

The History of MAB Community Services

How Far We Have Come

Boston, Massachusetts, 1903. You are newly blind from an accident or an illness. If you are like most of the 3,800 blind adults in the Commonwealth, you face the almost certain prospect of becoming, in the words of a leading minister of the day, "... one of the sad-hearted, silent men and women sitting in the dreary solitude of conscious isolation; some in lonely homes where all that can be done for them is to provide food and raiment and shelter; and some dragging out the weary years as objects of public charity in almshouses...The lot of hundreds of these is one of irrepressible loneliness and weariness, because, unable to read or write, and uninstructed in any form of useful employment, they are doomed to sit in idleness both of body and mind."

Boston, Massachusetts, 2003. You are newly blind from an accident or illness. No matter what your trade or profession, what language you speak, your age, or other disabilities you might have, within a month of your loss of sight, you become eligible for an array of services from professionals and volunteers who can begin to work directly with you at your home, workplace, or doctor's office. Counselors, mobility instructors, Braille teachers, psychologists, rehabilitation therapists, vocational trainers, computer and technology instructors, and legal advisors can guide you through the difficult adjustment to your loss of sight, and assist you and your family in planning for a productive, meaningful new way of life in your own community.

How did the landscape of blindness change so dramatically in 100 years? The answers lie in the day-in-day-out efforts of dozens of organizations and hundreds of people who pushed for change, justice, and fairness on behalf of, and with the blind citizens of the Commonwealth.

The Massachusetts Association for the Blind-originally founded as the Massachusetts Association for Promoting the Interests of the Adult Blind-is one of the oldest of these organizations. Now celebrating its 100th year of innovative public service, MAB grew from a tiny, all-volunteer group of prominent Bostonians, to a multi-million dollar agency employing hundreds of professionals, advocates, and volunteers.

Over the course of its history MAB has found gaps and filled them, swiftly and well. Blind adults can't read? Teach them Braille. No teachers available? Train volunteers. Not enough books? Find money to buy a press, to print them, or teach volunteers to record on tape. Isolation and unemployment are the problem? Create residences for blind individuals and training programs to

enable them to work. Public perception of blindness is an obstacle? Educate the public with demonstrations and embrace the role of consumers in service delivery and decision-making. Not enough funding? Partner with the government, other agencies, the private sector, and the community.

MAB's story is a simple one: identify need, shape individualized programs, train volunteers and hire professionals, build strong alliances and collaborations, and create networks of support and advocacy for families and communities across the state. In this tradition, MAB has also identified gaps in services to communities of people with other disabilities, including deaf-blind children, children with acquired brain injuries and adults with mental retardation. The journey from its modest and well-intentioned beginnings to its present configuration of services, advocacy, and outreach, is, in many ways the story of the evolution of American acceptance of the value of inclusion, equality and diversity. But let's go back to the beginning.

In the Beginning

1903 was quite a year. Over half the US population of 80,000,000 lived on farms. The Ford Motor Company was just incorporated in Detroit, electricity was a new phenomenon, and the first feature film debuted, as did the Crayola crayon, the Gillette safety razor, and the Thermos bottle. Helen Keller published *The Story of My Life*, and Marie Curie became the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize. The first World Series was played, a thrilling contest between the Boston Pilgrims (later the Red Sox) and the Pittsburgh Pirates, a best-of-nine battle which Boston won 5 games to 3, behind the pitching of its 28-game winner, Cy Young.

Across Massachusetts, cities were struggling with dramatic immigration surges and rapid industrial growth. In Boston, the last serious epidemic of smallpox had been contained, thanks to mandatory vaccination. Immigration policies limiting Chinese workers were being brutally enforced, but Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Russian families had been filling the sweatshops and tenements for the previous 40 years. By 1877, blatant exploitation of workers, women and children, crowded housing and poor sanitation, and miserable labor conditions had led Boston's Dr. Harriet Clisby, one of America's first women physicians, to establish the Women's Educational and Industrial Union (WEIU). The volunteers of WEIU—prominent citizens, philanthropists, activists, and society women who wished to serve their community—provided education about hygiene, language and job skills, free medical care and legal advice to poor and uninformed workers. By 1900, they were established as one of Boston's primary service providers and advocacy organizations.

In 1901, The Union's Ethics Committee persuaded the Boston Public Library to

provide a space in which blind and visually impaired people would have an opportunity to read from the Library's collection of embossed books. Full of enthusiasm, the Committee publicized the new reading room by mailing notices to 50 blind people it had identified in Boston and publishing notices in local newspapers. Accounts vary, but fewer than five people attended the opening event. One of those was J. Newton Breed, a Civil War veteran who had lost his sight during a quarry explosion. Breed promptly educated the well-intentioned and puzzled Ethics Committee about the reality for most blind adults in Massachusetts. They were unemployed, isolated, poor, and illiterate, he explained. Even if they could read the letters or published notices about the Library program, few could travel safely, or afford to have the library send materials to them. Further complicating the problem of widespread illiteracy, there was no standard tactile reading system at this time, so that even the embossed or Braille materials at the library were not universally accessible. Most blind adults had no way to educate themselves, or to become educated. The only facilities that provided educational and training services to the visually impaired were the Nursery for Blind Babies and the Perkins Institution, which admitted students only up to the age of 19. Most blind adults lost their sight long after childhood. One distressed Committee member concluded, "... the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts has but two doors open for her four thousand adult blind—the Insane Asylum and the Poor House."

Chastened, educated, and re-energized, the Committee interviewed many blind adults, and discovered that what they wanted most of all was employment and independence. They promptly hired an instructor who worked with blind adults in their homes, teaching knitting, sewing, and chair caning. More than twenty visually impaired men and women also learned the Moon Alphabet, a tactile reading system, in just one month. Armed with this encouraging result, the WEIU Ethics Committee turned to the forum of public opinion, publishing articles in Boston newspapers that described both the dismal conditions under which many blind adults lived, and the success of the WEIU's training program. They asked for public support—both funding and volunteers—to establish widespread training and services for blind adults. As compelling evidence in support of their cause, they asked Jessie Gilman, a blind woman, to demonstrate her skills on the typewriter and sewing machine at the Mechanics Fair, "which astonished the crowds that hung around our booth."

The public's enthusiastic response persuaded the WEIU to form "The Massachusetts Association for Promoting the Interests of the Adult Blind," the first social service agency for blind persons in the United States. Though its course was uncharted, its objective was clear: to provide services that would enable blind people to live as independently as possible and as contributing and integrated members of society. The WEIU's early experiences, as it learned

to listen to the people that it served and involve them in developing solutions, continue to guide MAB to this day.

The First Twenty Years

In these early days, no social service infrastructure existed and social work was not yet a mainstream profession. There were few precedents in providing the kinds of support that MAB wished to provide. MAB's initial Board of Directors was composed of prominent men and women in Boston society who used their connections and considerable influence to begin a multi-pronged assault on the causes and outcomes of blindness across the Commonwealth. Working from a single desk at the WEIU, these volunteers staffed the organization, raised the funds, and eventually engaged the professional support and participation of specialists to supplement their ranks. The early members all had full vision, but one, Charles Campbell, was the son of an accomplished blind father and a mother who had worked at Perkins. From his own experience he knew that blind adults could lead independent, fulfilling lives, and he set about raising public awareness about blindness, giving lectures and showing photographs of the successes of some of MAB's blind workers.

MAB also put the condition of Massachusetts' blind residents on the political map. Through vigorous lobbying efforts and public outreach, the WEIU and MAB persuaded the state legislature to fund a public agency to address the needs of blind individuals; today, every state has a similar tax-supported entity. This agency, which became the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, has evolved into the primary provider of services for blind individuals in the Commonwealth. The creation of MCB enabled MAB and other private organizations to develop complementary services to fill the gaps that state funding could not fill. MAB and MCB continue to partner today.

Through its *Experiment Stations for Adult Trade Training*, MAB increased the number and kind of industrial job opportunities for blind workers and arranged the first known placement of a blind worker in a factory setting. In the industrial economy of the early twentieth century, blind adults desperately needed factory skills to compete for jobs. The Experiment Stations trained people to weave rugs and fabrics, and to manufacture brooms and mops. MAB found outlets for the sale of products made by blind workers and promoted the employability of blind people in factories.

To improve communication and learning among professionals providing services to blind individuals throughout the United States, MAB created *Outlook for the Blind*, an innovative magazine that served as a clearinghouse of information. The periodical is still being published as the *Journal of Visual*

Impairment and Blindness, and remains an invaluable link between members of the professional community. MAB also focused on the prevention of blindness, especially among newborns. Ophthalmia Neonatorum is an infection passed from mother to infant during childbirth, which causes blindness among the babies. Once a prevention method for the disease had been confirmed—using drops of 1% silver nitrate in babies' eyes within hours after birth—MAB collaborated with physician's groups to make Ophthalmia Neonatorum a reportable infectious disease, ensuring that physicians would then treat all newborns with silver nitrate. Partnering with another organization to obtain mutual goals is a continuing MAB trademark.

Money is an urgent practical need for most adults, and blind adults are no exception. MAB began a Loan and Financial Aid program to provide small loans for financial emergencies and for the purchase of special aids. MAB also developed recreational gatherings, training centers, and for some, residences, that provided shelter, comfort, and a safe place for blind individuals to learn daily living skills. The MAB homes in Boston—Woolson House and Rogers House—also provided the impetus for another MAB service tradition: volunteers. Neighbors or friends of the residents, the volunteers would read aloud, organize a glee club or other social gathering, and go for walks with the residents. Classes and lectures were offered, and during the summers, blind citizens from elsewhere in the Commonwealth would come for a week or two of rest and relaxation. For those adults who could not manage to return to the community, the MAB houses became their permanent homes.

This remarkable list of achievements was accomplished by MAB's small Board of Trustees, a handful of volunteers who had no professional training, no permanent staff, no office space and limited funds.

The Seeds of Change

By the 1920's, MAB was no longer alone in providing services to the visually impaired in Massachusetts or the United States. The MCB was a mature social service organization, and social work for the blind and visually impaired was rapidly becoming more professional, as evidenced by the growth of such organizations as the American Association of Workers for the Blind. In addition, the American Foundation for the Blind, one of the first national, consumer-driven organizations, was created in 1920. MAB began looking beyond the immediate individual needs of blind adults, to the broader world of education and publication. It found several new areas on which to focus its prodigious energy.

Although great progress had been made in providing social services for visually

impaired individuals, there was no systematic national curriculum for training teachers, nor was there a universal tactile alphabet system. MAB worked to change both. Along with the Perkins School and Harvard University, MAB developed a professional training program for teachers of blind children. The curriculum was introduced into the course offerings at Harvard in 1920, and was quickly embraced by other universities. MAB also recognized that there were too few publications in Braille, in part because Braille was only one of several tactile alphabets in use, and all of them required time-consuming, expensive equipment to produce. Inspired by a MAB member who was also a Perkins graduate, in 1927 MAB began publication of a news magazine, *The Weekly News*, printed by what was then known as the Braille Weekly Publishing Company, now the National Braille Press.

The Social Context of Blindness

Throughout its first decades, MAB found itself on the cutting edge of what could be considered "the blindness-rights movement." As broad changes evolved in social and political attitudes towards disabilities in general, and blindness in particular, MAB's Board responded proactively with specialized services and forward-thinking training and advocacy.

The advent of World War I and the horrific injuries with which many soldiers returned, began to significantly change the public's awareness and attitude toward disabled Americans, including those who were blind. Many had survived formerly fatal injuries, thanks to medical advances. By 1921, there were nearly 40 rehabilitation hospitals across the country, an increase of 35 in only 25 years. The labor union movement was also growing, and legislation that provided for vocational training and counseling had been passed in 1918. Charitable groups, including the American Red Cross, joined the effort to offer training and employment, and recognized the need for rehabilitating workers injured or disabled on the job.

Events of the 1930's were cataclysmic for many Americans. The stock market crashed, and the economy collapsed. The unemployment rate grew to 25 percent, and only 25 percent of the unemployed received any kind of assistance. The plight of the 7.6 million elderly Americans was even more dire. Over half of them relied on private charities, public poorhouses, or their families for support. Blind and disabled individuals were especially vulnerable, because after several years of Depression, many younger people could no longer help their older relatives. In Massachusetts, private and public charities were strapped. As the economic and social despair of the Great Depression took hold, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a visibly disabled President, championed the Social Security Act. Passed in 1935, it provided income support for children

with disabilities and people who were blind. Another New Deal program authorized the federal government to license vending stands in the lobbies of federal office buildings to blind individuals, who sold cigarettes, newspapers, and chewing gum. This provided the incentive for MAB to initiate its Vending Stand Program, allowing blind and visually impaired men an independent way to make a living.

In 1940, the National Federation of the Blind was formed. The NFB advocated on the federal and state level for white cane laws and the inclusion of people who were blind in the development of programs and services. All this legislation served to bring the issues of access, education of the disabled, and equity, into the public forum. Services available to blind individuals in Massachusetts reflected this growing public awareness.

Professionalism and Volunteers

During World War II, MAB's Board acquired the use of a large summer home, Sunlight House, in Scituate. They were then able to offer a vacation experience on the South Shore for families and individuals who were blind, something staff and volunteers had been advocating for many years. For 14 weeks during the summer, one week at Christmas and one week at New Year's, Camp Sunlight offered vacations to blind residents of Massachusetts and their families. Activities at Camp Sunlight included music appreciation, arts and crafts, nature studies, a book club, morning meditation, walks, ballroom dancing and square dancing. Guests could go on automobile rides in the country, visit the beach, go to the movies, or go fishing. The vacation program was so successful that MAB purchased Sunlight House in 1950 and continued providing respites there until the mid 1970's.

In 1946, MAB acquired its first real office space, in downtown Boston, and hired its first paid Director, Muriel Staffeld. As she put it, "the idea of giving things to and doing things for blind people" had given way to "helping blind people to acquire the skills and ability to act and live independently." As public awareness and acceptance of people with disabilities grew, the need for MAB's residences and the work stations diminished. The focus was shifting to the concept of rehabilitation and inclusion in the mainstream, not just in Massachusetts but also across the country.

Reflective of that change was the development of a direct service volunteer program in 1959. Begun as a pilot project and still in place today, the program served blind individuals in their own communities. During the first year it matched 28 sighted people with 34 visually impaired people to provide a range of services including reading to them, driving them to appointments, writing

letters and checks, accompanying them on walks, or helping them shop for clothes or groceries. Within three years, there were over 200 trained volunteers serving blind people all over the state. MAB required that all volunteers undergo a thorough training program before allowing them to serve. In line with its increasing professionalism, MAB hired a Director of Volunteer Services in 1961. This began a steady spiral of development within the Volunteer Program, to more than 600 volunteers in 1966.

The 1960's were a period of growth, beginning with a name change to the Massachusetts Association for the Adult Blind. MAB opened the Worcester County Center for the Blind in 1961 and an office in Springfield in 1968. Social workers provided casework to individuals and families to facilitate adjustment to blindness, including counseling on marital, financial, housing, and social problems. A new department, General Services, developed an informational resource file and a telephone tape "to give current information on sales, theater, taxes, etc., and a variety of aids and devices useful to persons who are blind." MAB caseworkers also provided social services at the low vision clinic at University Hospital Boston, beginning in 1968.

During the social and political turmoil of the mid-1960's, MAB social workers recognized that there was a growing need for blind teenagers to have extra support as they navigated the always-difficult transition to adulthood. MAB held a series of seminars at Sunlight House with blind teens to explore the issues and concerns that mattered most to them. Not surprisingly, the teens wanted a chance to gain enough self-confidence to do things that other kids did. Based on their research, MAB began their "Youth Socialization Program," the first of its kind. They integrated blind teens into mainstream community recreation programs, bringing blind and sighted teens together at community centers. Blind teens could go to the beach, water skiing, horseback riding, sailing, skating, and bicycling, with sighted peers. The name of the organization changed again, to the Massachusetts Association for the Blind, to reflect these new services.

Civil Rights and Beyond

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s had profound ramifications far beyond the realm of the racial issues it initially sought to expose. Other disadvantaged groups became acutely aware of how their rights were being denied. A climate of consciousness permeated the world of the disabled and gradually changed the way service providers interacted with their clients. In 1963, President Kennedy called for a reduction "over a number of years and by hundreds of thousands" of the number of persons confined to residential institutions. He asked that methods be found "to retain in and return to the community the

mentally ill and mentally retarded, and thereto restore and revitalize their lives through better health programs and strengthened educational and rehabilitation services." This began two decades of de-institutionalization.

An early participant in the de-institutionalization movement, MAB cooperated with the Commonwealth to design a residential Life Learning Program at Sunlight House that specifically responded to the needs of adults who were both blind and mentally retarded. The first residents were eight men who had lived their entire lives in institutions and lacked even the most basic personal skills. They could not count, brush their teeth, or even recall their own last names. The severe social retardation that life-long institutionalization had forced upon them had discouraged them from ever trying to take care of themselves. At Sunlight House, these men were assigned responsibilities, instructed in daily living skills, and given job training. Within 18 months, they held reasonably demanding jobs, and with the help of a volunteer, arranged a trip to Washington DC that included having lunch with their congressman.

Sunlight House also held a residential program for six deaf-blind children born during the rubella epidemic of the 1960's. Rubella, also known as German measles, affected 20,000 to 30,000 US children, causing multiple disabilities and dramatically increasing the number of children in state institutions. MAB again worked with private and public agencies to develop a program that met the therapeutic and educational needs of the blind children.

Back in Greater Boston, services continued to focus on filling gaps in the social service network available to blind and visually impaired people. The Supportive Services Department provided resources and information, public education, aids and equipment, and the telephone tape. It also published *Contact*, MAB's consumer newsletter, which included household hints, fashion news, activity reminders, descriptions of aids and appliances, and features from "How to Lower Your Heating Bills" to "How to Buy a Piano." Readers may remember the "Aids and Appliances Corner" and the "Business Barometer." Volunteer services and social casework continued, and a Vocational Rehabilitation Program provided high school age and unemployed visually impaired persons with insight into the most feasible occupations and their capabilities in meeting occupational requirements. The Springfield and Worcester offices were primarily offering casework, volunteer services and recreational activities.

In an effort to expand services to African American and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, MAB established two Sight Services Centers at Freedom House and the South End Neighborhood Health Center. The mission of the Centers was "to serve as a link between community needs and existing services and to provide direct services to the community when they are

unavailable from other sources." Although the Sight Services Centers closed when their funding expired, these goals continue at MAB through its commitment to community-based services.

In 1974 MAB's first Consumer Advisory Council was established under the leadership of Board President Albert K. Gayzagian. The Advisory Council helped MAB evaluate programs, develop standards and procedures for new services, and monitor the community's unmet needs from the unique perspective of the consumer. MAB's programs were reorganized in 1975 into two departments, Residential Services (the Deaf-Blind Program and the Life Learning Center) and Community Services, reflecting the agency's philosophical move towards more community-based services. In March 1976 The Permanent Charity Fund (now The Boston Foundation), funded a feasibility study for joint planning and programming among Greater Boston agencies serving the blind. As a result of the study, the custom Braille transcription and recording services at the National Braille Press were transferred to MAB so that NBP could focus on mainstream publications. The addition of these services added even more volunteers to MAB's considerable volunteer community.

A vision rehabilitation clinic was established in conjunction with Mercy Hospital in Springfield, with MAB's social worker providing intake and follow up. The Springfield office's entrepreneurial spirit was celebrated in the January 1979 issue of *MAB Moments*, during Springfield's tenth Anniversary year: noting Springfield's "find needs and fill them" spirit, the article went on to describe a variety of innovative classes and activities developed for local residents, including first aid classes, exercise programs, arts and crafts, and self-defense classes for women.

With the programs at Sunlight House expanding but still administered from downtown Boston, the need for more space and consolidated operations began to grow. Board member Stanley Lewis negotiated the purchase of buildings at 200 and 190 Ivy Street in Brookline, in a gracious and peaceful residential neighborhood where MAB's headquarters are still located. From 1976 to 1977 MAB consolidated its programs in Brookline, selling Sunlight House and relocating the Deaf-Blind program and the Adult Life Learning Program to Ivy Street. The Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation awarded MAB a \$125,000 incentive grant for the purchase of the buildings. Eunice Kennedy Shriver called MAB's programs for multi-handicapped children and adults "unique in this country and doing an enormously important job." She went on to say: "You are, I think, inspiring this whole country to recognize that those with severe handicaps, not just mental retardation but many other handicaps, are worth paying attention to...you're setting for the whole country a pattern - that [handicapped people] have innate value; that they deserve respect; that they deserve equality; and

that is justice, it's not just charity, it's something that they are entitled to and until people all over the country realize that, we really don't have a full democracy.”

The move offered opportunities for new programs and increased enrollment. The Deaf-Blind Program now had thirty children in five classrooms, due in part to changes in funding for special education under Chapter 766, which guaranteed the right of all young people with special needs to an educational program best suited to their needs. The Life Learning Program expanded to 24 men and women living at 190 Ivy Street. MAB also constructed a six-person apartment in 200 Ivy Street, to serve as a transitional living arrangement for adults who might then be able to move to independent or cooperative apartments where they could do their own shopping, cooking and cleaning. A storefront was rented for the Life Learning Center's Day Activity program, (now known as MABWorks) at 44 North Beacon Street. The Day Activity program prepared participants for employment in the community through activities to build skills in daily living, mobility, and communication, and through jobs including craft-making in the workshop and helping out in MAB's kitchen.

By 1979 MAB publications were talking about "a new spirit within the organization, and progress made pushing ahead with new and expanded services." Aids & Appliances Stores opened in MAB's three offices, selling items such as canes, kitchen aids, watches, and talking clocks. MAB was also offering certificate programs in transcription typing, operation of word processing equipment, and medical terminology transcription. Once courses were completed, MAB helped the jobseekers find placements and offered ongoing assistance to help the graduates stay at their new jobs.

Redefining

By the beginning of the 1980's the Deaf-Blind program had evolved into a Multi-handicapped Children's program, serving a broader community need. The Life Learning Program was re-named Adult Services and MABWorks was changed from a day-activity program to a work program. There were 20,698 legally blind individuals in Massachusetts in 1981 and this number would continue to grow through the decade, reaching 29,630 by 1991. MAB was serving 1,250 people yearly and had 550 community volunteers. Start-up funding from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind helped expand services in Springfield and Worcester. While successful at recognizing needs and starting new programs, MAB did not have a strong fundraising operation and struggled to maintain funding for its services. The situation would worsen as state priorities changed and public funds decreased.

As costs began to grow, MAB conducted a number of particularly creative fundraising events. The Senior Society of Everett sponsored a 24-hour hair-cutting marathon at the Louis Beauty Salon & Unisex. More than 100 people came to get a haircut. Annual 10-mile Walkathons were held in Brookline sometimes with notable honorary chair-people such as Joan Benoit and Bobby Orr. And in Worcester, the "Men of Song" sang barbershop harmonies to raise money for services. The agency hired a Development Director in 1988, and began to slowly build an organizational culture committed to raising the funds needed to support its programs.

The technological changes of the Computer Age brought great benefits to the MAB community. The first computers arrived in 1985, partially funded by the Digital Equipment Corporation. For the first time files and documents could be stored electronically. Computerized Braille came to MAB the following year, a harbinger of the enormous changes that computers would bring to communication and information exchange over the coming decades. MAB staff wrote of their amazement as the first pages slid out of the donated Apple IIE computer and the MBoss printer.

The Worcester office celebrated its 25th Anniversary in 1986. Its programs had received funding from the United Way of Central Massachusetts in 1976, and now included volunteer services, community outreach and education, information and referral, a telephone information tape, the Aids & Appliances Store, recreational programs, and meetings for families of persons experiencing sight loss.

Shrinking enrollment in the Multi-handicapped Children's program and the aging out of many students in a short period of time had brought the program into sudden decline by the early nineties. A neglected facility, problems in the program and changing priorities in the funding of special education meant that MAB was not receiving much-needed rate increases from the State. Coupled with the drop in revenue caused by low enrollment, the result was a significant budget deficit that meant the organization was using capital from its endowment to keep its programs going. Searching for new program alternatives, MAB, in consultation with the Department of Education, identified a need for services for children and youth with acquired traumatic brain injuries. The Ivy Street School opened in 1993, the Commonwealth's first self-contained residential treatment and education program for children with traumatic brain injuries.

The school operates year-round, with a majority of students living on site. Ivy Street offers intensive opportunities for vocational and life skills training,

psychotherapy, physical therapy and rehabilitation, individualized education plans, recreation, and social activities. 25 students currently attend the school, which has expanded to include the Cottage Farm program, an off-site residential apartment offering a transitional placement for students who will soon be graduating and moving into community-based living.

MAB's dormitory-style residence at 190 Ivy Street was sold in 1998 to enable the organization to create six 4-person apartments for its Adult Services residents. The new apartments offered the residents their own bedrooms, shared kitchens, and the chance to live life as a resident of a neighborhood, dramatically enhancing the quality of their lives. For some it even brought the opportunity for homeownership. MAB continued to pursue small group living opportunities for additional residents; the most recent example is a residence for three adult women with brain injuries, a unique collaboration between MAB's Adult Services department and The Ivy Street School.

Fundraising Strategies, Mergers, and Growth

In the Community Services department, the Volunteer Program, The Store, and the Braille and Recording studios continued to provide individualized services and information to consumers. Adequate funding was an ongoing problem, made worse by rising costs in Adult Services brought on by the higher levels of staffing needed to cover all of the new residences. In 1993, MAB embarked on a new venture that would raise nearly one million dollars for its services over the next ten years. The *Team With A Vision* was a team of blind and sighted runners who ran in the Boston Marathon® using invitational waivers donated by the Boston Athletic Association. The *Team* raised funds for MAB programs and raised awareness of the capabilities of blind athletes, with MAB *Team* members often placing first, second, or third in the Visually Impaired Division.

In 1997, MAB began a collaboration with the VISION Foundation, a community based nonprofit primarily serving elders experiencing progressive sight loss. The partnership matched MAB Community Volunteers with individuals receiving In-Home Rehabilitation from VISION. As the collaboration developed, the discussions between Executive Directors turned to other collaborative opportunities, and then, to the idea of merger. VISION, which had strong community programs, an emphasis on outreach to underserved communities, and a strong funding base, did not have the resources or organizational size to expand its impact or support its staff. MAB, with its statewide presence, strong volunteer corps, and well-established programs, wanted to expand the scope of its services but did not have the funding or capacity to invest from the ground up.

VISION Foundation had been started in 1970 by a group of women who held self-help meetings around a kitchen table. Seeking help as they adjusted to progressive vision loss, they had been unable to receive advice or assistance from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind because they were not legally blind. Instead they started their own support group and began to compile resources to help those who were coping with vision loss.

With initial funding from the Department of Elder Affairs and ongoing support from the Commission for the Blind, the support groups grew (at this writing there are 34 self-help groups across Massachusetts, all led by visually impaired coordinators). VISION also published articles and resources for people adapting to vision loss, most notably *Coping With Sight Loss*, which offered “a wide range of information urgently needed by people who are losing their sight...with topics including aids and devices, agencies and organizations, low vision services, eye disorders, mobility, job opportunities, benefits, etc.” In 1983 VISION received its first Title III contract to provide in home rehabilitation to elders experiencing sight loss. Over the years the Visually Impaired Elders Project expanded to include more than 50 communities in eastern Massachusetts. VISION and MCB also began to co-sponsor the *Senior Connection*, an annual conference for blind elders from across the state. By the 1990’s, the expanding need for services and resources were fast outstripping the capacity of this small, grassroots organization to support its growth. A merger with MAB offered stability and the chance to share limited resources.

In October of 1998 VISION merged into MAB’s Community Services Department, forming a new department called Vision Community Services, which offered in-home rehabilitation, information and referral services, The Store, community volunteers, customized Braille and recording services, and peer support groups. The rehabilitation program was expanded to Worcester and Springfield, and a new program, Newsline for the Blind[®], was initiated in collaboration with the Massachusetts chapter of the National Federation of the Blind. Newsline[®] made it possible for visually impaired individuals to listen to the daily newspaper over the telephone, giving them timely access to newspapers for the first time. In the spring of 2000 MAB opened a new satellite office in Brockton, offering local volunteer services and in-home rehabilitation to southeastern Massachusetts residents.

100 Years of Service

The merger brought new services, but also a need for increased private fundraising efforts. In 2000 the Board of Trustees began to develop a new

vision for MAB's sustainability. Recognizing the need to build a strong development operation, the Board committed to increasing MAB's capacity to raise funds from individuals, foundations and corporations. As the 100th Anniversary approached, the Trustees also recognized the need for clear goals and strategies to lead MAB into the next century. MAB retained the Bridgespan Group to conduct a comprehensive assessment of its program portfolio and its strengths and weaknesses in its field.

The most substantial change recommended by the 2003 Strategic Plan was a new name for the organization. Since the 1970's, when the residential programs first opened at Sunlight House, the name Massachusetts Association for the Blind had not adequately reflected the organization's breadth of services. In conjunction with its 100th Anniversary celebrations, which featured the musical group The Contours and a keynote speech by Stevie Wonder, MAB was re-named MAB Community Services, Inc. The new name, though keeping the initials of the old organization, was intended to integrate the various program areas under a single agency brand that did not give preference to any one of MAB's constituencies. Integration was a strong theme in the strategic plan, which called for MAB to capitalize on its expertise serving people with a variety of disabilities by building services across program lines.

There were some immediate successes for this new model. A new interdepartmental team of senior management staff was created to encourage shared planning and enhanced programming for clients. The Developmental Disability department (formerly Adult Services) and the Vision department began a collaboration funded by the Department of Mental Retardation to provide orientation and mobility services to adults with developmental disabilities. Other significant investments included the completion of a strategic technology plan that resulted in a \$75,000 grant from the Fidelity Foundation.

The strategic plan also called for a new model for the vision rehabilitation services provided by the Vision Community Services department. As an aging baby boomer population experiences vision loss, the number of people with low vision or blindness is expected to double. Vision loss not only causes a decline in an individual's independence and quality of life, but is also linked to depression, increased falls and fractures, and the inability to manage complex medical conditions such as diabetes. These medical "co-morbidities" mean that increasingly, vision loss must be recognized as a health care problem. Yet MAB's vision programs had been operating under a social service model, and one that was significantly underfunded. With local United Ways tightening their priority areas and a series of mergers among local corporations increasing competition for corporate support, it was clear that MAB's vision services would need more than their current patchwork funding to ensure their future. The

adaptive aids stores, which provided a valuable service for many years but were not financially self-supporting, were closed, followed a few years later by the Braille program and the closure of the Brockton area office.

MAB set out on an ambitious multi-year initiative to professionalize its in-home vision rehabilitation services and stabilize their funding. This has led to increased staff training, the introduction of case management, the addition of social workers and occupational therapists to the case review teams, and an ongoing effort to secure contracts for in-home services from insurance providers and senior care options plans (SCOs). The department, pared down to its essential staff, has also begun to develop creative collaborations with other service providers, including the New England Eye Institute, the Holyoke Health Center diabetes management program, and the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary.

An increasingly successful partnership is the VISION 5K, an annual event involving MAB and five or more local organizations who collaborate to raise money for their services for blind and visually impaired individuals. Originally started as a pledge walk by the VISION Foundation and expanded in 2002 to include a 5K race, the event now draws more than 800 participants and raises \$300,000. Through creative marketing and fundraising the 5K has begun to garner significant attention and community support. It also serves as the US 5K *Championship for the Blind* and attracts elite blind athletes from around the world.

The change introduced by the strategic planning process continued in 2007 with the retirement of the Chief Executive Officer, Joseph Collins, and the hiring of a new CEO, Barbara Salisbury. The MR Services Department, now renamed Developmental Disability Community Services in recognition of changing preference in the disability community, has opened several new community houses and recently took on its first *Turning 22* client. *Turning 22* refers to the age at which individuals with developmental disabilities age out of state-funded educational services and become eligible for adult residential and vocational programming. The years leading up to and immediately following the 22nd birthday are a pivotal period for establishing vocational and independent living skills to ensure that clients can lead full and meaningful lives without the supports of special education. MAB, as a service provider to young adults at the Ivy Street School, is perfectly positioned to create a continuum of services for *Turning 22* clients that capitalize on both the clinical resources of the school and the residential programming expertise in the Developmental Disabilities department.

The Ivy Street School has also expanded its capacity, increasing enrollment

from 25 to 30 in 2007 and opening a new community residence, Browne Street, for students themselves beginning to approach age 22. Vocational training has become an increasing priority for the students, who now all hold jobs at the school or in the community. Vocational training and life skills have been integrated fully into the Ivy Street School curriculum. In another interdepartmental initiative, a Director of Vocational Services was hired, to revitalize the MABWorks program in Watertown, to coordinate new vocational services initiatives throughout the organization, and to transition MAB from a vocational model based on supported, in-house jobs to an inclusive model based on building relationships with community employers and placing as many clients as possible in competitive community based jobs.

MAB retains its strong commitment to consumer and volunteer involvement in programming, and is seeking strong partners with whom it can expand programs and increase its visibility and reach. The expansion of MAB's mission and its growing constituencies has led to a critical need for stable revenue, but the organization's professional and volunteer leadership has responded with strategic growth, careful planning, and a commitment to cultivating partnerships and relationships that can help MAB achieve its goals. The journey into a second century of service is underway.