THE QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE

Your journey from high school to college and beyond starts today. Discover new skills, tools and superpowers that allow you to bravely face new challenges and overcome obstacles.
Dear Pre-ETS Community:

Thank you for your interest in Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) provided by the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB).

An essential part of our mission at MCB is to promote independence and self-determination for the people we serve. We have developed this graphic novel featuring characters inspired by blind and visually impaired individuals with the hope of improving employment outcomes for our community.

Our goal is to increase our engagement with young adults between 14-22 years of age, along with their families and friends. Massachusetts is one of the oldest agencies dedicated to servicing the blind community, with Helen Keller as one of the original commissioners. We hope this graphic novel will serve as a guide for Pre-ETS Best Practices, as you take the important steps in your journey towards a fulfilling career and independent life. Just like our characters Alex and Sophia, we want your story to grow and evolve with you.

We have an agency full of colleagues who are dedicated to serving you and our mission. Collectively, they represent our story’s hero, MC-B. While we don’t pretend that MCB or MC-B have all the answers, many of us, including myself, have learned from experience that having support and access to services during your formative years can be life-changing.
MCB is here to serve you, your families and our Commonwealth. We work with children, youth, adults, and seniors who are all at different stages in their career journeys.

We celebrate your quest for independence and hope to support you in any way possible.

Thank you for joining us on this adventure.

Sincerely,

David D’Arcangelo
Commissioner
Our teens, Alex (18 and fully blind) and Sophia (14 with low vision) are arriving at a community center to meet with a counselor from MCB.

Hey! How’s it going. I’m Sophia.

Hey. I’m Alex.
So, I don’t want to be rude, but can I ask when you went blind? I mean can you see anything?

Yeah, I was born that way. What’s your story?

I can still see a bit, but it’s getting worse. My doctor says I have to be “declared legally blind”.

I know.... I won’t ever be able to drive or anything like that.

Like what now? I just want to be like other kids...
Hey folks! I'm Mr. Preetz. I'm a counselor with Massachusetts Commission for the Blind - we call it MCB for short.

Just give me a minute - I'll be right with you. I need to grab something.
LOOK, I GET IT. YOU’RE UPSET ABOUT BEING DECLARED LEGALLY BLIND. IT’S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD. IT DOESN’T CHANGE WHO YOU ARE, IT’S NOT YOUR FULL IDENTITY.

EASY FOR YOU TO SAY - HOW DO YOU KNOW?

WELL, I ALSO HAVE LOW VISION. I’VE TURNED WHAT SOME PEOPLE CALL A DISABILITY INTO MY SUPERPOWERS.

MCB HAS MANY PROGRAMS THAT HELP US. BUT FIRST, YOU HAVE TO BE REGISTERED - AND THEN THE DOORS START TO OPEN.
I know how you feel. Let’s not focus on what we can’t do, there are all kinds of things we can do.
So, let's explore!

And since mindreading is not one of my superpowers, you need to be an active participant and tell me what you're thinking.

So, let’s explore!
OH, AND SINCE YOU CAME TO SEE ME, I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU! TAKE THESE KEY RINGS TO REMIND YOU THAT I’M HERE TO HELP. FOR EVERY ACTIVITY YOU ACHIEVE ALONG THE WAY, YOU’LL GET MORE TOKENS!

WOW! COOL - THANKS!
Let’s start with how you figure out what’s possible. At this point you can just try a lot of different things.

But how can we do that? I have no idea what I’m going to be!

This is the perfect time to think about what you like doing. That will help you decide what you study or where you might get a job.
For example, I love the guitar, and when I was a kid, I thought I'd be a rock star in a band. But I was a terrible guitar player and was never going to be a star.

But I got an after-school job in a guitar store. We realized that even though I was blind, my hearing was awesome and that helped me be the best and coolest guitar tuner.
It’s not just about what you like to do – it’s the combo of what you like to do and what you are good at that will lead to your success.

So, let’s explore using one of our online tools.

By the way, learning about assistive technology will be a huge asset for you - one of your superpowers. Like in this case, you can use a screen reader to help you.

Sophia, what do you like?

I really love animals.

Okay, let’s see what comes up for animals...

Search

Animals

Location: Massachusetts
It looks like there’s all kinds of things you could do – from caring for animals to animal training.

Animals

- Animal Trainer
- Animal Care Worker
- Veterinary Assistant

That’s cool, it would be fun to work with animals.

Great, let’s find out what we can come up with.
Hey Virtual Assistant! What animal shelters are near here?

Yes, I found two shelters near here. Do you want their names or addresses?

Let’s write this down in your plan and then later on you can talk to your mom. Then you call them and see what they have for volunteer opportunities - after school or weekends. That would give you some wonderful experience.

Call animal shelters with mom

You’ll run into a lot of people along the way who will be able to help you make connections. Don’t be shy about building new relationships every chance you get.
I am on a first robotics team at school and am one of the outreach leads. I enjoy helping the new students coming in. I think they look up to me because of what I’ve been able to do as a blind guy.

Have you thought about becoming a counselor or a teacher?

Well, maybe... do you have any ideas?

How about if I introduce you to a friend of mine who just became a science teacher? She’s someone you could talk to about what courses you need or even what college you might want to check out.
NEW THINGS - EXPLORE YOUR OPTIONS
WORK BASED LEARNING

IT’S ONE WEEK LATER: SOPHIA’S MOM COMES TO THE FIRST PART OF THE MEETING, SOPHIA HAS DECIDED TO TRY TO VOLUNTEER AT THE ANIMAL SHELTER.

GREAT NEWS SOPHIA! THE ANIMAL SHELTER JOB COULD BE REALLY FUN! IT’S WONDERFUL YOUR MOM IS JOINING US - LET’S GET TO WORK ON THE APPLICATION.

OK, WHAT SHOULD WE PUT FOR EXPERIENCE? SOPHIA HASN’T HAD A JOB YET.

ARE THERE ANY OTHER THINGS WE COULD MENTION?
HOW ABOUT DOG WALKING AND PET SITTING FOR THE NEIGHBORS?

YES! THAT’S PERFECT TO SHOW THAT YOU HAVE RELATED EXPERIENCE.

LOOKS LIKE THINGS ARE GOING WELL! I’LL BE BACK LATER TO PICK YOU UP.

BYE MOM - HI ALEX!
LET’S GET THIS WRAPPED UP. LATER WE CAN CONDUCT A MOCK INTERVIEW.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

I’LL PRETEND TO BE THE MANAGER AT THE SHELTER AND I’LL ASK SOME INTERVIEW QUESTIONS. YOU CAN PRACTICE WHAT YOU WOULD SAY AT THE INTERVIEW TO HELP YOU PREPARE.

WHAT IF I GET THE JOB AND THEN FIND OUT I’M NOT GOOD AT IT OR I DON’T LIKE IT?

I’M SURE YOU WILL BE GOOD AT IT, BUT IF YOU DON’T LIKE IT, THAT’S OKAY. YOUR FIRST JOB IS NOT GOING TO BE YOUR LAST JOB – IT’S THE EXPERIENCE THAT’S IMPORTANT. YOU’LL PROBABLY TRY A LOT OF DIFFERENT THINGS.

OK, I’LL TRY.
Hey Alex! How’d the meeting go with my friend the science teacher?

GREAT, she was cool. I found out she has a teaching assistant in her class now - and it’s a paying job, even for a student.

Do you think I could be a TA once I’m in college?
Of course! Let’s make sure your resume is up to date and includes your AP science and the first robotics work you told me about.

Your friend said I could come back and shadow her TA for a few days to learn more about what the job is like. Do you think that would be a good idea?

Yes, that’s a great idea Alex. Both you and Sophia have a chance to explore things you like and build your experience without making any big commitments.

It’s about trying things out to help you learn about different jobs. Remember, it’s all part of the journey.
It’s one month later – Alex and Sophia are back in a meeting with MCB in the same room.

Welcome back folks. How have things been going?

I had a couple of interviews at the animal shelters. I was bummed I didn’t get chosen for the first one, but the second one worked out. I volunteer on Saturdays.

How’s that going?

I do a lot of different things with the animals and I get to help people adopt their pets and I even got to hold a hedgehog! The people are great and I’m learning a lot. I love it!
How about you, Alex?

As you suggested I’ve started making a list of schools and even went on a virtual tour of one.

That’s great! Working with the staff, the public and the animals helps build lots of different superpowers, from confidence to determination to compassion.

Who knows? Maybe you’ll become a veterinary technician, which is a vocational program.

We can help you get ready for that if you decide that’s what you want to do after high school. We’ve got a few more years to figure it out.
That’s great. Let’s work together to get your admission applications completed.

And let’s arrange some video calls with alumni from these schools so you can talk about their experience.
That’s cool. But you know, I’ve been kind of worried about going to college. We don’t have a lot of money and I know tuition is expensive. Plus, I need a new laptop.

Yeah, my parents both work and they don’t have a lot of time to drive me to school if it’s far away.
Well, there’s great news on all that. The MCB program can help with tuition, textbooks, assistive technology and more.

We’re even here to help you get ready to live independently if that’s what it takes.

• Tuition
• Textbooks
• Assistive technology
• And more…

Really?!! MCB does all of that for us?
YOU BET! NO MATTER WHAT PATH YOU TAKE – HIGH SCHOOL, COLLEGE, VOCATIONAL SCHOOL, OR WHAT JOB YOU END UP IN, YOU CAN TRUST THAT MCB IS WITH YOU ALL THE WAY.
It might seem like building your career is a long way off and we know things are going to change along the way, but the more you do now to get ready - the better.

Let’s talk about some of the things to keep track of in your plan. If you don’t write them down you will forget. Trust me, you’re going to need it down the road.

- Contact info for supervisors
- New skills
- New responsibilities
- Letters of recommendation
SOPHIA, IS THERE ANYTHING YOU DID WHILE VOLUNTEERING THAT WOULD BE GOOD TO PUT IN YOUR PLAN?

IT WAS REALLY BUSY. THE PROBLEM IS, LOTS OF TIMES I HAD TO STOP WHAT I WAS DOING TO HELP WITH SOMETHING ELSE. IT WAS A BIT STRESSFUL, BUT I FIGURED OUT HOW TO GO BACK AND FORTH AND NOT LET IT BOTHER ME.

THAT’S GREAT - LET’S MAKE SURE WE ADD TIME-MANAGEMENT TO YOUR RESUME.

WHAT ABOUT YOU ALEX?

THINGS ARE GOING REALLY GREAT; THE TEACHER SAYS I REALLY HELP THE STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPTS - THAT I HAVE ‘PATIENCE, UNDERSTANDING AND INTELLECT’.

ALEX, THAT IS GREAT! YOU SHOULD ASK HER FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION. START SAVING THESE LETTERS TO USE IF YOU NEED A REFERENCE IN THE FUTURE.
PLANNING FOR A FUTURE JOB ISN’T JUST ABOUT EXPERIENCES AND RESUMES. YOU NEED TO DEVELOP SOME SOFT SKILLS.

WELL, IT’S EVERYTHING FROM HOW YOU PRESENT YOURSELF, YOUR BODY LANGUAGE, YOUR TONE OF VOICE AND HOW YOU INTERACT WITH PEOPLE. SOMETIMES YOU NEED TO PRACTICE TO GET IT RIGHT.

HUH? WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS?

• SHOW UP ON TIME
• LISTEN CAREFULLY
• PREPARE AND PRACTICE FOR COMMON QUESTIONS
• DRESS APPROPRIATELY
• LEARN HOW TO GREET PEOPLE

HERE’S SOME EXAMPLES OF SOFT SKILLS THAT RELATE TO JOB INTERVIEWS...
By the way, I learned about dressing appropriately the hard way!

I went to an interview thinking I was looking really good, but when I got home, my mom pointed out a huge stain on my vest. I was so embarrassed. I learned that I need to have someone look me over before I go to a meeting.

There’s lots to think about, but it gets easier as you go along. All our MCB counselors are here to help you get interviews, practice and prepare.

The point is, we’ve got your backs.

The answer is not always going to be yes. You will face adversity; you will scrape your knees along the way. Be patient and persistent. Develop resilience. Every interaction is a chance to build your network and your skills.
It’s one week later. MC-B and Alex are waiting for Sophia to arrive.

Sorry, I’m late – I had to go to the Eye Doctor.

Oh, no problem. Nice new glasses!

Yeah, my vision is getting worse to the point where I can’t wear my contacts anymore. I’ve had to switch to these, but at least they are kind of cool.
I LIKE HOW YOU PUT A POSITIVE SPIN ON IT. THAT’S A NICE LEAD INTO OUR NEXT TOPIC – HOW TO TALK ABOUT YOUR ABILITIES BUT NOT DENY YOUR DISABILITIES. HOW TO SHOWCASE YOUR SUPERPOWERS.

SOPHIA - WHAT’S ONE OF YOUR SUPERPOWERS?

WELL, I DON’T THINK I HAVE A SUPERPOWER...

I THINK YOU DO. I REMEMBER YOU’RE REALLY GOOD AT CALMING PETS AND THEIR OWNERS. I BET THAT WORKS AT HOME WHEN YOUR LITTLE BROTHER IS UPSET TOO.

YEAH, I GUESS....
So, that means one of your superpowers is empathy. You are sensitive to other people and you can help them feel better.

This is a way to get comfortable talking about your abilities. Think about what you do well and how that makes you unique.

I’m starting to understand.

I’ve already been working on this a bit in my college applications. One of the things that has helped me is to look back in my journal for things I was good at and stuff I liked.

Wonderful. All those notes you took will come in handy as you write your own story. Don’t be shy to talk about your accomplishments.
Let me share another story from my past. I was interviewing for a job and when they found out I was blind they thought I wouldn’t be a fit. They said I would have trouble getting to meetings. Well, I had to tell them, I’ve been learning how to travel independently and get around with my cane since I was a little kid. I got that job. And I didn’t have any trouble getting to the meetings.
MCB offers mobility training that gets you navigating and traveling on your own. MCB also assists in teaching you to use nonvisual techniques or your remaining vision in the best way possible.
The point is, sometimes employers only see our disabilities, they don’t see our superpowers. Our job is to show them why hiring us is the best choice.
OUR EXPERIENCE PROVES THAT WE HAVE GUTS, WE ADAPT, WE HAVE OVERCOME OBSTACLES, WE HAVE PERSEVERED, WE HAVE PROVEN THAT WE ARE MORE THAN CAPABLE. WE’RE THE KIND OF PEOPLE THAT EMPLOYERS WANT TO HAVE ON THEIR TEAM.

OUR JOB IS TO STAND UP FOR OURSELVES AND BE STRONG. WE CAN TELL THOSE PEOPLE WHO THINK WE’RE LESS CAPABLE BECAUSE WE’RE BLIND, THAT OUR BLINDNESS IS NOT A WEAKNESS, IT’S A STRENGTH.
At the end of the journey, our teens decide that getting support from MCB and leveraging Pre-ETS services is the ticket to their future.

Stay with me and the program and together we'll succeed.
SOPHIA AND ALEX SEE THEMSELVES TRANSITION FROM TEENS TO ACCOMPLISHED, INDEPENDENT, YOUNG ADULTS WORKING IN JOBS THEY LOVE.
THE QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE

ALEX AND SOPHIA ARE TWO VISUALLY IMPAIRED TEENS ON A QUEST TRYING TO FIT IN AND MANEUVER THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL. LIKE OTHER TEENS WHO HAVE LIMITED VISION OR ARE BLIND, THEY STRIVE TO BE INDEPENDENT BUT ARE UNAWARE OF THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO THEM. AS IN ANY GOOD ADVENTURE, THEY BRAVELY FACE ADVERSITY AND OVERCOME OBSTACLES.

LET THE JOURNEY BEGIN!

For more information go to www.mcb-thequestforindependence.com
There you can download the book, soundtrack, map resources & more.