

BayLines

Winter, 2017

BayLines



**Bay State
Council of the Blind**

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**President's Message:
BSCB: A Membership Organization
by Brian Charlson**

As we recover from the hustle and bustle that are hallmarks of the holiday season, the leadership and membership of the Bay State Council of the Blind can feel very proud, and more than a little bit exhausted, following a year filled with legislative and regulatory accomplishments and social and educational interaction. But, as with most things in this world, time does not stand still for any individual or organization.

What might we find ourselves doing in the new year? What challenges will we face when working with government? What ways might we find to embrace and support those who are newly blinded and struggling to live independently, and those who have worked so hard to be employable and still find it impossible to find work?

The Bay State Council of the Blind is many things to many people. For some, it is a social outlet allowing them to go to the movies, go bird watching, get a strike at the bowling alley, or just go out to dinner with people they have come to like and trust. For others, it is a way for them to take part in the legislative process that might improve the unemployment situation or the quality and availability of education for those who are blind or have low vision.

All of this comes from working together to provide opportunities for those who are blind or visually impaired to achieve anything they are willing to work for. We cannot work together if we forget that the Bay State Council of the Blind is first and foremost a membership organization. While we can individually benefit from programs, services, and devices that have come about as the result of the work of others, we can only impact the quality and

availability of these programs, services, and devices, if we advocate for them as a group. There is power in numbers and opportunity in numbers.

While we might as individuals not need anything from the special education system, others do. While we may not need financial assistance from the Social Security Administration, others do. While we might not enjoy television, plays or the movies, others do. While we may not need to take advantage of paratransit, others do. We all benefit from a more accessible and inclusive world.

Stop and think about how the attitudes of those who are sighted are formed. If they know a well-educated blind child who is attending the same school as their sighted child, don't we benefit from that improved attitude? When the employees of a business find themselves relying on the skills of a blind or visually impaired co-worker who has had quality training in the use of their computer, don't we all benefit from that impression? When someone's elderly parent can administer their own medication because of accessible labeling of medication, don't we all benefit when our children are considering just how safe we will be if allowed to stay in our homes rather than pressuring us to move into an assistive living facility?

If you are reading this and are not currently a member of the Bay State Council of the Blind, join us. If you are a member but don't take part in our social and advocacy activities, join us. If you are an active member, make a point to bring a blind or visually impaired friend to a chapter meeting or social event.

Let me finish by thanking all of you for being part of my life. I have gained so much more from my association with you than I can ever repay. Giving someone a place to turn when they are having trouble with one or more aspect of vision loss is a gift few others

can give. Membership in the Bay State Council of the Blind is truly “the gift that keeps on giving.”

Save the Dates by Bob Hachey

There are two important events in the month of March that BSCB members and friends may wish to attend.

The first is the ninth annual BLIND Day which will be held in the Great Hall of the Massachusetts State House on Thursday, March 16 from eleven a.m. until two p.m. This is an opportunity for all of us to visit or contact the offices of our state representatives and senators to advocate for the important services provided by the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, The Talking Book Library, Perkins School, and the Carroll Center. Lunch will be served. Budgets are expected to be very tight for the next fiscal year, which increases the need for advocacy on these fronts. For those unable to attend the event, please consider contacting your elected officials via phone or email. BLIND is an acronym, which means Blindness Legislative Informational Networking Day. Anyone who needs more information or assistance registering should contact me at 781-893-6251.

The second event is the BSCB Spring Conference, which will be held on the weekend of Saturday, March 25. The convention runs from Friday through Sunday and the location will once again be the Marriott Hotel in Burlington. All members should have received the convention mailing well before this issue of *BayLines* is published. Please contact me with any questions.

Outdoor Recreation in a New England Winter by Bob Hachey

New England winter usually means cold weather and snow. Some folks who love the warmer weather make efforts to avoid spending time outdoors until the baseball season rolls around. However, winter provides the opportunity to participate in fun activities such as skiing, ice skating, ice fishing, and snow shoeing.

Below, I'll provide a listing of organizations that provide some of these opportunities. Please note that it is too late for many of these activities in 2017, but that they will very likely be scheduled in future years. For best results, you should contact the organization listed, especially if you will be needing accommodations such as sighted guide or a ski guide.

Ski For Light (SFL) is an organization that provides both local and national opportunities for cross-country skiing. This organization was founded in 1975 in Norway for the purpose of introducing blind and visually impaired persons to cross-country skiing. SFL holds a week-long national event that includes skiing as well as plenty of social activities. Blind skiers are matched with a guide for the week. There are also local events that take place each year in northern New England, which include cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. New England Regional Ski For Light also offers summer activities such as canoeing, hiking and tandem bicycling. For further information, go to the following websites:

www.nersfl.org

<http://www.sfl.org/>

You may also phone New England Regional Ski for Light's President Marie Hennessey at 781-321-1071.

Maine Adaptive Sports and Recreation sponsors an annual New England Blind & VI Ski Festival. This event includes both guided downhill and cross-country skiing.

Highlights of the Festival include:

- Alpine ski instruction by trained volunteer instructors
- Option to try cross-country skiing
- Evening activities (bring your instrument if you play)
- Welcome Pizza Party and celebratory Banquet at the end of the Festival
- Guest speakers
- The chance to test your skills in an Alpine Race course
- Opportunities to make connections with other Blind and VI skiers and guides
- Fun!

Maine Adaptive supplies the lessons and equipment at no cost. The Welcome Pizza Party, Banquet and evening activities are all included in the Festival. They have lodging packages available for anyone who needs lodging, and transportation from Portland is available. For more information, or to sign up contact them at 207-824-2440 or email: info@maineadaptive.org.

New England Healing Sports Association (NEHSA) offers downhill skiing for persons with a wide variety of disabilities including blindness at Mount Sunapee. For further information, go to <http://nehsa.org/about-us/overview>. You may also contact NEHSA via phone at 603-763-9158 or send them an email at info@nehsa.org.

New England Disabled Sports Offers guided instruction in skiing and snowboarding at the Loon Mountain and Bretton Woods resorts in New Hampshire. They recommend that anyone interested in participating in this program make reservations at least one week in advance. New England Disabled Sports can be

reached via the web at <http://nedisabledsports.org> or via phone at 603-745-9333.

The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, (DCR) offers ice skating, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing at a number of locations throughout the state on specific dates through its Universal Access Program. While many of these dates will have passed us by when you read this, these activities will continue to be offered in future years. You can find the Universal Access Program on the web at <http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr/massparks/accessibility>, or call Laila Soleimani, Outreach Coordinator at 413-545-5759.

Ice Fishing by Jerry Berrier

[Editor's note: This article appeared in *BayLines* approximately ten years ago.]

When I signed up recently to take a bus trip with my chapter of the Bay State Council of the Blind to Boston to see an audio described theater performance, I never dreamed it would lead to a chance to experience ice fishing. We had arranged to take the one-hour trip along with some clients of the local branch of the Massachusetts Association for the Blind and some volunteer escorts. One of the volunteers talked her husband Joe into going along, and somehow he and I got into conversation on the way back. I had always wondered how ice fishing was done, and when he mentioned that he ice fishes, I asked a few questions; well, actually I asked dozens of questions. Finally Joe, who I know had had very minimal experience with people who are blind, hesitantly asked, "Do you think you might like to go and try it sometime?"

Of course, I responded with great enthusiasm, but I truly never expected to hear from him again.

Often in conversation, a person will casually make an offer to get together for an event or activity, but then the business of life gets in the way, and soon the promise is forgotten. Not so with Joe, though. A few weeks later he called me and told me when to be ready and what to wear — warm boots and gloves, and layers of warm clothes.

I wanted to go, but I had misgivings. "What if I fall through the ice? What if I get cold or bored? What if it's so slippery that I can't stay upright?" In retrospect though, I'll bet my ambivalence was nothing compared to what must have been going through Joe's mind. "What if he gets hurt? No, even worse, what if I let him get hurt? What if he doesn't like ice fishing? What if I say the wrong thing and offend him? Even if all else goes well, what if we don't catch any fish?"

Although he knew very little about me, having met me only once, he put aside any misgivings he may have had, perhaps knowing the value of helping another human being to experience something brand new, something that person may never have another chance to experience. I am so grateful that there are people in the world like Joe who have the courage to reach out when many would back away. I only hope I may be as forthcoming in my relationships with others.

I knew I was in for a rare good time when on the way to the pond Joe mentioned that he planned to show me everything he could and that I would be sharing in some hard work. We spent five hours out in the open on a frozen reservoir, with weather that included a snow shower and several brief sunny periods. When it was calm and the sun was out, the 30 degree temperature felt balmy, but then a gust of wind would come along to remind us

that it was still winter. Joe and his son-in-law Randy, who met us there, said they have fished many times in weather that made this day seem like springtime.

Joe's fishing equipment is kept in a large rectangular box that just fits in the rear cargo area of his truck. It has ski-like runners underneath it so it can be pulled along like a sled. It holds everything needed for ice fishing, including a chair, a five-foot long hand auger used to drill through the ice, and dozens of smaller pieces of equipment. Attached to the box was a bucket of water containing "shiners", small live fish used as bait.

It had snowed a little the night before, so the walking was very easy out on the ice. I needn't have worried about falling through, as the ice was about fourteen inches thick. Once we got to what Joe felt was a good fishing spot, he handed me the auger, very similar to an old-fashioned wood brace but much longer. It took me 5 or 6 minutes of hard work to drill the first hole, and by then I was almost warm enough to remove my coat. He then handed me a vertical wooden stick that had a spool of line attached near the bottom. About halfway up the stick were cross pieces to keep it from falling through the 7-inch in diameter hole I had drilled in the ice. The spool near the bottom was filled with 10-pound test fishing line, at the end of which was tied a steel leader with a fishhook attached. As I learned later, pickerel have teeth and can bite through nylon line (Joe actually held one's mouth open so I could feel its teeth). Attached near the top of the vertical stick is a length of spring steel with a flag on one end. The flag is held down by a metal clip attached to a mechanism that releases it when something begins pulling on the line. Each licensed fisherman is permitted to set up five tilts, and they keep a close watch on them all. When a flag pops up, they jump up and hurry over to see what is happening.

Joe and I placed his 5 tilts in a circle about 30 feet apart. Pretty soon, Randy, who was attending to his own tilts some distance away, yelled "FLAG!" Joe looked where Randy was pointing and then he and I rushed over to the spot. I knelt down to examine the tilt, and I could feel it vibrating as line was rapidly being pulled off the spool by a hungry fish. Following Joe's instruction, I waited to give the fish a chance to swim a distance with the bait, and then I carefully lifted the tilt out of the hole and laid it on the ice while allowing the line to continue to slip through my fingers. When the time seemed right, I gave a quick jerk upward on the line to set the hook. Ah yes, something was still pulling and jerking on the line. I then began pulling the line by hand up through the hole in the ice and eventually hauled up a nice pickerel about 15 inches long.

I don't know who was more excited, Joe or I. I held the line up, dangling the fish while Joe took a picture, and then he deftly removed the hook from the fish's mouth and carefully dropped the creature back down through the hole where it could resume its comfortable life in the frigid water.

Between the three of us, we caught several more pickerel and one good-sized bass. When things got quiet, we sat on lawn chairs and consumed the food and hot drinks we had brought with us, but each time someone called "Flag", off we went to check out a tilt. Sometimes it was a false alarm; maybe a gust of wind caused the flag to pop up, or maybe something tugged at the line and then thought better of it. More often than not though, an upright flag meant another fish was about to make our acquaintance.

I don't know if I would ever become an avid ice fisherman like Joe, but I certainly enjoyed myself out there in spite of, no, partly because of, the wind and changeable weather. I had a great time out there on the ice, but what I really want to say is that Joe's

willingness to share his time and his love of ice fishing with me reminded me how precious human relationships are and that I also have a responsibility to reach out and share my own experience and passions with others.

Things could have gone differently. Joe could have forgotten to ever call me to invite me. I could have avoided taking any risk by declining his invitation. Joe and Randy weren't quite sure what to expect on this fishing trip, and neither was I, but all three of us were willing to step just a bit beyond our own comfort zones to experience something new. It was cold out there on the ice, but that experience was one of the warmest I have had in quite a while. I'll bet I could talk them into taking me ice fishing with them again one of these days!

Introducing GoGoGrandparent by Bob Hachey

Here is a new service taking advantage of the new on demand transportation technology that can help older adults maintain their independence while putting family members' minds at ease.

GoGoGrandparent connects seniors to Uber and Lift to get to doctor's appointments, bridge club or anywhere they want to go within 100 miles. It sounds super easy and no smart phone is required. You can try out their demo with a sample phone call right from their website. Operators are available 24/7, too! Register today by dialing 855-464-6872. You can add an emergency contact for safety purposes. Your emergency contact can receive an email or text message alerting them of your requested trip. The best thing about this service is that you aren't required to download an App, and that is good for seniors who don't have a cell phone.

The service also offers restaurant and grocery delivery in test areas. The frequently asked questions can be found by visiting <https://gogograndparent.com/faq>.

[Editor's note: I spoke with one of the live operators for this service and she was very happy to answer my questions. Do not be dissuaded by the name; this service is available to anyone. When you register, your GoGoGrandparent account will be tied to a credit card for payment. It is available in any community that is served by Lyft or Uber. There is an additional fee of \$0.19 per minute to use this service over and above the Lyft or Uber fare. Thus, a 20-minute trip will cost the user an extra \$3.80.]

Is Braille Relevant in 2017? **by Timothy Vernon**

[Editor's Note: The following article is reprinted from the Perkins Transitions Blog for the month of December 2016. It may be found on the web at <http://www.perkinselearning.org/transition/blog/braille-relevant-2017>.]

On January fourth, millions of blind people worldwide will pay homage to Louis Braille on his 207th birthday. The braille system, which Louis began perfecting at the tender age of eleven, was adopted as the primary reading method of the blind by France in 1854, and started being used in the United States in 1860. Today, dynamic technological advances have caused the braille literacy rate of blind children to decline. According to National Braille Press, 12% of blind students learn braille. I wish to highlight how knowing braille impacts my daily life today, and will continue to help me in the future.

In the summer of 1999, I was a freshman in high school, and held my first job as a receptionist at Collette Vacations in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Collette had over 500 employees to whom I needed to efficiently connect callers. I placed the extension list in braille, kept it in a binder, and referred to it to obtain proper contact information. As my responsibilities at Collette increased, I placed tour descriptions into braille so I could respond to customer inquiries on tour highlights.

Braille remains important in my employment today. I am employed by a utility company, and receive emergency calls reporting gas leaks or odors. Each call is potentially a life-threatening situation, and I read a list of safety precautions, which are written in braille. Soon, I will be delivering an oral presentation as part of a promotional exam. I will have notes for my presentation in braille to help deliver the speech with ease.

I know braille books are cumbersome, braille writers are heavy, and braille displays are expensive. However, without braille, it would have been impossible to learn proper spelling, grammar, and sentence structure. Also without braille, I would not have been named to the Dean's List at Fitchburg State University, or have recently received an award for exemplary customer service at work. As you consider whether braille is important, remember that of the 85,000 blind adults in the United States who are employed, 90% are braille literate. Louis Braille's invention is one of the best gifts found under a Christmas tree; braille knowledge places visually impaired people on an equal footing with sighted relatives and friends.

Your Editor Gets an Early Christmas Present by Bob Hachey

On December 14, 2016, I decided to once again contact Verizon customer service to see if they had any information on providing accessible set top cable boxes for blind and visually impaired persons. This is a call I had made many times since my Comcast using friends had gained access to their cable boxes around 2 years ago; until now, all such calls had ended in frustration. In less than a week, cable television and satellite providers would be required by federal communications regulations to offer accessible set top boxes to their blind and visually impaired customers.

I was pleasantly surprised that the customer service representative to whom I spoke had just received training on a newly implemented feature that would offer me access to the onscreen information. She told me how to turn on what is known as text to speech. She also told me that, if necessary, Verizon would send out a technician to my home to turn on the service for me at no cost.

That evening, I got my wife to help me turn on text to speech, and from that point on, I've been a bit like a kid in a candy store. I now have access to most of the information that sighted Verizon customers take for granted. I make regular use of the guide, the digital video recorder, and the ability to turn audio descriptions on and off. If you leave it on all the time, you will find that some channels are broadcast in Spanish, which does not work very well if you don't speak the language. The only problem now is that I may just be listening to too much TV!

I wish to close by expressing a heartfelt thank you to Senator Ed Markey for all of his efforts to make media accessible to the blind

and visually impaired. He was the lead sponsor for the Communications and Video Accessibility Act, which was signed into law by President Obama in 2010. If any of you do not have access to your cable boxes and would like to remedy that situation, please contact me. I'll be happy to assist you in either making it work for you, or filing a complaint if your provider has failed to comply with the new regulations.

Seniors Who Volunteer Can Work Off Some of Their Property Tax Bills

by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue

[Editor's Note: This short article was taken from the official blog of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue. It can be found on the web at <https://blog.mass.gov/revenue/current-affairs-2/seniors-who-volunteer-can-work-off-some-of-their-property-tax-bills>.]

While the Senior Circuit Breaker Tax Credit may offer homeowners over the age of 65 a substantial tax credit on state income tax, those 60 and over may benefit from a different type of program designed to help lessen the burden of local property tax payments. The program is known as the Senior Citizen Property Tax Work-Off Abatement Program.

The tax work-off abatement law allows a city or town to establish a program giving property owners 60 or older the opportunity to volunteer services to the city or town in exchange for a reduction in property tax of up to \$1,000. (The law was recently amended to increase the maximum amount of the reduction from \$750 to \$1,000. A community may choose a lower amount, however.)

The city or town, not the state, administers the program, keeping track of hours worked and crediting for each hour worked an amount not to exceed the minimum wage, currently \$8 per hour. Regulations for the program vary from community to community. Income limits for eligibility may vary, for instance, and some communities may set a ceiling on the program that is less than the \$1,000 maximum allowed under state law.

Participants may be asked to do anything from painting fire hydrants to answering phones to stacking books in the local library. In return, they receive a record of their work, which is also sent to the local assessor in order to reduce the volunteer's property tax bill. The value of the work is not considered to be wages and therefore is not taxable.

To see if your community participates in the tax work-off program, contact your local council on aging, senior center, or assessor. Some communities report waiting lists, so don't delay in contacting local officials to see if the program is available in your community.

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