

**Annual Family Support Plan
FY '09 (July 2008 – June 2009)**

Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

Overview of Family Support

The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind provides family support services in line with the principles of the agency's mission statement: To provide the highest quality rehabilitation and social services to blind individuals, leading to independence and full community participation. This critical mission is accomplished by working in partnership with legally blind consumers, families, community agencies, health care providers, and employers.

MCB is committed to the following principles:

1. Providing responsive, high quality services.
2. Promoting full access to community services.
3. Offering individuals choices among services tailored to meet their unique needs.
4. Eliminating barriers to employment and community integration.
5. Exploring and applying new technologies to enhance opportunities.
6. Valuing input from a wide public audience and recognizing that community advocacy and advisory groups are an essential component of system planning.
7. Promoting the registration of legally blind individuals to ensure that services are offered and rights are explained and protected.
8. Providing education and training to community organizations, employers, health care providers, and schools to promote awareness of blindness and the abilities of persons who are blind.
9. Assuring that the cultural and ethnic diversity of consumers and staff are respected in the design and delivery of services.
10. Ensuring that through recruitment, retention, advancement, and monitoring, the workforce of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind reflects the diversity of the population it serves.

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 an independent as possible is often something that MCB is better able to provide through family support services, rather than through one if its defined social or vocational services.

The majority of MCB family support services are targeted to support consumers in the Deaf-Blind Multihandicapped Program. The consumers in this program have very significant disabilities in addition to their blindness including deafness; cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges. This group of individuals present complex needs, and need a continuum of supports to live and work in the community. MCB plans to

target this group for participation in the PCP Self-Direction pilot program. There are 600 people receiving services managed by this unit including 24 hour residential services, day programs, respite, homecare, low vision services, and adaptive technology. Services are highly individualized. It is our intent to advance the practice of self-direction and Person Centered Planning throughout our programs by developing an infrastructure to support self-direction as an option for everyone currently receiving residential services and for those turning 22, to develop and implement a person centered planning process for this group, and to develop options for individual budgets.

Examples of support services currently provided include: funding for housing adaptations, private-duty nursing, rent, utilities, 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 has a more limited program of family support services under its Independent Living Social Services Program. Support services provided under this program have included: providing funds for hippotherapy for a child; furniture and household goods for a consumer leaving a shelter moving into an apartment; providing funding for swimming lessons to enhance community integration; providing funds for past due utility bills; providing funds for winter clothes.

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. MCB's program of flexible family supports is incorporated into its Comprehensive Annual Independent Living Services Plan. Public hearings on this plan are held across the state in September 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. Some parents of legally blind children and family members of legally blind persons also attend and participate on these advisory boards. There are also positions on the council designated for key stakeholders including the Massachusetts Department of Education, the Federation for Children with Special needs, and the National Federation of the Blind. In addition, the agency is planning to develop a Youth Advisory Council during the coming year to increase the input from and consultation with these consumers and their families.

MCB will continue through its counselors and social workers to encourage more participation of 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 the MCB counselor. In March 2008, MCB staff participated in a conference on Transition from School to Work to Adulthood at the Perkins School for the Blind. MCB Commissioner, Janet LaBreck, was the keynote speaker. Parents, children, teachers, and MCB counselors were among those attending.

A number of family members 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. 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.

As mentioned above, most of the family support services that MCB provides are targeted to support consumers in its Deaf-Blind Multihandicapped Program. During FY 2008, MCB allocated \$100,000 for family support services in this program. Approximately, 100 consumers and families were served. The typical expenditure per family was between \$500 and \$1000. However, if needed after consultation with the family, much larger expenditures were made. For FY 2009, the agency has \$240,000 available for family support services for these consumers and families. MCB is projecting that approximately 150 consumers/families will be served

In addition, during FY 2008, MCB has been able to provide flexible family supports to approximately 160 consumers/families under its social services and independent living programs with approximately \$125,000 combined state and federal funds. Thus, the average expenditure per consumer/family in this program is less than \$800. The agency expects to have the same funding available in FY 2009 and to serve the same number of consumers/families.

Each individual service plan indicates 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 what might be interfering with progress is discussed and possible options and resolutions explored. Full consultation and explanation of family support services takes place.

MCB will continue to utilize counselors as the frontline to disseminate information. 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 to offer services.

Periodically, MCB conducts a census of the approximately 39,000 registrants and, at the same time, renews its offer of information and services. A census is planned for the fall of 2008.

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. It also contracts for ASL Interpreters.

The agency's Staff Development Unit has for a number of years worked to assist staff to better address the needs of traditionally under-served minority groups. As in previous years, a training program on cultural diversity and rehabilitation issues was offered to vocational rehabilitation staff during FY 2008 and is planned for FY 2009. 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 Director of Multi-Cultural Outreach who coordinates a formal program of outreach to all minorities and under-served populations in cooperation with grass-roots community organizations.

VI. Interagency Collaboration

With the appointment of a new commissioner during the past year, 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 person-centered planning.

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 DMR often collaborating to pool resources to meet a consumer/family need. MCB has collaborated with service organizations such as the Knight of Columbus, the Lions Clubs, Habitat for Humanity, Kiwanis, etc.

The success of the agency's Deaf-Blind Multihandicapped Program, in particular, depends on extensive and effective collaboration with a number of agencies, including the Department of Mental Retardation, 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.

Since MCB has just recently been able to fill the previously vacant position of Director of Multi-Cultural Outreach, the agency will be able to increase its efforts to collaborate with a number of grass-roots community organizations during FY 2009.