitioners attended.

The symposium led to clarification of MCB's registration policy for those who are functionally blind. We invite you to view the symposium presentations and handouts at <http://www.perkinselearning.org/cvi-symposium-may-28-29-2015>.

- Funded by a grant provided for the Institute for Community Inclusion, MCB successfully contracted with Partners for Youth with Disabilities in 2015 to implement a statewide mentoring program, matching younger vocational rehabilitation MCB consumers with older MCB consumers who have employment experience. This program focuses on career exploration, personal adjustment, and independent living to help maximize employment outcomes.
- MCB successfully launched the Rehabilitation Teaching group training model in collaboration with the Lowell Association for the Blind. The Fundamental Independent Skills Training program enables consumers to learn various skills in a group setting over a period of time to enhance independence both in their homes and communities.
- MCB completed iPad training for Rehabilitation Teachers to in turn provide community-based group iPad trainings to seniors who are legally blind and own iPads. Based on a survey conducted for MCB by the Massachusetts Council on Aging, Plymouth, MA and Amesbury, MA were chosen as pilot locations.
- MCB along with the Carroll Center for the Blind and the Perkins School for the Blind are founding members of the Perkins Business Partnership. The partnership is an alliance with Boston area businesses. This collaboration holds great promise to break down barriers to employment and expand job opportunities for individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

- MCB launched a series of Commissioner Listening Sessions around the Commonwealth. The listening sessions, planned through March 2016, seek to solicit consumer, provider and community perspectives, as well as allow for input and feedback on other topics of importance.

Active Collaboration

- MCB engaged in significant outreach and collaboration with special educators and teachers of the visually impaired (TVIs) throughout 2015. MCB's Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner spoke with many groups of TVIs, including those employed by the Carroll Center, Perkins, as well as members of the Association of Massachusetts Educators of Students with Visual Impairment. TVIs were provided Release Forms allowing MCB caseworkers to participate in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. MCB also sent transition letters to families of consumers turning ages 14, 17, and 21. In addition, a survey was emailed to TVIs looking for input into programming for transition-age students.
- MCB completed a data share with both the Department of Developmental Services and the Perkins Braille & Talking Book Library. The data share enables MCB and these partners to identify mutual consumers for purposes of better service planning and delivery.
- MCB was selected to join an intensive technical assistance project through the Institute of Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, referred to as the Job-Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center on Employer Relations and Supports. MCB will be collaborating on this project with non-profit partners: the Perkins School for the Blind and the Carroll Center for the Blind.

Operational Efficiencies

- MCB set the groundwork for agency implementation of a new federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) legislation, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). This job-driven legislation has brought changes to the VR program, promoting employment activities. WIOA has special provisions around Pre-Employment Transition Services. As a result, group-training transition service initiatives are underway for students with a disability, ages 14-21, who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan.
- MCB completed a service evaluation project for all of the agency's specialized services including Central Registry, Deaf Blind Community Access Network, Orientation & Mobility, Rehabilitation Teaching, Assistive Technology and the Internship Program. The evaluations have resulted in recommendations that have informed a more efficient and effective service delivery. A consumer Client Management System manual and Rehabilitation Teaching curriculum were also developed this year.
- At the request of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MCB reestablished the Braille Literacy Advisory Council, which provided advice to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education about the implementation of Unified English Braille and produced an advisory policy on assistive technology for home-use by students.

Memorandums of Understanding (MOU)

- MCB entered into a first ever MOU with the Department of Developmental Services for better coordination of services of mutual consumers.
- After more than 30 years, MCB entered into a new MOU with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for better coordination of services for kids with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 Plans through transition age. Children's social workers were instrumental in discussions around a new IEP format and the Common Core Curriculum and its impact on students who are legally blind.
- MCB entered into a MOU with the Massachusetts Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired. The MOU gives senior consumers who are visually impaired access to enhanced medically-reimbursable in-home services from specially trained occupational therapists.



Precious Perez practices her white cane skills.

Consumer Highlights

Carla Burke (Senior Assistive Technology Training)



After moving to Cape Cod in 1999, Carla Burke, who had previously enjoyed working in child care, needed to rethink her goals because her vision had deteriorated from Retinitis Pigmentosa.

MCB sponsored Carla to attend the Carroll Center for the Blind to receive technology training. She became involved in volunteer work, joining the Board of Directors of Sight Loss Services, a non-profit agency on the Cape, and the Harwich Disability Rights Committee. In 2003, she volunteered to develop a program at the Brooks Free Library in Harwich called Vision Impaired Technology Assistance at the Library (VITAL). Soon thereafter, she was hired as the Assistive Technology Coordinator at the library due to her unique skill set.

During the past twelve years, Carla has coordinated the VITAL program, which pairs volunteer tutors with visually impaired consumers. The program teaches consumers how to use a wide range of assistive technology. Her passion as an advocate and proficiency in assistive technology make her a crucial resource to her community on the Cape.

Bruce Howell (MCB Mentoring Program)



In 2015, the MCB mentoring program held a Mentor Appreciation Night honoring Bruce Howell who received a “Mentor of the Year Award.” Bruce is employed as the Accessibility Service Coordinator for the Carroll Center and also serves as Chair of MCB’s Rehabilitation Council. Bruce’s

mentee, Tyler Terrasi, presented the award to his mentor. Tyler is employed as a Customer Request Processor at the Metro West Regional Transportation Authority and credits Bruce with helping him prepare for employment. Among other mentoring activities with Bruce, Tyler visited the Carroll Center for a day of job shadowing with Bruce and other employees who are visually impaired, to learn more about how they perform their jobs non-visually.

David Morrison (Senior Assistive Technology User)

Photo credit: MABVI



David is a 70-year-old senior from Greater Boston who was first registered with MCB in 1998. David is a great example of someone who used a combination of skills and assistive technology to continue

working in his chosen profession following his legal blindness diagnosis. He embraced learning the accessibility features on Apple products, such as the iPad and iPhone. He was able to use hand magnifiers, Closed Circuit Televisions (CCTVs) and recorders supplied by MCB to work an additional 10 years in the printing industry after his diagnosis.

In August 2014, he served on a panel, at the MAB Community Services Annual Meeting, moderated by MCB Commissioner Paul Saner. "An App a Day Keeps the Doctor Away" panelists discussed how visually impaired seniors are increasingly using high-tech strategies to compensate for vision loss and to promote healthy aging.

Mani Iyer (Deaf-Blind Extended Supports Unit)



Mani was born and raised in Bombay, India. At age 4, his teacher personally visited his home to inform them that Mani had difficulty hearing in the classroom. His parents had not noticed this because the family spoke loudly for the benefit of his

sister who had Usher Syndrome. Ushers is often consistent among families. By age 12, Mani experienced night blindness and became dependent on using sighted guide during evening hours. He managed to lip read all the way through graduate school at the University of Bombay where he earned a Master's Degree in Computer Science. Mani has worked at Oracle and Mathworks as a senior software engineer and team leader.

Mani and his family moved to Boston in 1994 after living in New Jersey. He became registered with the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) and received orientation and mobility services. In 2013, he won a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts for a one-month poetry residency at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, VT. It is the first time the school had a person attend with Deaf-blindness. In July 2014, he was selected as one of the winners at the 24th Americans with Disabilities Act Anniversary Poetry Slam Competition.

Isabella Cherin (Children's Services)



Isabella, an MCB children's services consumer, embraced the opportunity to visit MCB to learn about its programs and services, meet with MCB staff, and interact with employees who are visually impaired

and blind to learn about their careers. Isabella is legally blind as a result of Ocular Albinism and Nystagmus.

During her visit, Isabella attended a braille class, toured MCB's recording studio, received her MCB ID card, and met with Commissioner Saner. She was particularly interested in braille and assistive technology. She has spoken to members of the Lion's Club about her blindness and the equipment she uses in school to complete her work (iPad and CCTV).

Luis Soto (Project SEARCH)



Before beginning Project SEARCH in April, Luis knew he had to find a job. He wasn't sure just what he was looking for, but knew Project SEARCH would help him accomplish this goal. Since becoming a part of the program, Luis has not only gained a job as a per diem front desk staff associate at Somerville

Hospital, but has gained a plethora of experience in workplace dynamics, communication, and co-worker relations. Luis has established a positive relationship with nearly every staff member and patient who enters the hospital. When Luis was assigned to the front desk at Cambridge Hospital as his first internship, he was reluctant. Since becoming a part of Project Search, Luis' improved confidence radiates throughout all walks of his life. Luis stated, "My experience with Project SEARCH helped me realize that I can do things I had thought were impossible."

If you would like to receive this report electronically, please email us at: Officeofthecommissioner@state.ma.us.