### Image of a bumble bee spelling out the words, "Share the buzz"THE BESB BUZZ….

A Newsletter for Families of Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired

## Volume 24 Aging and Disability Services logo Spring 2020

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## Department of Aging and Disability Services

Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)

Feature Articles:

COVID-19, Crafts and Cookies, Retirement Wishes, Sofia Sees Hope, Braille Challenge, Department Name Change, York Corrections Prison Braille Program, Coding Workshop, Summer Program Opportunities

In an effort to provide you with faster delivery of our newsletter and program flyers, save paper, and contain printing costs, we are now posting an expanded electronic version on our website:

<https://portal.ct.gov/AgingandDisability>

 (Newsletter is also available in Spanish on our website)

If you provide us with your e-mail address, we will send a copy of the newsletter directly to you by e-mail. Please give your preferred e-mail address to your child’s Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments.

Feel free to contact the newsletter’s co-editors with any suggestions at

 lisa.pruner@ct.gov or adrienne.brown@ct.gov

We welcome your comments and ideas for future newsletter topics.

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COVID-19

Dear parents/guardians,

We hope that you are all safe and healthy. We want to provide you with some updates and information of importance regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are multiple ways to stay connected to the most up-to-date information on COVID-19. There is a statewide website dedicated to the COVID-19 at <https://portal.ct.gov/Coronavirus>. Other resources include calling 2-1-1 for information on available supports and signing up for the Governor’s press releases at <https://portal.ct.gov/Office-of-the-Governor>.

The COVID-19 website is updated frequently and it has the most current information and instructions for all of Connecticut’s residents. This is an unprecedented and evolving situation, so guidance may change rapidly as the pandemic progresses. BESB, like all other state buildings, is closed to the public, with a limited number of staff coming in for essential services only. Nearly all staff are teleworking and using telephone and email primarily to coordinate services to clients. In-home services are only being allowed in extremely urgent situations and only after assessing the risks, since social distancing is essential to slow the spread of the virus. For families that are trying to reach their child’s case worker, email is recommended as the best approach to establish contact.

Service provider options are also limited at this time due to similar telework situations. For those providers that are open and accepting referrals we are strongly encouraging our parents/guardians to follow social distancing protocols for everyone’s safety and well-being, and deferring appointments to a later date if possible. At this point it is not known when community-based services and camp opportunities will return to regular schedules so please stay in contact with us for updates.

~Crafts and Cookies~

By Evelyn Furey

Anyone have fond memories of baking cookies on cold winter days when they were younger? A few of our students made some sweet cookie memories attending a BESB event held on December 18th which included baking and decorating sugar cookies. Students between the ages of 8-12 gathered together at the BESB office in Windsor ready and excited to put their baking skills to use—maybe more excited to put their *eating* skills to use, but I could see some star bakers in the making! This event was a fun way to practice some of those tricky kitchen skills (rolling, mixing, spreading, cutting) that can be applied to more than just cookies. We incorporated a few tips and tricks like using wooden dowels on either side of the dough as you roll it out to keep the cookies an even height and using a tray when decorating the cookies to contain some of the sprinkle and icing mess.  The cookies turned out great - some of them ended up with more frosting and sprinkles than I ever imagined could fit on one cookie! The best part of the event though was our students getting a chance to chat and socialize with other BESB students. If you have a child or student who you think would like to get to know or reconnect with other BESB students reach out to your TVI to see what events are coming up near you!

Best wishes for a happy retirement to Preschool Education Consultant Gail Johnson who retired as of January 2020. While she will be living and working in her beloved White Mountains of New Hampshire, we hope that she will be keeping in touch with us here in Connecticut!

Sofia Sees Hope Update

by Elissa Bass,

Director of Marketing & Communications for Sofia Sees Hope

Sofia Sees Hope (SSH) is a global not-for-profit dedicated to finding treatments and cures for blindness caused by Leber’s congenital amaurosis (LCA) and other rare inherited retinal diseases (IRD).

Since its founding in 2014, Sofia Sees Hope has directed $255,000 to research and given $125,000 to provide families free access to genetic testing. This is in addition to providing outreach support, education and advocacy to the IRD and LCA patient communities through programming and a biennial family conference.

Sofia Sees Hope is able to support research and provide access to genetic testing because of its successful fundraising, primarily through its signature annual gala event, Dinner in the Dark. Matching corporate gifts and other event fundraising proceeds make these donations as well as a national conference for LCA families, and other outreach events throughout the calendar year possible.

For more information check out [www.sofiaseeshope.org](http://www.sofiaseeshope.org)

Did you know about these resources for free Braille books for young readers?

Seedlings Braille Books for Children ([www.seedlings.org](http://www.seedlings.org)) lists:

* **The Book Angel Project (**[**http://www.seedlings.org/bkangel2009.php**](http://www.seedlings.org/bkangel2009.php)**) , which provides three Braille books per year for free to VI kids 0-21 in the US and Canada.**

National Braille Press (<https://www.nbp.org/>) lists:

* **ReadBooks! Project (**[**https://www.nbp.org/ic/nbp/programs/readbooks/readbooks.html**](https://www.nbp.org/ic/nbp/programs/readbooks/readbooks.html)**), which provides literacy bags to young Braille readers at no cost**

American Printing House for the Blind (<https://aph.org>) lists:

* **The Dolly Parton Imagination Library** [**https://sites.aph.org/dolly-partons-imagination-library/**](https://sites.aph.org/dolly-partons-imagination-library/)**, which provides six Braille books per year through the age of six**

Connecticut Has Another Braille Challenge Winner!

Congratulations to Paige Drury of Glastonbury on her “Varsity Level” win in the 20th Annual New England Regional Braille Challenge. The competition, which is a national program of The Braille Institute, is designed to encourage braille skills development. It was held at The Carroll Center in Newtown, MA. Paige is now eligible to compete in The Braille Challenge national finals in Los Angeles in June. According to her TVI, Patti Fahle, Paige has participated in the Braille Challenge for ten years and has been to the Braille challenge National finals in Los Angeles six times! Paige is a high school junior with a passion for music. She has sung the National anthem all over the state! She enjoys theater and has been involved with several plays. Most recently, she participated in the musical Mama Mia!

Many Connecticut students participate in the Braille Challenge each year. If your child is interested in participating, they should speak with their TVI.

For more information on what is involved in the Braille Challenge, check out their website at:

 <https://www.brailleinstitute.org/braille-challenge>



 Department Name Change

By Brian Sigman, BESB Director

Through Public Act 19-157, effective October 1, 2019, our agency became the Department of Aging and Disability Services.  The change was implemented in order to better reflect the services the agency now provides with the consolidation of the former Department on Aging into the Department of Rehabilitation Services. With the consolidation and subsequent transfer of the State Unit on Aging and the CT Long Term Care Ombudsman Program into our agency, a new name that better represents the work that we do and our agency mission of maximizing opportunities for the independence and well-being of all people with disabilities and older adults in Connecticut will help guide the public toward locating these services. The State Unit on Aging administers programs that provide meals, employment, health insurance counseling, services for family caregivers and other supportive services, while the Ombudsman Program provides individual advocacy to residents of nursing facilities, residential care homes and assisted living communities. Our agency name is most frequently referred to as “Aging and Disability Services” or “ADS” when an abbreviation must be used. The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) continues in the agency structure as a bureau that focuses on serving individuals of all ages that experience significant visual impairment.

Have you explored these websites?

* **Paths to Literacy** – an ever-growing collection of articles, tips and information related to literacy for kids with visual impairments of all ages, sponsored by Perkins School for the Blind: [**https://www.pathstoliteracy.org/**](https://www.pathstoliteracy.org/)
* **Paths to Technology** – also sponsored by Perkins School for the Blind – a collection of articles, tips and videos related to technology of all kinds for kids with visual impairments[**https://www.perkinselearning.org/technology**](https://www.perkinselearning.org/technology)

York Correctional Institution Prison Braille Program

By Nancy Mothersele, Braille Coordinator

In 2017 The American Printing House for the Blind (APH) received a grant from West Hartford based J. Walton Bissell Foundation. This Connecticut-based philanthropic organization wanted to award a grant which would benefit blind and visually impaired individuals here in Connecticut. The resulting prison Braille program at the York Correctional Institution in Niantic is a partnership between the American Printing House for the Blind, Department of Correction and the Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind. The J. Walton Bissell Foundation awarded APH a $26,000 grant to buy computers and other equipment needed to launch the program, including a Perkins Braille embosser, translation software and Braille paper.

To create the program the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB), working closely with APH, reached out to the Connecticut Department of Corrections (DOC). The Commissioner of DOC met with all involved and offered an area in the York Correctional Facility for Women to house a program. This area, which had been used for data entry, could hold at least forty inmates. BESB and DOC then worked with APH, ordering equipment and software to build this program. Inmates were interviewed by the BESB Braille Coordinator, the DOC supervisor that would oversee the program and a representative from Correctional Enterprises. Ten inmates met the criteria.

For nearly two years the Braille Coordinator from BESB instructed the inmates in the Braille code. Nine of the ten original participants have completed the rigorous course and received their certification from The Library of Congress in Literary Braille transcription. These nine certified transcriptionists will now be able to produce literary Braille for the students of Connecticut.

In January a graduation ceremony was held at York Correctional Institution for the nine women who obtained their national certifications. The Commissioner of the Department of Aging and Disability Services and the Director of BESB joined the Commissioner of Corrections, the Director of Correctional Enterprises, the Director of the J. Walton Bissell Foundation and the Director of the National Prison Braille Program from APH at the graduation ceremony. The women were able to invite their families to be in attendance as they received their certifications.

In 2019, the J. Walton Bissell Foundation, seeing the success of the initial program, awarded an additional $20,000 grant to enable the expansion of the program and the purchase of specialized equipment and software.

Presently, there are nine certified literary transcriptionists at York who are now working to obtain additional certifications in Nemeth Code (math), proofreading, formatting and foreign language. Over the past year an additional ten participants have been added to the program. The new participants are all working on learning Braille to obtain their Library of Congress Braille transcriptionist certifications.

This successful collaboration will enable Braille reading students of Connecticut to receive transcribed materials in a timely manner and will allow the offenders to re-enter into society with very specialized skills for future employment.

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Coding Activities Workshop

By Jessie Mabry, Access Technology Specialist

In September 2019, I had the opportunity, along with TVIs Patti Fahle and Hope Pardee, to attend a two-day workshop about teaching coding concepts to blind and low-vision students. It was held at the Perkins School for the Blind near Boston and led by Diane Brauner, who oversees Perkins’s Paths to Technology website and has a wealth of experience teaching tech, vision-related skills, and orientation and mobility.

Diane first explained to us that coding involves not only programming, but other more basic concepts that students typically start learning very early and use in daily life such as problem-solving, following directions, measuring, mental mapping, teamwork, role delegation, and so on. It is important that our students learn these skills along with their peers in ways adapted for their needs and gamifying them makes them a lot more memorable.

We began our workshop with “unplugged” activities that even preschoolers could do—using an egg carton as a rudimentary grid to learn about rows, columns, left/right, and route-planning, for instance. Then we took those concepts into the virtual space and practiced with some simple coding apps on an iPad that included text-to-speech, such as the Ballyland Code series. At the end of each day, we used toy robots and created obstacle courses for them in teams, with each member in an assigned role.

The culminating project was a real-world problem: Diane had us pretend that our robots were crossing a Bahamian island ravaged by Hurricane Dorian, (a current event at the time), to bring supplies, clean up debris, and rescue residents. We included obstacles that approximated what someone might actually encounter in such a situation—alligators, rickety bridges, downed power lines and toppled buildings for our bots to navigate on their missions. We also practiced recording the code needed to get the bots through the course correctly. You can read more and watch videos of our creations here: <https://www.perkinselearning.org/technology/blog/coding-and-stem-robot-obstacle-challenges-2-hurricane-dorian>

Our activities included high contrast, texture, sound, and other

elements that would help students of all abilities fully participate. Diane also solicited our ideas for ways to adapt projects and told us about several she was working on.

My colleagues and I returned to Connecticut excited to apply what we learned. We have already obtained a few coding toys and taught an interactive lesson with high school students.

For a great summary of coding activities, check out this link:

<https://www.perkinselearning.org/technology/blog/coding-posts-summary>

Summer 2020 Opportunities

Please speak with your child’s TVI regarding these or other programs that may be appropriate for your child this summer! Note that dates are subject to change or cancellation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Camp Independence

Learn more: <https://www.channel3kidscamp.org/>

This is a one-week traditional overnight camp experience for children and teens who are blind, visually impaired, and deafblind. The purpose of this camp week is to empower children to participate in all activities to the best of their ability. They learn to advocate for themselves and engage in the community to the maximum extent possible. It is important that children with vision and hearing impairments be included in sports, physical and recreational activities, receiving the same opportunities as their peers to be successful.  A camp setting offers children the instruction and tools to learn how to become active members of their schools and communities.

Dates for this year’s program this are August 9-14 at Channel 3 Kids Camp in Andover. For more information contact Melissa Shea at 860-742-2267 or M.Shea@channel3kidscamp.org

NFB BELL Academy 2020

Learn more: <https://www.nfb.org/programs-services/nfb-bell-academy>

The National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut is proud to offer the Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Summer Program for children ages 4-12 who are blind or visually impaired and in need of additional Braille instruction. This nationwide program will encourage students to cultivate their knowledge of music, engage in physical activities, interact in their communities, and improve their Braille literacy and arithmetic abilities. Children will learn independent living skills, interact with blind adult mentors and enjoy curriculum-related field trips. The two-week summer program will be held at the Montessori School of Greater Hartford in West Hartford, CT from July 27, 2020 to August 7, 2020. The BELL Academy is free to your qualifying child. For details and registration please visit the website at <https://www.nfb.org/programs-services/nfb-bell-academy/nfb-bell-academy-application> or contact Connecticut Coordinator, Honorata Kazierczak at BELLinCT@gmail.com or (860) 620-3128.

How Is BESB Helping During School Shutdowns?

* **BESB staff are reaching out to teams and families to offer support, consultation and direct service.**
* **BESB staff are working hard to help school teams make new online learning platforms *accessible* to all students.**
* **BESB staff are creating and compiling resources for at-home learning to help families cope with school closures while working on important Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) skills.**
* **Please contact your child’s assigned BESB staff for additional information and assistance.**

Connecticut to Host NE/AER Conference 2020

Planning is underway for the Northeast Chapter of the Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (NE/AER) annual conference scheduled for November 4-6 at the Mystic Hilton. TVIs from Connecticut, as this year’s hosts, are hard at work planning an outstanding conference for vision professionals from across New England and Canada. BESB Education Consultants Evelyn Furey and Lori Cornelius are co-chairing the conference. The theme for the conference is MYSTICal CONNections. Ask your TVI for more information on the conference and stay tuned for more information in the fall!

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Looking for a refresher on how to access your child’s technology? Check out the instructional videos available from Hadley School for the Blind!

<https://hadley.edu/InstructionalVideos/>