

Montana Business Enterprise Program
For the Blind and Visually Impaired

Senate Education
SENATE EDUCATION

EXHIBIT NO. 11

DATE 2-16-05

BILL NO. SB-335

SB 335 -- FACT SHEET

SB 335	The purpose of SB 335 is to increase the number and scope of opportunities available to licensed blind vendors for the operation of vending machine facilities in Montana. This is accomplished by eliminating the language in the Blind Vendors Act that excludes "federal military reservations" from the program's scope. (The federal statute specifically <i>includes</i> the Department of Defense in the federal program.) The impact of this change would be substantial, likely providing enough additional business in the Great Falls area alone to enable the placement of between 2 and 3 new blind vendors .
PROGRAM BACKGROUND	The Montana Business Enterprise Program (MBEP), also referred to as the Blind Vendors Program , was restarted in 2000 after a 15-year hiatus. Its mission is to provide blind and visually impaired individuals in Montana with opportunities for remunerative employment, enlarged economic opportunities, and increased self-support. The program is authorized under the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act of 1936, as amended, and the Montana Blind Vendors Act of 1981. The program was established in response to a major need for employment opportunities for the blind and visually impaired in Montana, whose current unemployment rate is estimated to be at least 75 percent.
BUSINESS FOCUS	The program's business focus is on the operation of vending machine facilities on federal, state and other properties in Montana by blind vendors licensed by the Blind and Low Vision Services of the Department of Public Health and Human Services (BLVS). The program's business model is to operate an entrepreneurial business that functions much like a private vending company and will become economically self-supporting.
PROGRAM GOALS	(1) Create 15 full-time vending and management positions for blind and visually impaired Montanans and up to 50 part-time jobs during the next five to seven years. (2) Become financially self-supporting in 5 to 7 years
LICENSED BLIND VENDORS	MBEP vendors are trained and skilled professionals dedicated to providing the highest quality products and services to their customers. To become a licensed blind vendor, an individual must be legally blind and undergo an intensive 3- to 6-month training program that involves classroom, field and on-the-job training. (It is worth noting that for most of our vendors, this is the first real job they have had and for many it is their only real source of income, aside from state and federal support.)
PROGRAM MANAGEMENT	Responsibility for the program in state government resides with the Department of Public Health and Human Services, which in turn has contracted with Montana Business Enterprises, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation, to manage the day-to-day operations and provide business

support to blind vendors.

PROGRESS TO DATE

MBEP currently has **seven licensed vendors** operating vending facilities in the Kalispell, Missoula, Helena and Billings areas, with one more vendor awaiting placement and another currently in training. MBEP vendors are now operating **180 vending machines on 45 sites**, including 24 state properties, 12 federal, and 9 other. Vending operations generated \$185,000 in total sales in fiscal year 2004, a seven-fold increase over the previous year. In addition, **two full-time management and thirty part-time driver jobs** have been created by the program. Current expansion plans include Great Falls, Bozeman and Butte sometime within the next three years.

**FOR FURTHER
INFORMATION:**

Visit the MBEP website at **www.mtbep.com**, or contact:

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