

**MASSACHUSETTS COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND
ANNUAL FLEXIBLE FAMILY SUPPORT PLAN
STATE FISCAL YEAR 2007**

The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) has been celebrating its centennial year. Celebrations are occurring throughout the year. The first of these celebrations took place at the State House while others have been held in different regions of the state. Celebrants included consumers, employees, former employees and legislators. The warmth and ease of interactions between these groups is indicative of the relationship that MCB has had, especially with consumers for a century.

MCB at any given time has a register with approximately 35,000 legally blind persons. Registrants range in age from newborns to those who have passed age 100. Children usually comprise less than 10% of the registrants. Elders have the highest rate of occurrence of legal blindness of any age group. What a child needs is certainly different from a middle age or an elderly person. A person who has been blind since childhood has different needs than a newly blinded person who is an adult.

Legally blind persons have vision ranging from no vision, light perception, seeing shadows, seeing large objects, to having some good functional vision.

Consumers live all over the state; some in rural areas, some in suburbs and some in cities. Some are very wealthy; some have average means; some the working poor and others are quite destitute. Some are native Americans; others, foreign born. Some are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Blind.

Some consumers are very healthy; others have health issues such as diabetes; complications from extreme prematurity; stroke; arthritis; the whole gambit of health issues that humans may have.

Because our consumers are so diverse, "one size does not fit all". MCB has been characterized as a one-stop agency, designed to meet all of its consumer's needs.

The blind community in the Commonwealth, as well as nationwide, has a history of strong advocacy. An example of this effective advocacy is the fact that legally blind persons are allowed higher income limits for SSI-Blind eligibility and receive a higher benefit than persons with other disabilities.

MCB's OVERVIEW OF FLEXIBLE FAMILY SUPPORT:

Because of the diversity of the consumers, MCB's definition of family is very broad. A blind elder living alone in their home is a family. A recent college graduate on their own for the first time is a family. A legally blind child living with parents are a family. A legally blind adult who has a spouse or a spouse and children is a family.

Thus, Flexible Family Support, is a way for consumers to identify needs beyond, that, for which, MCB has a line item budget. It is a way for MCB counselor's "to think outside the box". MCB is primarily a Rehabilitative agency. Anything that will enhance or support a consumer to remain in his/her home; to be as independent as possible is something that MCB is better able to support through Flexible Family Supports.

Support services have ranged from helping a consumer move from a nursing home back out into the community; providing a security deposit for an apartment; providing funds for ramps or lifts; providing funds for hippa therapy for a child; furniture and household goods for a consumer leaving a shelter moving into an apartment; providing funds for a license and liability insurance for someone who is starting over again with a new career after losing their vision; providing funds for past due utility bills; providing funds for winter clothes. MCB support services run the full gambit.

MCB's primary network is counselors and consumers, working together toward an agreed upon goal; MCB seeking input and advice from its various advisory boards; MCB listening to and responding to it consumers.

1. FAMILY EMPOWERMENT

MCB has always sought and received input from the consumers they serve. The Blind community has been a very powerful and effective advocate for blind persons of all ages.

MCB has several active advisory boards that meet regularly. This past year a parent of a young multi-involved child, who had attended one of the Families Organizing for Change conferences volunteered to participate in one of MCB's regional advisory boards. MCB is very excited about that and hope that this will encourage other parents to do the same.

MCB will continue through its counselors to encourage more participation of parents of young legally blind children on advisory boards. This has always been an effort, but not always a successful one.

2. FAMILY LEADERSHIP

Families of young children are normally informed of conferences and trainings by their MCB counselor. Because so many of the children are so medically involved and because of the shortage of nurses to fill hours of approved Private Duty Nursing, it is frequently impossible for parent (s) to leave their child for any extended period of time.

Other consumers have participated on Advisory boards and have developed some very good leadership skills.

3. FAMILY SUPPORT RESOURCES AND FUNDING

MCB does not provide annual allocations to families. MCB provides Flexible Family Support to those consumers/families who have identified a need that will help support their goal of being as independent as possible. MCB tries to serve as many consumers as possible, based on availability of funds and in compliance with MCB consumer developed policy guidelines. 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.

Each ISP indicates the customized service that will assist the consumer/family to achieve the identified goal.

4. ACCESSING SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

During the development of the annual ISP, 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. Obviously, Flexible Family Support is discussed.

MCB will continue to utilize counselors as the frontline of disseminating information. MCB Advisory Boards will continue their roles of advising MCB about consumer/family needs.

5. CULTURALLY COMPETENT OUTREACH AND SUPPORT

MCB is charged with providing services to any and 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.

MCB contracts with Catholic Charities for language interpreters. It also contracts for ASL Interpreters.

MCB's training unit schedules programs to help MCB develop increased cultural competence. 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.

6. INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

MCB requires that MCB counselors try to collaborate with any other agency (private or public) that is involved with MCB consumers/families. This has been especially effective with MCB/DMR collaborating to pool resources.

MCB has collaborated with service organizations such as the Knight of Columbus.