



Maine State Rehabilitation Council
Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired

**ANNUAL REPORT TO THE REHABILITATION SERVICES
ADMINISTRATION**

AND

THE HONORABLE JANET T. MILLS, GOVERNOR OF MAINE

FOR THE PERIOD OCTOBER 1, 2023 – SEPTEMBER 30, 2024

SUBMITTED FEBRUARY 19, 2025

I am pleased to submit this annual report on behalf of the Maine DBVI-SRC as Chair. My name is Andrew B. MacLean and have served on the SRC since November 2021 as a recipient of services from DBVI.

I am a visually impaired person resulting from cone rod dystrophy, one of the family of inherited retinal diseases. I am serving my second year as Chair of the DBVI-SRC.

I thank my colleagues on the SRC and the DBVI staff for their contributions to the SRC's work and support of my role during the past year. During the reporting period, we have experienced a substantial turnover in the membership of the SRC and in the staff of the DBVI. I am pleased to welcome several new SRC members whose formal appointments by Governor Mills have been finalized. DBVI Director Elissa Rowe has been an excellent professional partner and supporter of the SRC's working during her first year in the role having succeeded Brenda Drummond in late 2023. The SRC membership and the DBVI staff have a cooperative and mutually supportive relationship, and together we have had a productive year. I look forward to another positive and productive year for the SRC working with Director Rowe and her staff.

Current DBVI-SRC Membership

I would like to recognize and thank the following members of the DBVI-SRC. This membership roster is current as of the submission of this report, not the reporting period.

1. Andrew MacLean, Chair (former recipient of services from DBVI)
2. Allen Kropp, Esq., Drummond Woodsum law firm, Vice Chair
(Business, Labor, Industry representative)
3. Nancy Moulton, Catholic Charities Maine, Immediate Past Chair
(Community Rehabilitation Provider)
4. Jessica Cavanaugh, Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VR counselor, ex officio)
5. Amber White, The Iris Network (Community Rehabilitation Provider)
6. Elissa Rowe, Director, Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ex officio)
7. Darcy Gentle, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians (RSA 121 grant project representative)
8. Sherry Belka (Disability Advocacy Group representative)
9. David Emberley, Maine Department of Education (State education agency representative)
10. Roger Fuller (former recipient of services from DBVI)
11. Nathanael Batson (Disability Advocacy Group representative)
12. Kathy Despres, Goodwill Industries of Northern New England
(Disability Advocacy Group representative)
13. Isaac Gingras, Maine State Workforce Development Board (State workforce development representative)

Governance Framework for the SRC's Work

The SRC conducts its business in accordance with Bylaws, most recently amended in December 2021 which includes the following mission statement.

The mission of the Council is, in partnership with the Director of the Division, to formally provide leadership and diverse viewpoints in order to effectively develop and evaluate programs, policies and services, and to influence, at the systemic and policy level, the direction of those services to the blind and visually impaired population of Maine. The Council will also partner with the Division to identify priorities that help create opportunities, increase independence, and broaden access to the workplace for citizens of all ages who are blind or visually impaired.

The Mission and Bylaws are based upon the description of the SRC's functions found at 34 CFR §361.17(h):

(h) **Functions.** The Council must, after consulting with the State workforce development board—

(1) Review, analyze, and advise the designated State unit regarding the performance of the State unit's responsibilities under this part, particularly responsibilities related to—

(i) Eligibility, including order of selection;

(ii) The extent, scope, and effectiveness of services provided; and

(iii) Functions performed by State agencies that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with

disabilities in achieving employment outcomes under this part;

(2) In partnership with the designated State unit—

(i) Develop, agree to, and review State goals and priorities in accordance with [§ 361.29\(c\)](#); and

(ii) Evaluate the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program and submit reports of progress to the Secretary in accordance with [§ 361.29\(e\)](#);

(3) Advise the designated State agency and the designated State unit regarding activities carried out under this part and assist in the preparation of the vocational rehabilitation services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and amendments to the plan, applications, reports, needs assessments, and evaluations required by this part;

(4) To the extent feasible, conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of, and consumer satisfaction with—

(i) The functions performed by the designated State agency;

(ii) The vocational rehabilitation services provided by State agencies and other public and private entities responsible for providing vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities under the Act; and

(iii) The employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals receiving services under this part, including the availability of health and other

employment benefits in connection with those employment outcomes;

(5) Prepare and submit to the Governor and to the Secretary no later than 90 days after the end of the Federal fiscal year an annual report on the status of vocational rehabilitation programs operated within the State and make the report available to the public

(6) To avoid duplication of efforts and enhance the number of individuals served, coordinate activities with the activities of other councils within the State, including the Statewide Independent Living Council established under chapter 1, title VII of the Act, the advisory panel established under section 612(a)(21) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council described in section 124 of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, the State mental health planning council established under section 1914(a) of the Public Health Service Act, and the State workforce development board, and with the activities of entities carrying out programs under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998;

(7) Provide for coordination and the establishment of working relationships between the designated State agency and the Statewide Independent Living Council and centers for independent living within the State; and

(8) Perform other comparable functions, consistent with the purpose of this part, as the Council determines to be appropriate, that are comparable to the other functions performed by the Council.

Summary of DBVI-SRC Activities

The DBVI-SRC held four regular business meetings and a joint annual training session with DVR-SRC during the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2024.¹

Between these regular business meetings an Executive Committee comprised of Chair, Vice Chair, Immediate Past Chair, Treasurer, and DBVI Director) meet to create meeting agendas and consider other SRC business, including long-term planning.

During the October 2023 meeting, the council held a regular business meeting where officers were elected: Andrew MacLean (Chair), Cheryl Peabody (Vice-Chair), and Allen Kropp (Treasurer).

The following subcommittees were formed: 1. Policy, 2. Program Assessment, 3. Transition, 4. Membership, 5. Employer Engagement and Business Development, and 6. Executive.

The SRC also had Karen Fraser (Director of BRS) present during the October 2023 meeting, educating members about Maine's 10 Year Economic Development Plan and Comprehensive Workforce and Talent Strategy, which was being updated with post pandemic insights.

Members reviewed the plans and offered their feedback, comments, and expertise.

The DBVI and DVR-SRCs held a joint training session in November 2023. During the half-day event, members of the two SRCs took time to get acquainted with each other and with the staff of both Divisions and participated in a brief review of the SRC roles and responsibilities. Members engaged in an extensive conversation about membership recruitment and retention challenges faced by both groups and the need for additional administrative support for the SRCs. Two other substantial sessions of the joint training were a series of video presentations by

¹ October 2023, February, May, August of 2024.

employers of individuals with disabilities and a panel of individuals who had received services from DBVI or DVR and had experienced success in employment and independent living.

There was no December meeting because of inclement weather, but the Executive Committee met to work on the VR portion of the State Plan. Additionally, DBVI-SRC submitted an Annual Report to the Rehabilitation Services Administration in January 2024 that covered the FFY 2023.

DVR held 7 listening sessions in collaboration with DBVI-SRC, analyzed the results of the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment, and received 47 responses on a staff survey, all data used in creating the State Plan that covers the next 4 years.

During the next regular business meeting in February 2024, members discussed the Goals and Objectives for the VR portion of the State Plan and offered feedback and suggestions before it went out for public comment. Furthermore, members discussed how to best support DVR SRC, which was struggling with membership recruitment.

The DBVI-SRC met again in May, when Chair Andrew MacLean discussed his experience attending the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) annual conference in April in Bethesda, MD.

Members were also informed that long-term SRC officer, Cheryl Peabody, was going to retire in June, which was a significant loss of institutional knowledge. Cheryl performed much of the administrative work for both DBVI-SRC and DVR-SRC. Members shared ideas on how to best fill the gap with Cheryl's departure. There was also a robust discussion about attracting and retaining DBVI staff, like Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Specialists, Teachers Of the Blind and Visually Impaired (TBVI) and Vision Rehabilitation Therapists (VRT).

The final regular business meeting for FFY 2024 was in August. Elissa Rowe provided data about organization that referred clients to DBVI, and the DBVI-SRC looked for organizations with low referral rates, as well as

identifying other referral organizations, identifying potential sources for increased applicants. This was a fruitful discussion, with numerous suggestions offered.

There was also a dynamic discussion about increasing DBVI-SRC membership.

Also at the August meeting, the DBVI-SRC decided to expand the role of an SRC Administrator, Branden Densmore, because of Cheryl Peabody's retirement. Branden had previously provided administrative support services to both DBVI-SRC and DVR-SRC. The DBVI-SRC created a new "Administrator" job description for Branden, greatly expanding his administrative and fiscal services support role for both the DBVI- and DVR-SRCs.

At each SRC meeting, in addition to the topics mentioned above, the SRC provides substantial time for a DBVI Director's Report during which the Director and staff provide an update on all DBVI programs and activities and members are engaged in discussion with the DBVI staff. The DBVI staff encourages feedback from SRC members.

Finally, during the reporting period, I have had the opportunity to represent the DBVI-SRC in a full-day training session hosted by DBVI for its staff and community organizations providing services to the community of blind and visually impaired individuals in our state and this was a productive session at which I was welcomed and offered plenty of opportunity to provide a perspective from the community served.

Letter from the DBVI Director



**DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
Bureau of Rehabilitation Services
Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired
45 Commerce Drive
Augusta, Maine 04332**

Janet T Mills
Governor

Laura Fortman
Commissioner

Maine Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) work together to assist Mainers who are blind and visually impaired to overcome barriers to accessing and maintaining employment. DBVI supported the following programs and innovations in Fiscal Year 2024, each of which had been raised with and addressed by the SRC:

Business Enterprise Program (BEP) continued to provide support for existing managers and new opportunities for blind and visually impaired individuals seeking self-employment in the food and vending service business. One such opportunity is providing vending services to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) employees, while they resided in Maine and provided restorations after the major storm damage sustained in December 2023. Other changes on the horizon include the transition to new management at the Cross Café (at the State capital complex in Augusta) and working with the University of Maine System to provide vending services at the Fort Kent and Presque Isle campuses. In December 2023, new BEP rules were adopted and promulgated. One of the newly licensed BEP managers attended a National Randolph-Sheppard training this past year. Managers are encouraged to participate in events

and activities that build skills, knowledge, and resourcefulness that lead to the provision of excellent food and vending services, and strong partnerships with State, Federal, and public agencies, as well as the private sector.

Learning, Independence, Fun and Employment (LIFE) Camp is a one-week residential program, located at the Iris Network, focused on pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) for students with visual impairments and blindness. Students worked on adaptive home and personal management skills, including cleaning, budgeting, food prep, organization, and orientation & mobility. They identified their strengths and interests and how those related to employment. Students participated in hands-on career exploration of three different worksites and toured a Business Enterprise Program (BEP) Micro market at the Portland Career Center. They also participated in assistive technology classes, identifying individual accessibility options to meet their needs, and practiced basic computer skills. Self-advocacy skills were an integral part of the program, emphasizing choice, workplace preferences, interests, and work accommodations. LIFE Camp introduced students to independence, employment, and empowerment!

No Barriers was a 4-day, extended weekend, residential camp held at the UMaine Camp and Learning Center at Bryant Pond, ME. For the fourth year, students ages 14-21, participated in team building activities based on the “7 life elements” of the No Barriers curriculum, developed by Erik Weißenmayer, the first blind individual to climb to the summit of Mt. Everest. The seven elements include Vision, Reach, Pioneer, Alchemy, Ropes teams, Summits, and Elevate. Each student participant creates a vision board at the beginning of the camp with what they would like to accomplish/overcome during the program. Through the activities, that included rock wall climbing, zip lining, hiking, and canoeing, students worked to overcome these personal barriers and encourage others to achieve their goals.

Blind and Visually Impaired Persons (B A VIP) Orientation and Mobility Support Group is a group of current and former orientation and mobility clients who meet monthly to assist one another with problem

solving mobility difficulties with the support of Orientation and Mobility Instructors, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, and other professionals with expertise in visual impairments and blindness. The group develops the agenda for the meetings which has included things such as advances in technology and mobility techniques. Participants benefit from increasing their mobility skills, independence, and peer support.

Boston Bound! The Division for the Blind & Visually Impaired, in conjunction with Catholic Charities Maine, offered for the first time, Boston Bound! Boston Bound is a two-day program for transition age students and recent high school graduates that addressed the five required areas of Pre-Employment Transition Services and multiple areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum. The program took place in Boston, MA in August. Boston Bound included a visit to Harvard University to explore opportunities in postsecondary education and career exploration. Participants spoke with various Harvard staff to learn about their roles and career journeys, met with staff from the Disability Access office, and received a tour of the Harvard campus. Participants also received a tour of Google and met with a panel of Google employees. This broadened their understanding of different jobs and work environments, enabled them to explore their own work values and preferences, learn about various career pathways to jobs in tech, and interview preparation and networking. Participants made strong connections with peers with visual impairments and were given opportunities to take on leadership roles. Orientation and Mobility was interwoven throughout the program, as participants were exposed to various modes of public transportation, including buses, the subway system, and uber, and provided them many opportunities to navigate a variety of environments in an urban setting.

Career Exploration Group Back by popular demand, DBVI offered their career exploration group for the second year in a row. The group is designed for middle and high school students with visual impairments to support them with exploring various jobs/careers in a hands-on way. Throughout the schoolyear, the group visited a different employer once a month. On these visits, students participated in a worksite tour, learned about the various jobs available, spoke with employees at the worksite to learn about their roles, backgrounds, and career journeys, and often participated in a hands-on activity related to a particular job in the business.

This has been an effective way for students to explore jobs in a meaningful way. It has helped them identify interests and explore jobs that they may have never considered and enabled them to begin developing a sense of their own work preferences. Students also benefited from the opportunities to connect with peers with visual impairments and practice orientation and mobility skills in a variety of settings.

In-Person Training DBVI staff presented an in-person training on Considerations & Strategies for Working with Blind and Low Vision Clients to our Community Rehabilitation Providers: Living Innovations and Goodwill. The training focused on DBVI services, vision loss, client considerations, Progressive Employment, employer considerations, orientation and mobility, human guide, vision rehabilitation therapy, case examples, best practices for supporting our clients, and provided resources/references as well as interactive activities for the staff to engage in.

Published Journal Article DBVI partnered with Catholic Charities Maine (CCME) to write an article in the summer issue of *Visual Impairment and Deafblind Education Quarterly* Journal. The article focuses on the array of services and support for children who are blind and visually impaired in Maine. The journal used a photo from DBVI of a Maine student, standing in a barn and brushing a horse, as the cover of the issue!
<http://dvi.uberflip.com/i/1524859-vidbe-q-69-3-summer-2024/0?>

Recruitment and retention of a highly skilled and qualified workforce continues to be a focus of DBVI. In alignment with the four-year Vocational Rehabilitation State Plan, Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVIs), Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMS), and Vision Rehabilitation Therapists (VRTs) are positions identified as needing the most recruitment and retention efforts. Over the past year, the team has made strides by implementing collaborative and innovative approaches such as conducting an informational webinar, supporting staff in other positions to pursue these particular career paths, redesigning positions to find efficiencies, and changing some of the reimbursement structures for certification reimbursement. We look forward to our ongoing collaboration

with the SRC to strengthen the supports and services available to blind and visually impaired individuals living in Maine.

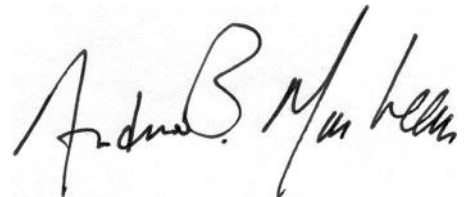
Sincerely,

Elissa Rowe

Director Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Thank you for considering this Annual Report from the Maine DBVI SRC.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Andrew B. MacLean". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Andrew B. MacLean, Chair

Email: amaclean@mainephysicians.org

Mobile: 207-215-7462