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Chapter 171 Report and Annual Family

Support Plan

FY 2017

Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

August 2016



Overview of Family Support

The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) provides family support services in line with the principles of the agency's mission statement. The mission of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind is to provide the highest quality rehabilitation and social services to individuals who are legally blind, leading to independence and full community participation.

Family support is a way for consumers to identify needs beyond those for which MCB has a line item budget. It is a way for MCB counselors and social workers to offer full consultation with consumers and families about all their needs for support, traditional and non-traditional. MCB is primarily a rehabilitative agency. An unusual service that will assist a consumer to remain in his/her home and to be as independent as possible is often something that MCB is better able to provide through family support services, rather than through one of its defined social or vocational services.

The majority of MCB family support services are targeted to support consumers in the Deaf Blind Extended Supports Program. The consumers in this program have very significant disabilities in addition to their blindness, including deafness, intellectual, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Flexible family support services are provided to these consumers under the 4110-2000 (Turning 22 Program and Services) appropriation account.

Deaf-Blind Community Access Network (DBCAN) services are not flexible family support services and are provided as a distinct and separate program under the 4110-1000 (Community Services for the Blind) appropriation account. The DBCAN program provides highly specialized personal assistance services to deaf/blind individuals to allow them access and to enhance community integration. On average, 16 hours of service are provided each month to approximately 70 deaf-blind individuals. These hours allow individuals to do their shopping, personal business, to attend community educational events, and to access medical services. The providers of this service are trained by DBCAN staff to provide communication access as needed. The providers are typically American Sign Language students.

Individuals who are deaf-blind or blind with intellectual disabilities present complex needs and require a continuum of supports to live and work in the community. There are approximately 800 people who are deaf-blind or blind with intellectual disabilities receiving community services (under the 4110-2000 appropriation account) managed by the Deaf Blind Extended Supports Program, including day programs, respite, homecare, low vision services, and adaptive technology. Services are varied and highly individualized. It is our intent to continue to advance the practices of consumer choice and self-direction throughout our programs with flexible family supports.

Examples of support services currently provided include: funding for minor housing adaptations such as stair lifts, funding for medical equipment and supplies not provided by MassHealth, transportation, and PCA services for a family taking a vacation. Such services are provided when there is no other traditional resource such as MassHealth available to the family.

MCB also provides more limited family support services to legally blind children and adults with special needs that fall outside of the agency's formal program of services. Examples include: providing funds for hippotherapy for a child; provision of furniture and household goods for a consumer leaving a shelter to move into an apartment; funds for small needs such as winter clothing or eyeglasses when no

other funding is available.

MCB's primary network is comprised of counselors, social workers, and consumers, working together toward goals that are agreed upon and planned after full consultation with consumers and families. Self-direction and consumer choice are the guiding principles in all service planning.

MCB seeks input and advice from its various advisory boards; MCB listens to and responds to its consumers.

I. Family Empowerment

MCB has for many years sought and received input from legally blind consumers. The blind community has been a very powerful and effective advocate for blind persons of all ages. MCB seeks input and advice from its various advisory boards as well as individual consumers and families. Public hearings on MCB's Comprehensive Annual Independent Living Services Plan are held across the state in August of each year. MCB publicizes these hearing on its website, through its weekly taped telephone consumer information line, and through the radio reading network. Hearing notices are mailed to agencies and consumers who have expressed interest. These forums provide the opportunity for families to provide substantial input into our policies.

MCB has a number of active advisory boards that meet regularly. These include six Regional Advisory Councils and a statewide Rehabilitation Council that has a major role in the agency's policy development. The majority of the members of these councils are legally blind consumers. Parents of legally blind children and family members of legally blind persons are invited to attend and participate on these advisory boards. There are also positions on the council designated for key stakeholders including the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Federation for Children with Special Needs, and the National Federation of the Blind. In addition, the agency has established a Youth Advisory Council that has increased the input from and consultation with these consumers and their families.

MCB will continue, through its counselors and social workers, to encourage more participation from parents of legally blind children and family members of legally blind persons on these various advisory boards.

All MCB social, vocational and independent living services are planned and provided in partnership with the consumer; consumer choice is an overriding principle and policy that all MCB direct service staff honor.

II. Family Leadership Development

Families and consumers are normally informed of conferences and trainings by their MCB counselor. In March 2016, as in past years, MCB staff participated in the 11th annual conference called "Focus on Vision Impairment & Blindness." The topic this year was: Meeting the Needs of Individuals with Intellectual Disability & Vision Loss. Families, teachers, and MCB counselors were among those attending. MCB was the lead sponsor; the Perkins Training Center and the DDS Southeast Region Training Council were co-sponsors.

A number of family members of MCB consumers are involved in the activities of the Association of Massachusetts Educators of Students with Visual Impairments and the Massachusetts Association for Parents of the Visually Impaired.

Many other consumers have participated on agency advisory boards and have developed exceptional leadership skills.

III. Family Support Resources and Funding

MCB tries to serve as many consumers as possible, based on availability of funds, and the agency maximizes one time opportunities to this end. For example, a family that needs a ramp for safe entrance and exit from a home or a van does not need that funding every year. A family that needs a security deposit for an apartment does not need that funding every year.

During FY 2016, MCB expended \$389,995 for family support services. Approximately 480 consumers and families were served. The typical expenditure per consumer/family was between \$500 and \$1000. However, if needed after consultation with the family, expenditure amounts were adjusted. For FY 2017, the agency has approximately \$390,000 available for family support services for these consumers and families. MCB is projecting that approximately 475 consumers/families will be served.

Each individual service plan describes the customized services that will assist the consumer/family to achieve the identified goal.

IV. Accessing Services and Supports

During the development of the individual service plan, the consumer/family identifies what will be needed to assist in reaching the identified goal. During regularly scheduled home visits, progress or impediments are discussed and possible options and resolutions explored. Full consultation and explanation of family support services takes place.

MCB will continue to utilize counselors to disseminate information and to work with individual families. MCB Advisory Boards will continue their role of advising MCB about consumer/family needs.

It should be mentioned that all legally blind persons have very good access to MCB services due to the mandatory reporting of legal blindness required by Massachusetts law. All newly reported legally blind persons are registered with MCB and contacted by a social worker or counselor who explains and offers services.

Periodically, MCB conducts a census of the approximately 27,000 registrants and, at the same time, renews its offer of information and services. During FY 2016, an outreach mailing was sent to all registrants between the ages of 14 and 22.

V. Culturally Competent Outreach & Support

MCB is charged with providing services to all persons residing in the Commonwealth who are registered as being legally blind. MCB contracts with the Language Line so that counselors can make telephone contact with consumers/families for whom English is not the primary language. For home visits, MCB contracts with Catholic Charities for language interpreters. The agency also contracts for American Sign Language interpreters.

The agency's Staff Development Unit has, for a number of years, worked to assist staff to address more effectively the needs of traditionally under-served minority groups. As in previous years, a training program on cultural diversity was offered to staff during FY 2016 and is planned for FY 2017. Cultural competence, especially regarding attitudes about legal blindness, is crucial for the successful rehabilitation of the many ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistically diverse consumers/families that we serve.

In addition, the agency has a staff member who coordinates a formal program of outreach to all minorities and under-served populations in cooperation with grass-roots community organizations.

VI. Interagency Collaboration

MCB has greatly expanded its collaborative efforts with other EOHHS agencies as well as community partners. MCB staff participates in many inter-agency workgroups on EOHHS initiatives, including those related to family supports.

MCB has long required that MCB counselors and social workers collaborate as much as possible with any other agency (private or public) that is involved with MCB consumers/families. This has been especially effective with MCB and the Department of Developmental Services often collaborating to pool resources to meet a consumer's needs. MCB has collaborated with service organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, the Lions Clubs, Habitat for Humanity, Kiwanis, among others.

The success of the agency's program, in particular, depends on extensive and effective collaboration with a number of agencies, including the Department of Developmental Services, the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults, and the Perkins School for the Blind.