**Equal chances for Blind and Partially Sighted Persons by Rehabilitation Employment,
or Double Benefit Outcome of Wage Support System at Blind Organisations in Hungary**

The so-called Accredited Wage Subsidy System launched in 2007 replaced a Support Scheme originating from a time before the political changes in Hungary and all over Eastern-Europe. The new subsidy system on employees with changed working capacity, especially persons with disabilities, aiming among others at preventing various ways of misuse hidden in the previous support schemes has been going on with significant changes since 2012. The Wage Subsidy system ruled by Government Decree 327/2012 is available for NGOs and for-profit organizations that assure all pre-conditions necessary for the employment of people with reduced working capacity including Visually Impaired persons. Those pre-conditions include an accessible workplace both in physical and IT regards, hiring assistant staff, as well as a rehabilitation mentor and a counsellor.

The accreditation process aims at checking and certifying the eligibility of employers of persons with changed working capacity, namely whether they meet each and every human and material pre-condition required by the accreditation rules. Those requirements are meant to assure that an employee with changed working capacity is employed in a working environment to his or her state of health deterioration and/or his or her disability, achieving the highest possible level of employment to the employee’s skills and abilities.

Each organisation must submit an application for accreditation to the local Government Office that – based upon a verification process of all pre-conditions fulfilled by the applicant – is entitled to approve and issue the appropriate Certification. However, having been granted the Accreditation does not imply automatic wage and extra costs’ support yet. Those subsidies are allocated in frame of a call for tenders for accredited organisations, within the limits set out in the annual state budget.

As getting only an Accreditation takes already serious costs and efforts for an employer, and the amount of support per capita – if granted – covers not more than daily 4 hours of employment at minimum wage, the system means help primarily for companies and organisations only intending to employ a large number of persons with changed working capacity. MVGYOSZ (Hungarian Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted) and its member associations belong to the latter type employers, for whom the system has established an opportunity to offer intellectual quality jobs for medium and highly skilled persons with visual impairment or other kinds of disabilities, in frame of wage subsidy employment. In contrast to this, blind and partially persons used to perform almost exclusively light, manual jobs requiring on-the-job training only before.

Since its introduction, the Accredited Wage Subsidy System has proved to be an irreplaceable support to the maintenance and development of activities of organisations of persons with disabilities, including Visually Impaired people, as well as an at least partially independence from the probability and unpredictability of calls of tenders. This group of employers includes primarily the Member Associations of MVGYOSZ and other NGOs working usually in close partnership with them, and less often other non-profit companies. Most of the services offered by these organisations aim specifically at visually impaired persons to improve their quality of life and to provide leisure, cultural and sport activities. Several associations and foundations conduct also elementary and occupational rehabilitation, mental hygiene services, adult education and awareness-raising activities. By taking advantage of the wage subsidy system, the eligible organisations do not only get funds to provide their services helping the everyday life of visually impaired people, but also job possibilities are created for visually impaired persons and for people with other kinds of disabilities. As the amount of wage subsidies almost never covers the total costs of salaries and related contributions of visually impaired persons conducting intellectual work, the organisations in question are forced to seek further resources from other types of applications or from donations, in addition to the state funds granted.

During the last decades Hungarian persons with visual disability had a rather limited range or career possibilities to choose from, even in the late ‘90s most of them worked as a phone center operator, as an unskilled worker or probably as a piano tuner-technician, a masseur or as a musician in the entertaining industry. Under the rather poor conditions due to their visual disability just a very few of them had a possibility and the necessary skills to choose an intellectual career. They were facing the challenges of the open labour market mainly as a lawyer, a teacher or a musician. It was the IT revolution in the early 2000s that made possible for more and more young blind and/or partially sighted to study in higher education and to find a job to his or her qualification. A lot of young people with visual disability works nowadays as a psychologist, social worker, language teacher, humanities major or as a special education teacher, sometimes they study IT engineering or software development. However, just a very low proportion of them can find a job in the open labour market, partly due to the lack of inclusive approach, and partly because of the lack of their rehabilitation in certain regards. Those visually impaired graduates failed to find a job in the open labour market before, or those who have never even dared to try to enter the open labour market, are often employed by a blind organization as a help desk assistant, a rehabilitation or mental hygiene counsellor, as a community or event organizer, as a fundraising manager, IT expert, or as a project manager etc., and they do their jobs usually for their superior’s and for the visually impaired clients’ satisfaction. It of the happens that a blind organization employs also people with other kinds of disabilities, as a an assistant for a blind or partially sighted colleague, or doing jobs that cannot be carried out by a visually impaired worker, e.g. a driver, or , in addition to visually impaired professionals, organizations employ other types of people with disabilities or health impairments who, in addition to blind or partially-sighted staff, perform personal assistantships, assistantships or jobs that a visually impaired employee is unable to provide, driver, finance administration staff, etc..

Various associations and foundations provide services to local communities - as a Social Entrepreneur – in cooperation with local governments or with other NGOs or private companies, relying on the work of visually impaired experts. For these kinds of non-market activities provided with no profit or just for a very law profit in the long run, the wage subsidy system means usually an essential and inevitable source, in lack of that those services could be hardly carried out and maintained.

The purpose of the activities of accredited organizations is to conduct rehabilitation employment, i.e. in an ideal case the primary objective of the labour done in those working places is not the manufacturing or service activity itself, but also the development of the professional, social and personal competences of an individual with changed working capacity, as well as strengthening his or her identity as an employee. These objectives can be better realized by involving a rehabilitation counsellor and mentor, the hiring of whom is a pre-condition of eligibility for wage subsidies. Of course, a blind organization employing visually impaired persons is aware of the assistive technologies necessary for the work of people with visual disability, thus the working environment is equipped accordingly (software compatible with a screen reader, Braille display, embosser, smartphone etc.). In a similar way, these organizations provide proper assistance even during the learning period incl. accompanying to the working place and learning the route.

According to the experiences, counselling is much more effective if provided to the stakeholders by a Visually Impaired specialist compared to a case where information and experiences are shared by an expert with no visual disability. This way a disabled employee working for a blind organization does not only socially useful work but he or she may become also an exemplary model to follow. Their acting as a colleague or/and expert is of particular importance in advocacy fields, since it is definitely much more credible to anyone if the points of view of a special group is communicated by a well-prepared expert facing the same challenges.

The Hungarian Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted (NVGYOSZ) was founded in 1918 by blind officers wishing to dispose about their fate on their own. Although MVGYOSZ has changed a lot during that past period of more than 100 years, the basic aim remained the same: to represent and advocate the interests of blind and partially sighted people, to promote their social inclusion in all areas and to provide special services. As a sheltered workplace, the Federation employs currently 41 persons with changed working capacity, primarily visually impaired ones. As an umbrella organisation, MVGYOSZ has got 21 member associations all over the country. MVGYOSZ’ advocacy activities cover all areas of life, including education and training; carrier counselling and employment; social benefits and legal protection; equal access to assistive tools, to culture, leisure and sports events and activities; elementary and occupational rehabilitation; autonomous way of life and self-determination; respect for human dignity; awareness raising, etc.

MVGYOSZ’ Services for Blind and Partially Sighted persons:

- Assistive Tools Shop and Service (bolt.mvgyosz.hu)

- Audio Library Bodor Tibor (hangoskonyvtar.mvgyosz.hu)

- Louis Braille Library

- Távszem (RemotEye) – non-stop remote assistance for visually impaired persons (www.tavszem.hu)

- Guide Dog Training (www.vakvezetokutya.hu)

- Digital Competences Development

- Braille Printing House

- Production of Adapted Textbooks and Braille Sheet Music

- Campaign/Programme to Support School Inclusion of Visually Impaired Pupils and Students (jovokilatasai.mvgyosz.hu)

- Legal Aid Service

- Maintaining a Holiday Facility for VI persons by the Lake of Balaton

- Helpdesk Information and Customer Service; Monthly Journal Vakok Világa (World of the Blind), Weekly Electronic Newsletter, website and Facebook site

MVGYOSZ’ Services for Sighted people

- Awareness Raising Programs

- Counselling and Accessibility Services, Plan Coordination, Site Visit, Expert Reports

- Share of Knowledge and Experiences Related to the Special Needs and Possibilities of Visually Impaired Persons

Current number of people employed by MVGYOSZ is 75 persons, 45 of which are persons with changed working capacity, most of them Visually Impaired (26 persons). 4 of the Visually Impaired employees are also hearing Impaired. Those sighted employees with changed working capacity are typically people with reduced mobility. 22 colleagues with changed working capacity work remotely. As per today, MVGYOSZ has been granted wage subsidy for a total number of 36 persons, 33 of them are Visually Impaired ones.

Visually Impaired employees of MVGYOSZ do the following jobs:

- President, Chief Professional Officer, and Service Manager

- Youth Referent,

- Legal Adviser, lawyer, legal assistant

- Accountant, Financial Clerk,

- Newspaper Editor,

- Non-profit Manager

- Customer Service Representative,

- Audio Book Editor, Audio Library Database Operator,

- Trainer on how to use smart and assistive tools

- Braille Editor, Braille Music Sheet Transcriber, Braille Proof-reader

- Assistive Tool Manufacturer

- Masseur

Almost all the visually impaired workers of MVGYOSZ have got medium or higher level education. Higher level degrees of our Visually Impaired colleagues: lawyer, teacher, Master of Arts, Social worker, psychologist, IT specialist,

MVGYOSZ provides its visually impaired employees arrange or support services:

- special assistive tools to the special needs of each individual: reading TV, electronic and traditional hand magnifier, smartphone, laptop, screen reader or screen magnifier software, Braille display, Braille typewriter, etc.

- personal assistant to help tasks where sight is needed, like reading and scanning printed materials, filling in data-sheets, document editing that cannot be done by screen-reader, guiding at events, etc.

- approving working from home, if justified

- providing remote access if working from home

- legal counselling and assistance, if required

- information and supportive conversation by a rehabilitation counsellor and mentor, if required

- support of attending elementary rehabilitation training, even during working hours

In 2020 and 2021, the 21 member associations of MVGYOSZ 21 employed some 290 persons, each year; 150 visually impaired persons plus 70 sighted people with other kinds of disability. Currently, 14 of the 21 member associations have gone through an Accreditation process, i.e. 14 member association are eligible for submitting an application for wage subsidies. In 2020, they were granted wage subsidy for 173 persons, the corresponding figure in 2021 is 210 people.

Visually impaired workers of the member associations do various jobs depending on their qualifications and the services by the member association in question. They work in different positions:

* office administrator, office manager
* customer service representative
* communication officer, press officer
* fundraiser
* youth worker
* refreshing and refreshment masseur
* programme and leisure officer
* community organizer, club leader
* IT instructor
* Advocacy leader / officer
* economic manager
* rehabilitation counsellor / mentor
* office assistant
* lawyer
* receptionist
* shop assistant
* IT administrator
* psychologist, mental health worker
* teacher, special education teacher, rehabilitation teacher
* labour market counsellor
* social worker
* peer support officer
* labour administrator
* personal assistant
* application writer, project manager
* newsletter and website editor
* cleaner, janitor