



Hello My name is Cory Brunner and am the SR. VP for a company called Vancro. (provide visual description). A quick introduction into who Vancro is – Vancro was Founded in 2004 and is a Service-Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business. We are company whose primary focus is accessibility services to include sign language interpreting and Support Service Providers or SSPs.

Vancro has been providing SSP's in VT since 2022 from variety of funding sources.

Before I jump into why an SSP program is important I want you to take a minute and ask you to imagine me in 4 years. I will be 54 and will notice something wrong with my vision. After several visits to the ophthalmologist, I will be told that I have Macular Degeneration. By 55 I will stop driving. By 57 I will be wearing hearing aids – something that happens to many members of my family. And then I will stop-

I will stop going to the gym because I can't see the equipment well enough

I will stop going to the town council meeting because I can't hear well enough

I will stop going to my doctors for 3-month allergy shots because I don't want to ask my neighbor or my husband to take me AGAIN to the doctors

I will stop doing the grocery shopping

I will stop asking anyone to take me to visit my family in Boston. Not only because it's too much to ask someone to drive me but when I get there, I can't follow the conversation, and I am always asking someone to tell me what's going on. I can tell they are annoyed.

So I just stop.

Or -

Imagine me in 4 years. I will be 54 and will notice something wrong with my vision. After several visits to the ophthalmologist, I will be told that I have Macular Degeneration. By 55 I will stop driving. By 57 I will be wearing hearing aids – something that happens to many members of my family. By 57 and a half I will have an SSP.

This SSP brings me to the gym and guides me around the free weights and guides my hand to the dumbbells I need to use.

This SSP will repeat speaking slower in my better ear the comment that I missed at the town council meeting

This SSP will bring me to my doctors and will read the new HIPAA Form that I need to sign and Guide my hand to where it needs to go so that I can sign the form

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This SSP will visually describe the bananas to me when I am grocery shopping so I can pick out the perfect one to make banana bread

And when I visit my family, this SSP will describe everything. They will guide me to where my 10-year-old nephew is so he can show me his new Switch and then they will describe what it looks like so we can talk about his favorite game

This is why an SSP and why is this important

Referred to as DeafBlind, Vermonters with dual sensory hearing and vision loss often find themselves living in isolation. Simple tasks like grocery shopping, getting a haircut or scheduling an appointment become challenging without relying on friends or family for assistance. Often feeling like a burden, many DeafBlind people elect not to attend to their health or enjoy recreational activities. There is a substantial negative impact to their mental and physical health and an associated negative impact to the relationship they have with friends and family.

The introduction of Support Service Provider (SSPs) dismantles that barrier. SSPs are highly trained professionals serving as sighted guides, offering visual, social and environmental description of surroundings, and providing transportation access. This program allows for DeafBlind Vermonters to lead more autonomous lives, fostering independence and self-determination.

Ranked as Number 3 in the country for having the oldest population – Vermont will continue to see an increase of people becoming DeafBlind. Many living in rural areas. This program is not solely for people who know American Sign Language, 80% of the people in the current program are not signers. They are your neighbors and your family members.

The provision of these services not only enhance the physical and mental health of Vermonters' but also creates valuable employment opportunities for Vermont community members.

Our team of SSPs includes a diverse group of individuals: College students who return home and work during the summer, Moms who have young children seeking flexible hours, retired folks who want to work part-time and people just entering the workforce looking to gain experience.

A national study on caregiving in 2015 stated that the average employer who has a caregiving employee has a lost work time average of 23.1 percent annually. A Gallup study in 2011 states caregiver absenteeism costs 25.5 billion dollars annually – at a conservative estimate of \$200.00 a day. The SSP program alleviates that financial burden for employers.

There is not an alternative to this program. -piecemeal funding, which has been the program's reality, is ineffective. DeafBlind Vermont's are unable to plan for the future and live with ongoing anxiety about the program's potential termination. There have been gaps in service and the hours allocated to program participants keep changing. It doesn't work. There is NO set aside federal program that supports DeafBlind People by providing SSPs. There is no Department of Health program that has available funding. There are no grants readily available to support SSP programs. Not the Vermont Community fund, not the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, not Helen Keller. We have tried. I promise you – we have tried.

While there are limited transportation options available for medical needs, they are pick up drop off programs only – they will bring you to UVMMC but they won't guide you to the third floor where your cardiac specialist is, nor will they read the HIPAA form you need to sign.

I know you received numbers and data from Fred and Angela. The data is a direct reflection of available funding. If you want to see all of the SSP programs nation-wide Helen Keller National Center has a resource for that online. Vancro runs 2 other SSP program and for funding comparison in New Mexico we have an SSP program that is fully funded at \$450,000, and there are 99 participants in the program and over 2000 hours of service provision annually (and a waitlist). In Nebraska our program is \$110,000 and we provide 615 hours of service annually and serve 25 participants (also with a waitlist)

Finally, I will close by sharing the words of our participants. Every 6 months we survey the people in our program - this is what they say:

“” The isolation feels much less than without the SSP service, I feel like I can understand what is going on around me. I feel like I am in a much more calm mental space. I used to be scared being Deaf then of course it became a huge concern when blindness was mentioned. I feel less stressed out. The SSP program brings a sense of peace in my life that I've been fortunate to have.

The SSP program has been a godsend, expanded my world to more possibilities and a sense of empowerment. Going to the gym was something I never felt comfortable doing until I tried going with an SSP. Now I do not worry about tripping, running into other people objects etc. I actually have a decent workout. Exploring different trails, parks and walking at a brisk pace with an SSP is a game changer for me. Being in touch with my body and becoming more active on a physical level helps, helps improve my mental health and, more importantly, grows me spiritually, giving me a sense of purpose



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The program has enabled me to independently participate in everyday activities and be an active member of my community. Without the help of SSP's, I would be

unable to independently work, go to doctor visits, shop for groceries, or complete continuing education certifications.

With an SSP, I feel that I have regained a lot of independence that is lost with dual sensory losses. Family, we don't want to trouble all the time and the same with friends, I feel like I am using friends/family to do the things I want or need to participate in. I hate asking them and now I don't have to.

Being assisted in reading things and being navigated makes me feel less stressed rather than other services where I am simply dropped off at the door

Vancro assists me tremendously by reading things to me. When I am shopping they also describe things to me. When going to appointments they assist me in filling out forms. When it comes to communicating, they also help in telling me what is being said so I remain part of the conversation. They navigate me to places where I need to go so I don't feel lost.

I cannot sing the praises of the SSP program more than I already do! This program has allowed me to have my independence back! No more begging, neighbors, friends, or family to give me a ride somewhere ... I can now make my own decisions ... simply no words. I cannot explain how freeing it is to make my own choices again and have a reliable assistant there to support me. SSPs Rock!!

SSP program has benefited me tremendously! Now I don't have to chase my grouchy family members! I am able to attend Deaf social events which keep me in touch with friends and new people

And My favorite:

This year for the first time in 15 years I bought my wife an anniversary gift without her having to come with me. The SSP guided me to the store and visually described every piece of jewelry. When I got back in the car with my SSP I cried. ""

I want to thank you for the consideration of supporting this program, I am available at any time to answer questions.



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<https://learn.helenkeller.org/mod/glossary/view.php?id=1690&mode&hook=ALL&sortkey&sortorder&fullsearch=0&page=-1>

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