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Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

Chapter 171 Report and Annual Individual and Family Support Plan

FY 2021

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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: 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.

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 1,200 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.

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.

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; or 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.

I. Family Empowerment

MCB has for many years sought and received **input from legally blind consumers**, as 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, individuals, and families. Public hearings on MCB's Comprehensive Annual Independent Living Services Plan are held in August of each year. MCB publicizes these hearings on its website. Hearing notices are mailed or emailed to agencies and consumers who have expressed interest. These forums provide the opportunity for families to provide substantial input into our policies.

In addition, MCB has a number of **active advisory boards** that meet regularly. These include a Statutory Advisory Board of five members appointed by the Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) with the approval of the Governor, six Regional Advisory Councils, and the statewide Rehabilitation Council that has a major role in the agency's policy development. Most 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 Rehabilitation 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. 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. Traditionally, MCB has co-sponsored the annual *Focus on Vision Impairment & Blindness* annual conference for families and consumers. Unfortunately, the 2020 conference was canceled due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

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

III. Family Support Resources and Funding

MCB strives to serve as many consumers as possible, based on availability of funds; 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 financial assistance every year. Similarly, a family that needs a security deposit for an apartment would not need that support every year.

During FY20, MCB expended \$333,195 for family support services. MCB served 463 consumers (235 of them children) and families. The typical expenditure per consumer/family was between \$500 and \$1000. However, after consultation with the family, expenditure amounts were adjusted, if needed.

For FY21, MCB has approximately \$325,000 available for family support services for consumers and families in the Commonwealth. MCB is projecting that approximately 500 consumers/families will be served. MCB has developed detailed guidance on family support services to enhance accountability and transparency while maintaining the same scope and nature of the services. Each individual service plan describes the customized services that will assist consumers and families.

IV. Accessing Services and Supports

All legally blind persons in the Commonwealth have free access to MCB services, ensured by 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. MCB utilizes counselors to disseminate information and to work with the individuals or families.

During the development of individual service plans, 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.

Periodically, MCB conducts a census of the approximately 27,000 registrants and, at the same time, renews its offer of information and services. During FY20, an outreach mailing was sent to all registrants.

In addition, MCB advisory boards continually relay the needs of consumers and families to MCB to ensure continual feedback on services and supports.

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. During FY20, MCB contracted with the Language Line so that counselors could 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.

In FY 21 the Agency's Staff Development Unit continued to work with staff to more effectively address the needs of traditionally under-served minority groups. As in previous years, a training program on cultural diversity was offered to staff. 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 MCB serves.

In addition, dedicated MCB staff provide outreach to all minorities and under-served populations in the Commonwealth 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. The Agency 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 collaboration has been especially effective between MCB and the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), often collaborating to pool resources to meet consumers' needs.

In addition, MCB staff participate in many interagency workgroups on EOHHS initiatives, including those related to family supports, and the success of MCB's programs rely on extensive and effective collaboration with a number of agencies and service organizations, including the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MCDHH), the Knights of Columbus, the Lions Clubs, Habitat for Humanity, Kiwanis, the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults, and the Perkins School for the Blind.