**MCB Virtual Town Hall Transcript – 5.1**

COMR. D'ARCANGELO: This is the Mass Commission for the Blind Virtual Town Hall. We have MCB consumer Barry Spiro playing some background music. Keep going, Barry. If you're just joining, you're in the right place. This is the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Virtual Town Hall. One of our consumers Barry Spiro is playing in the background some welcome music as we welcome everybody in. Thank you, Barry. There's one more song as we have more people joining in. Barry, thank you for accompanying us with music here. For all of us joining us, thank you for joining. This is David D'Arcangelo, Commissioner for the MCB. You're in the right place. This is our MCB virtual town hall. This is the first one of these we're trying. Thank you for joining us. I think we have over 300 people at this point. The room capacity is about 500. I wouldn't be surprised if we reach that. A couple of ground rules here: If we could have all participants be muted and keep your video off, except for our presenters and interpreters. We want to keep it, the bandwidth as useable as possible for our interpreters and presenters. That would be helpful. Please save your questions and answers for the session at the end of the presentations where we will be taking questions. Recording of this will be made available on our website, and we'll be sharing whatever links that are brought up during the presentation as well. If you haven't signed up for you are e-mails and you want to get the links the presentation and all the news and notes of MCB, you can do so by going to Mass.gov/MCB. Enter your information. We'll be sure not to spam you. That way we can get the information you're seeking and get a dialogue going. Closed Captioning is available for those using Zoom. That feature, if you look at the bottom of your screen you can click on that. If you have any questions you can use the chat feature to ask your question, there. We're planning on having another town hall meeting on Friday, June 5th. We're going to plan to do these on the first Friday of the month.

Once again, everybody, thank you and welcome. It is David D'Arcangelo, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. With me today is much of our staff here, professionals who are going to really help provide an overview and good information for you all on the services that we're providing. First before I begin, I do want to pay a special attention and give my thoughts and prayers to any one of you that has been personally impacted by the coronavirus. You or your families are in my thoughts. I want to make sure all the people that interact with MCB, with the Mass Commission for the Blind, have good health. I hope if you have been impacted, you've been able to get over it. Unfortunately, if there's been more difficult situations, please know you're in my thoughts and prayers. Safety is our priority for our consumers and for our staff. We want that to really penetrate this whole discussion. Because that's why we're here today. Although, you know, if this works well, even when we go back to normal, maybe we'll keep doing these. Really what we're trying to do is to be able to service our consumers as best as we can. We think this communication is going to help, but we want to make it interactive. We want to hear from you. Please send your questions and your comments through. I'm interested in hearing from you. All right. With that said, we can go.

Thank you again to our MCB consumer Barry Spiro for your lovely opening music. Barry will be on the end playing songs as we close as well. Thank you, Barry. Again, welcome. It is David D'Arcangelo. I'm very pleased you're with us today. I think we have close to 400, closing in on 400 people joining us. Welcome and we have a great presentation for you today. So, the agenda for those of you using Zoom you can see it on the screen. Otherwise I'll describe it. I'm going to give a little overview and then hand it over to our Deputy Commissioner John Oliveira who will tell you about some of our programs and services. We'll then hear from the internationally renowned orientation and mobility expert. We're pleased to have her, Director of O and M, Meg Robertson. Meg will hand it over to Alexander Pooler, doing a good job with the technology unit. We’ll hear from Joe Buizon. And we continue to get the consumers jobs during these times. We'll then hear from Susan Lavin about the Children’s Services we're providing. Susan will hand it over to Karen Hatcher. Karen, many of you know, runs our Older Independent Blind Program and will talk about some of the SR services and we'll hear from Karen. Finally, at the end, we're going to take questions and try to do our best to provide answers. Again, if you have questions, please enter them in the chat feature below here, pass them along, and at the end we'll be opening up microphones and video and really we want to have a good dialogue and participation because at the end of the day you're what matters, our consumers, so we want to hear from you. That's a little bit on the overview of the agenda. Let me now take you into a little overview about MCB, which many of you know but let's be sure to inform everybody.

So MCB is the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, which by the way is one of the oldest blindness agencies in the country. MCB is one of the longest standing state government blindness agencies in the country. I take it as a responsibility to make good on that history every day. We have about 26,000 consumers, that are legally blind and with visual impairment who are consumers of MCB. Those people who meet the definition of legal blindness, their eye doctor gets the information to us, and we then enroll them, you all, as consumers into MCB. This is about 26,000 consumers across 351 cities and towns. Really our goal is to provide quality services and enhance our consumers' lives by promoting independence, dignity and self-determination. That's our goal. We want to make sure our consumers are independent, self-determined, and that's much of the services we provide are geared toward keeping people as independent and self-determined as possible. We partner with several community agencies, nonprofits, other communities within Health and Human Services. We're one of 15 agencies within the State's Secretariat of Health and Human Services. State government is a big organization, about 42 billion dollars a year. Health and Human Services is about half that. So about 21 billion dollars a year flows through Health and Human Services. Again, we're one of 15 agencies. We have near 150 employees, about 138 employees at any one given time working for you, our consumers. We have four offices across the state, Boston, which is our headquarters and houses three regions. We also have offices down in Fall River, New Bedford for the south coast, Worcester for Central Mass, and Springfield to serve Western Mass.

At this point I'm going to hand it over to our Deputy Commissioner John Oliveira, and he'll go into a little more detail about some of the programs and services we offer, and updates related to our current situation. John. Okay. John may be having some technical difficulties so I'll go through these slides until John can join us. Essentially MCB, Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, we break our services down into three main programs. The first being vocational rehabilitation or VR services. They assist students and adults preparing to try to get to work. Really what we try to do is make sure that we're providing the services people need to be successful to pursue employment opportunities, get employment opportunities, maintain employment opportunities, and hopefully advance in employment opportunities. We get federal VR dollars. We get federal vocational rehabilitation dollars from the Rehabilitation Services Administration. MRC, which is the Mass Rehab Commission, they get the same dollars. They provide them for other disability prevalence types, people with mobility disabilities, cognitive disabilities. We focus in specifically on vocational rehabilitation for people who are blind and visually-impaired. At any one time there's about 9,000 VR consumers, but at any one time only 950 of those are active consumers. Meaning they're actively pursuing vocational rehabilitation outcomes. Within that we have various programs. One of them is the Randolph Sheppard program. You may have seen it if you've been in public buildings, state or federal buildings. Those are the vendors that are oftentimes running the concession stand, and maybe like in the lobby or something. We have approximately 29 of them across the state. That's an important program for us, and really it is a great entrepreneurial spirit we provide to our consumers who then become on their own. Many people think those stands are run by MCB. They're not. While we help work and train to get them started. Once they're started, they're up and running and full-blown entrepreneurs on their own and we're proud of the small businesses they run. Another major program, and I mentioned there are three, there's VR and then SR, social rehabilitation services. Massachusetts is one of the few states in the nation that provides state monies, in other words, state budget dollars, exclusively go to support social rehabilitation services here in Massachusetts. One of the few states to do that. So really what we want to do is support people to be independent as possible and to be able to give them options to be able to age in place and really be able to make sure people are getting the services, they need to be successful. Because so many of our consumers are not born blind. They age into blindness. As a matter of fact, of our social rehabilitation population, the average age of that consumer is about 82 years old. So, a significant amount, the large majority of the social rehabilitation consumers we have are aging into blindness. Really what our counselors are doing are helping people to adapt to that new reality. Many of our consumers have had good useable vision most of their life and aging into their blindness. Our consumers work with them to make sure that they keep the independence and self-determination as much as possible. This includes things like vision rehabilitation therapy. So, these are like activities of daily living. So whether it is pouring a cup of coffee and cooking or, you know, labelling your appliances, making sure you have the good mobility skills to navigate your house, the neighborhood, whatever the case may be, these are the services we teach our consumers, and many of you may have experienced these services. If you haven't, or you're interested in some, please contact us because really our goal is to keep people as independent and self-determined as possible. So, now I'm going to talk to you a little about what MCB has been doing in relation specifically to COVID-19. So, we've really maintained a good continuity of services. We closed our physical offices Friday, March 13th and back open for business Monday morning, March 16th ready to go. So, you know, did we have to adapt? Yes. And are our services delivering a little differently? Yes. These are unprecedented times. But you should know we really haven't missed much of a beat and we're there working for you. I'm very impressed with our counselors, our staff with the level of flexibility they've had in adapting to this new situation, and I'm also very impressed with our consumers. Many of our consumers have expressed concern for our counselors and staff during this time, and that's very, very nice, and great to know that the relationships that our counselors develop with our consumers are so profound that there's a level of caring there. Our staff is doing well currently. Our thoughts are with you all because we want to make sure that we're still delivering for you all these important programs and services. Really don't think you're overwhelming us. Please, if you have issues, we want to know about them. If you're seeking services, we want to be able to provide them. So, call on us. Thanks to my predecessors and all the people at MCB, our counselors really haven't missed a beat. Because they have access to our cloud-based client management system AWARE, and access to the internet through laptops with WIFI. This technology enables them to keep working and allowed us to not miss a beat. We continue to register consumers. The Registry unit has registered new users, given out travel cards. We continue to issue certificates of blindness, program applications and know that we can get you those services, whether it be assistive technology, counseling, certificate of blindness, we're open for business and ready to serve you. So, we’re continuing to work through COVID-19, seventy percent of staff that didn't have the training on Zoom before are newly trained on Zoom and other remote services. We're using WebEx, Microsoft Teams, conference calls, Zoom, Skype, you name it, our staff is using it all with the intent of trying to keep in touch as best we can with our consumers and making sure we're serving the consumers as best we can. We've continued with our meetings. We've had important stakeholder meetings. We've had virtual trainings. We're making sure safety is first so we're observing all the guidelines. But we're still getting assistive technology to people and providing all the other services. We're adapting and continue to work through COVID-19. We’ve tried to get the message out through various events we've been doing. If you've tuned into our website, we've tried to make sure our website is as accessible as possible and has the most up-to-date information regarding the coronavirus and how it impacts our consumers specifically. So, we've tried our best to do that. We've also really been robust with our social media. If you haven't engaged us -- you can go back. If you haven't engaged us on social media yet, please engage us on social media. We're on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook. We're blogging, and adding to our website, and really trying our best to get our message out. We're using TIC, for those using the reading radio services. We're trying to get our message out through them. All our stakeholder community as best we can. Thank you to all our stakeholders if you're on the call for your partnership and collaboration. We continue to get the message out really to keep our consumers as informed as possible. Again, I think I mentioned our assistive technology unit continues to make deliveries. We're using personal protective equipment to ensure safety for our counselors and consumers and really working through creative solutions to be able to get people the assistive technology they need to be successful and remain independent and self-determined as possible, and so we're doing more Alexa devices if you're interested in that. Let your counselor know or let us know so we can try to put you on the list. We're going to take place with a pilot with the new wearable technologies. If you're interested in that, speak up and let us know.

We've had VR success stories. We had somebody that now is making six figures in a job that was placed. As you can see on the screen. It was during the stay at home order. The person accepted a new position and now making $110,000 a year! That's one of the better VR outcomes. People think, well, everybody lost their job, and certainly we've seen that impact, but I want to be sure to make people know there is also hiring happening during this time as well. So, if you're a VR consumer or you know anybody looking for jobs, please let's get into a dialogue and talk to us. We know of employers that are seeking your services. There's hiring going on and we're still working in the VR space to get our consumers placed and trained as much as possible. These are a couple great success stories here that we continue to see. It is great to know those are happening. So, at this point I'm going to hand it over to our internationally renowned Director of Orientation and Mobility Meg Robertson who will give us the high-level view of O and M.

MEG ROBERTSON: Thank you David, very much. Good morning to everybody, and happy May day. I'm just going to update a little bit on the O and M services that are being provided during the COVID-19 event. On the screen my first slide is an orientation mobility services staff person, working with a student very close, a lot of close contact with our students. Unfortunately, we are not doing any direct O and M training now. We hope to again in the future, but we are not doing any personal training. We do a lot of phone interviews for our new referrals. So that has been going on at a regular basis with any new referrals. We’re trouble-shooting O and M issues. We're encouraging everyone to continue working on their recent acquired cane skills. We're encouraging everyone to learn a new technology. Maybe download GPS apps and work them in familiar areas for way finding and getting familiar with different navigation apps out there, if they have the option to do that. We're also working with high school seniors who are really – who lost their spring semester of O and M training and the O and M high school instructor, connecting with them and going on with what will be the next steps come this summer. We continue to send out replacement O and M equipment. We're reviewing street crossings and environments for future instruction. One of the positive outcomes in a little more time, we've been able to participate in different online O and M. Continuing Ed courses, such as preparing your student for guide dog readiness, working and learning about unsignalized street crossings, different techniques on that. Different public right away. The issues and the ways to address that. And now remote O and M teaching options, and especially for the people who work with them. I went to a training on that and that was interesting, that the things we may have to change when we get back to the "new normal". I think we've been lucky in Massachusetts, we've had a lot of O and M professionals work with consumers, with our staff at MCB, at The Carroll Center, our partners at the O and M department. Okay, and on this slide is a photo of a man walking with a short cane on a sidewalk. This is what we hope everybody can get back to after not too long. We're currently checking in with our current and some past O and M students. One of the things we're asking is what's their access to food and what different options are they using, or do they need some other ideas to figure out how to get their food, that now like they can't use their original option of going out. One of the other issues is boredom and social isolation. A lot of times we recommend the Hadley School for the Blind is a great resource because they work on all different platforms, from using telephone contact, education and courses using the internet, using mail and braille being sent back and forth. So that has been a nice resource for us. And then we also connect people back out to their Case Managers at MCB for other resources that we may not know of. We're often adapting, reviewing adaptive alternatives for using safe O and M techniques in related to social distancing guidelines. Maybe using your stairs, if you're in an apartment complex, instead of your elevator if you're uncomfortable with people getting on and off the elevator. The safe ways of using the railing and cleaning your hands after you're touching something. We also review different ways to sanitize your guide dog harness and/or your cane and your hands as you move from different buildings for activities that you may be doing. One of the things we've been talking to people about is resources for face masks, if they're having trouble finding a face mask. Most cities and towns in Massachusetts now have a face mask requirement to go into any buildings. One of the things that's been brought up to me by other consumers is placing a face mask on their face covering a lot of their face is causing a lot of disorientation. That does seem to go away. So, I would recommend when you're using a face mask is to practice inside first or in familiar environments before you just put a mask on and go on your regular route. We're also working on future planning for what the new normal might be and how we may teach more remotely or more hands-off, all the techniques and routes. Social distancing. Again, this is one of the big questions we had at the beginning of this event is how to do -- a guide, a human guide. There's a photograph of a human guide positioned with a visually-impaired person holding the arm of a guide. For social distancing that's no longer allowed for strangers that you may have to ask for assistance, and so some of the suggestions we'll be giving is working on using a voice guide, possibly using a hand on a back for the guide if you're comfortable with it. The use of using your extra cane between the guide and yourself. A lot of people when shopping when they have no one to assist them, they get a guide at the shopping center, set it up ahead of time, and the guide will pull the carriage as the shopper will follow holding on to the front of the carriage. It discusses options, why do you have to go out; what do you need; what are the other options you can use that you don't need to go out. And suggestions regarding use of long cane for ID. For the visual travelers who don't use the cane or guide dog, you may want to consider using a cane for ID out in the community, and so that people are maybe more aware of why you're moving into their space and not social distancing. A lot of people are getting grumpy these days, mad at people for moving into a space you're not supposed to be in. And again, awareness of different pedestrian changes in your neighborhood or your city and town. Some cities and towns are doing one-way sidewalks, that you must walk on one side and then walk on the other side. There may be pedestrians in the routes you usually are going out on. And there's a lot less traffic. So that may impact your mobility as well. Thanks for your time. We'll be holding questions until the end. Now I would like to introduce Mr. Alexander Pooler who is the Director of the Assistive Technology Department. Thank you.

ALEXANDER POOLER: Thank you very much for joining us for our town hall meeting. It is and exciting opportunity to talk about how our departments and for me the assistive technology department is adjusting to life with COVID-19 and all that goes along with that. So, in addition to the work we're doing with our consumers, we've had to get creative and embrace some new ways to start working with getting our technology out to the consumers and to our offices, and then figuring out ways to work with them remotely. These are things we have been kicking around at the department for some time about other ways to leverage some of the infrastructure we already have built in. But obviously with the COVID-19 that really changed the landscape and really kind of accelerated some things. One of the things we started working on initially is how we're going to do what we're referring to as no contact drop. We're finding ways to get technology delivered to consumers without the in-person contact and violate the social distance norms. One is we can directly ship a product from a manufacturer/vendor or from our MCB to a consumer. Another way is literally to take the product, drive it to the consumer's home, drop it off in the front of their house, and contact them and let them know the product is out there. The consumer comes out, retrieves the product, goes inside. We're able to get the delivery done. It is not the most ideal way to do it, but we are trying to find those better ways to use the technology services for the consumer. I can't speak enough the work that the department has done to embrace this challenge to find the innovative ways to do it. In addition to deploying technology to train technology remotely. Some devices are easier than others. For instance, we're working a lot with consumers who over the phone with their different types of technology, low-vision devices, things like TVs. Whenever possible we can try to see if we can enlist somebody in the home or nearby that can assist the consumer and work through some of the issues they're having. We're also working on helping to download a lot of software, the software is helpful for teaching skills. One of the things we're working a lot with is teaching touch typing skills for our consumers. So, we can eventually work with them maybe on other software or computer systems. We're also doing a lot of work on helping the consumers configure their Zoom session remotely. The question, how to change the mouse pointer, the contrast. A lot of the questions we're able to work with a consumer over their phone, or through other means. One of the other means we do occasionally incorporate, and use is Team Viewer. It allows us flexibility working with a consumer to help them work on their systems. It doesn't necessarily address all the problems we're running into but gives us another tool to work with to assist our consumers. One of the things that has changed is what we're doing, especially what the vendors are doing, and, for example, VFO the parent company for Scientific, has made their software, JAWS, zoom text to download up until June 30th at this time. On the slide there's a web address beneath this last point you can go to directly to see what information is on there. Or you can go directly to the VFO web page and get the information as well. It is easy to set up. I set it up for field consumers. For right now it is available free to our consumers and free to users of that software until June 30th, 2020. One of the other areas we're working on with our consumers in terms of remote working on their software issues, something called JAWS. Tandem something we've made use of as well. JAWS Tandem is a connection that serves as online between two JAWS users. Both users need to have a Windows 7 computer, preferably JAWS 10 and above, and basically the meeting can be conducted over the high-speed internet preferably, or through a Tandem center session, or a private network, or known as a tandem direct session. They're free of charge. The tandem direct session does incur a fee. It allows two individual JAWS users to be able to look at the software on one computer, allow to trouble-shoot and work through issues not only with JAWS but issues also with the computer system and finding solutions for them. This is something we've been working on a while ago it's been available, but with the situation this is giving us the opportunity to work directly with the consumers to find ways to address and trouble-shoot computer issues which in the past we would have done with the in-home visit but now we can do it remotely and practice the safe distancing. This has been a learning opportunity for us. Over the last few years we've worked a lot with our consumers who are in the education settings or in the workplace on a variety of different networks or different platforms they're utilizing through to do their learning or to do their daily business. This has obviously changed a lot about how we're proposing our consumers and doing business learning and working. While we have some experience with working with things like Blackboard and model and Moodle, Canvas, the current situation is requiring us to go deeper how the software will be used with the consumers so they can continue their education. We're doing a lot of work with Zoom, WebEx, and starting to work with Microsoft teams. This is giving us the opportunity to really learn a lot more about those type of platforms and how our consumers are using those. This is great to figure out solutions what is going on now, but important to look at how we can leverage the technology going forward with the consumers, in the possibility that this is something that becomes more long-term than we rather it be. Not only are we working with consumers to help them with their problems but working with consumers to how they're utilizing the software platforms and how to utilize them and leverage them so they can achieve the success they want, and we can work it out with them. That's where we are with assistive technology, and I believe we're going to be going to Mr. Joe Buizon for the next presentation. Thank you very much for your time.

JOE BUIZON: Alexander, thank you. Of course, many thanks to you, Commissioner, for your leadership during this unparallel time. It goes without saying, much thanks to everyone here today joining us for our first town hall. My name is Joe Buizon and I oversee the employment unit. What are the employment services at the commission? We assist individuals in conjunction with VR counselors to prepare them individuals for work. Getting them ready for gainful employment. What we have done recently with the unusual times is really to shift our systems to the individual's needs right? Millions and millions of individuals have applied for unemployment, and that continues to rise. This unit probably assists people applying for unemployment with the VR counselor referrals. We understand now it can be cumbersome to figure out where do you apply, what resources do you need, what documents do you need to provide, are you going to get a retro check, and the list goes on. We recently helped an individual apply and he went through our rehabilitation process, was successfully employed many moons ago, but because of the pandemic he was furloughed. He was upset, naturally so, and he was patient with us while we obtained all his information. It took an hour and a half, if not more, to get him into the system. Next thing you know he e-mails me and calls me the next day and says, Joe, we need to call unemployment, e-mail them. I don't need it. You don't need the unemployment? He says, no, I got a job. You got a job? I got a job. As quick as he kind of was wondering how he was going to put bread on the table for his family, having children, he's able to telecommute. What a wonderful story there. Even though we helped him with unemployment, our turnover was quick to do that. As we continue to make history together, and I understand and rightfully so a lot of it is negative, some of it is -- a lot of positive practices will be put in place. MCB has been able to pivot in employment services with a lot of job-driven programs. In the past, and we currently continue to help people apply for work, right? It takes so much time. What do people say? It takes a job to find a job. We used to do that at their homes, or at a local coffee shop, Starbucks, Cafe Nero, and we would do that, navigate the web, the new norms if you will. We still do it now, but now with a three-way call, with Zoom, e-mails and resumes and references, going back and forth to figure out what's even available now or in the coming weeks and months. Just yesterday our team was able to help someone apply to their local Whole Foods. Sometimes it takes 100 questions on the application process, kind of like an SAT, and I feel confident that if we get through that barrier, they get an interview, we have a relationship with that company, they can get that job. So, stay tuned. Hold on to your seats. Hopefully we'll have another success story coming our way. In addition to helping individuals apply with the VR counselors for these consumers, we of course have our beloved internship program. Our premiere program that has been longstanding, has been a modelled opportunity that people have participated in. Other agencies have replicated this program. I'm also a proud product of the internship program many moons ago. We usually get a hundred referrals from VR counselors, and we vet through it, and typically 70 to 80 end up engaging with the experience. This year the numbers look a little different, but we have always tried to focus on the quality and not the quantity of the individuals. With that said, with the internship what has changed, we must be flexible and know that summer is looking different. We know that partners may still host, and we encourage them to feel confident that they will in maybe in July or August. Will it spill into the fall? We want Zoom, the calls. We need the interns to learn and the employers to get the needs they need to do and to do it virtually as well. So, we already have some good news. My team has told me that one intern that goes to school in Cambridge just got a job, internship offer with one of the state agencies down the street from our office. We're excited there. It has been and will continue to be a fine private/public nonprofit partnership in the Commonwealth he. So, individuals have already committed to us in the internship program and we're still looking for more individuals to really host our young people as well as mature adults in our intern program. With the internship in our unit it really goes hand in hand. We have our mentoring program that we collaborate with our other Monday NOFTS and stakeholders. They're ahead of the curve in the mentoring program. They have always done things virtual. Understanding our mentees, the sweet spot from 18 to 21, that youth in transition age, the budding performance that will be talking about this for years to come, we connect them with Mentors. The key is those Mentors are also visually-impaired. But they're currently working and doing what they, kind of what the young person is aspiring to do. So, they have been doing it virtually, they continue to do that. We are looking for more individuals to listen about this opportunity and to market this far and wide. I'm a big component of mentoring. It is a powerful thing. The peer -to-peer power and the partners collaborating in that opportunity as well. Moving on from the mentoring program, we have mock interviews, right? Preparing is the key. Whether it be for volunteer work, for internship, or a job shadow, call it what you will, we do that still then and now today, but like this. I recently had a call with a young person in the North Shore, we did the typical "Tell me about yourself" and then the behavioral questions. I said, if you could be a tree, what tree would you be and why? There was silence. He chuckled, I laughed, and we were both laughing. He said, Joe, I don't know much about trees. I said would you want to be an oak tree because you want to provide strength; or a Christmas tree, and I said it yesterday because he wanted to provide joy and happiness, or a pine tree because you're more durable. I told him the only reason I knew this, I looked it up. So, we do this together, again, to prepare them for that. But we do it via phone or Zoom. So, they had to download the app and all those things. Speaking of job prep in the job driven programs, our annual job fair, which we partner with Harvard University on a frequent basis, and we always do it in October. As it is disability employment month, the diversity day for people with disabilities in trying to get them to raise the bar. The committee already decided to make that virtual. Like today the first time ever MCB will have its job fair virtual. We look for all of you to participate in it in some shape or form. Stay tuned. Our committee just met yesterday -- excuse me, last week, hammering out the agenda, what that looks like. We envision all of you having some type of role in that special day. And of course, something relatively new but it's been around now for six months, our Employment Now initiative, formally the project search. It is a robust internship program we partner with Mass. Eye and Ear, and CMA, the Carroll Center, and Polus Center, having the individuals on the ground, being a part of the culture, being engrossed Monday through Friday in their departments. The conversion rate has been unbelievable! Last year all the participants, these job-seekers, these candidates that were looking for full-time employment were converted to full-time offers and they took them, whether it be at the hospital itself or externally. So we anticipate that with this program upon graduation we'll seal the same numbers, but what has changed now is all of those individuals, of course they're at hospitals now, they're doing remote work or doing Zoom calls and preparing themselves when the doors reopen at these hospitals their skills will be sharpened, their interpersonal skills and hard skills will be honed. They'll hit the ground and running even before their skill sets when they kind of first kind of dropped down in early -- whenever it was, in February when we started. The last, but not least, we continue to engage with employers. We talk to Encore. We have a call next week with Harvard. We're politely persistent with our partners, with the consumers, the candidates meeting them where they are. Due to our disability rate, we have already been created, we have already been thinking outside of the box pre-Covid. I'm wishing you all well, safety during this time of uncertainty. You have my e-mail, reach out to me or our team. I want to turn it over to Susan Lavin, director of programs. Thank you so much.

SUSAN LAVIN: Thank you, Joe. Thanks to all for joining. I hope you're all doing okay during this very challenging time. Services for children ages 0-14 continue during the stay at home order. The MCB children's social workers continue to stay in touch with consumers and providers. They continue to provide Case Management, educational advocacy and support through the Special Education process. The children's social workers are participating in meetings and IEPs online, and one of the children's workers recently connected a consumer and her son, a consumer and his mom with the children's teacher of the visually impaired. Together they were able to identify and to coordinate the TBI drop-off of an iPad charger. This has allowed the child to do the school work for continued access. Also, the socialization and recreational opportunities are continuing in a different way with COVID-19. As you know, MCB funds five afterschool programs throughout the Commonwealth. These programs bring kids together with legal blindness from different regions. They're not just confined by the school district. We have one afterschool provider at this point that's providing a virtual Zoom atmosphere for the kids to stay in touch. MCB also supports individual recreation opportunities, including campership, HIPAA therapy, swimming and music lessons. Again, we're waiting for direction from the Governor as to when school might resume. We provide information/referral for a variety of services and benefits, assistance in advocacy in accessing public benefits and home supports, and respite care and flexible family supports. These two services are tied to financial eligibility. But your children's social worker will walk you through it and make the determination. MCB is also certified for Talking Book Library, and we do provide assistance as funding permits with home modification. Again, recently a children's social worker collaborated with an MCB consumer, his family, and Independent Living Center, the Department of Public Health, and a local contractor to fund and facilitate the installation of a ramp. So, the child can now be safely transported to his doctor appointments that continue during this time.

So, this slide shows the number of MCB consumers served aged 0-14 by geographic region. As you can see those who can access the slide there's a total of 1,220 children served by MCB. The Western Massachusetts region has 180 consumers; northeast Massachusetts 231; Central Mass, 205; Greater Boston, 229; the southeastern part of the state, 188; and Boston region 187. The MCB social workers in each of these regions continue to reach out to families and partners and aid and resources. Each child and family have unique needs that MCB can help navigate through. Feel free to contact them directly. Or if you have any questions please contact me, Susan Lavin at Mass.Gov or 617-626-7475. Take good care and thank you for your time. I'm happy to introduce the director of MCB's Older Independent Blind program, Karen Hatcher.

KAREN LAVIN: Thank you, Susan. Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today for these important updates. I am here really to tell you right now that COVID-19 has not prevented MCB from delivering low-vision products and services to our older blind consumers. We have had to alter the way we provide them, and I will be sharing some of the changes with you. The older blind program is funded through a federal grant, where each state and territory receive a portion of the grant funding to manage their programs. The goal of the program is to provide Independent Living Services and support to older blind individuals. MCB encourages all consumers to maintain their independence at home and in their community. And we help them do that. The eligibility for the program is to be a Massachusetts resident, legally blind, and over the age of 55. So, I'm going to talk through some of the changes. New consumer intake, the first connection to the consumer has always started out with a home visit. Social workers meet, interview and provide overview of our services. This intake process has moved to a phone conference, which is essential in order to prevent any delay in services. Low-vision aids have always been hand delivered to our consumers by social workers, where they are able to demonstrate and train our consumers on the products upon delivery. MCB is now shipping product directly to the consumer's home and providing descriptive methods and training if needed through phone calls. A rehabilitation teaching is a hands-on profession. The teachers assist consumers with tasks that may include kitchen skills and staying safe during meal preparation; labelling systems; financial management; medication management; and even iPad training. Teachers face a great challenge during COVID-19 and are learning to adapt to new methods of remote instruction, and they've become quite creative in doing so. Our low-vision support groups, which have always met in the senior centers and community centers, are now meeting on conference meetings. The phone conference support groups still offer the opportunity for them to talk about their fears, challenges, and triumphs in their adjusting to the vision loss. A big part of my role as director is to travel state-wide to focus on outreach to senior centers, assistive living and retirement residences to share information on our program. I also network with other state agencies and nonprofits at health fairs for the elder population. Though obviously during COVID-19, I've been doing a lot of joining the support group conference calls to provide updates on MCB and I do get together with my colleagues in the federal program on monthly conference calls. We discuss challenges and successes. So diabetic management, The Carroll Center is one of our partners providing diabetic management to consumers, and that has always been done on a phone intake first and then face-to-face contact to be trained on the talking glucometers. We're testing a pilot to see if it can be done remotely on phone conferences. We are waiting to hear from the nurse on the pilot. The Carroll Center has also, as a result of COVID-19, begun a diabetic management support group via phone. They meet bimonthly, and that seems to be gaining a lot of interest among our consumers. And finally, Perkins Talking Book Library, obviously the cartridge mailings have stopped when Perkins was forced to close its doors during COVID. MCB staff, however, was invited to two different Zoom conferences to learn about BARD and BARD express as a viable option to download books onto the USB drive that can be inserted directly into the talking players. This has become very successful, and we've been able to make these consumers a lot happier in their "alone" time. So, thank you to Perkins. In closing, I just want to take the opportunity to thank all our older blind vendor partners who have been an integral part of our success during COVID-19. A very special thanks to Perkins Library, the Carroll Center, MABVI, and the vendors who continue to ship low vision products and assistive technology to our consumers. I will say that until we all meet again, which we will, please stay safe and be well.

COMR. D'ARCANGELO: Terrific. Thank you, Karen. Thank you, everybody for presenting. I hope everybody enjoyed that.

JOHN OLIVEIRA: I would like to thank everyone. Along with all the different services you've heard about this morning, we do obviously serve folks who are deaf-blind. We haven't mentioned much about our deaf-blind consumers, but we do offer vocational rehabilitation services and SR services for that group of consumers at the department. They are very dedicated and hard working. So, we will continue to serve them the best we can. And you've heard about all the different departments that interact with the agency. Hopefully you've learned some new things. If you need our services in the future, feel free to contact the agency and we'll be glad to work with you. We had to scramble on March 13th to set up our whole telework team in the situation we're in. Our folks were prepared. We had laptops. They were equipped with the Case Management system. We have access to all the client data. We haven't missed a beat. We have teachers who have been extremely creative about providing the service. We have support from the support staff at the agency making those no-contact deliveries. We've used the US postal service, UPS, our staff, and it's been a great collaboration. We couldn't do it all without our partners. They've been innovative about putting different products, the training online, and it really has helped to continue our services. So, if you were getting services at the Carroll Center, that's still available online, and we've had to make some changes in the curriculum, but everything is going along well. So, feel free to reach out to MCB. We're here. We're ready to serve you in whatever needs you may have. We'll turn it back over to Commissioner David D'Arcangelo

COMR. D'ARCANGELO: Thank you so much. Thank you for the entire MCB for pulling together, your flexibility. Again, thank you to our stakeholders for flexibility and collaboration. We continue to try to get through this together. And most of all, thanks to the consumers for sticking with us. We may be doing it differently but we're still getting the services out there.

COMR. D'ARCANGELO: Yes, thank you. All right, with that said, we're nearing the end of the town hall. I'd love to go on forever, but I am supposed to be in another meeting now planning on the reopening of state government. We're trying to think of that and we're trying to contemplate the approach to be able to make sure we get people back to work and safely. Our state workers. I'm going to be going, but I know Barry will take us out. In conclusion, I want to say thank you. Thank you all so much for taking part today in our virtual town hall. We're trying our best to serve you during these difficult times. I'm so appreciative of our staff, for the work that they're doing, and I'm appreciative of our consumers. Please, we can only serve you if we know about the issues. So, bring those issues forward. We want to hear from you. Call us. E-mail us. However, you need to get in touch with us, please do that, and we'll be sure to respond. I want to hear from you. I thank you. I wish you all health and safety. I hope you have a great weekend. Thank you for all you do.

BARRY SPIRO: (Music) Thank you.