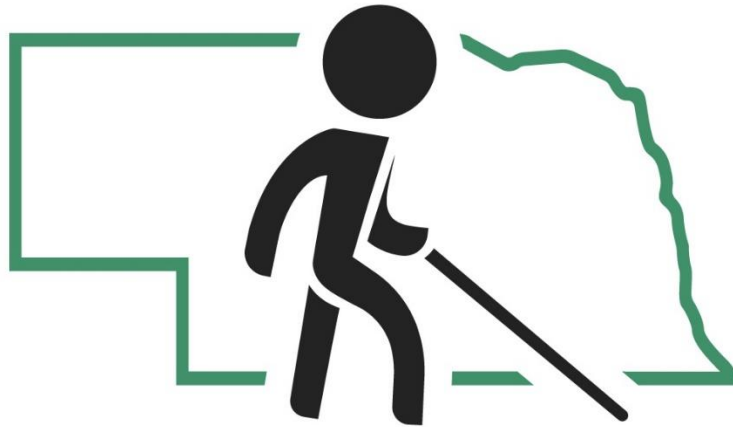


**NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND
AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED**

**ANNUAL REPORT
FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2023**



NCBVI

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION3
FINANCIAL REPORT4
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES4
TRANSITION SERVICES6
NEBRASKA CENTER FOR THE BLIND.....10
TECHNOLOGY SERVICES12
INDEPENDENT LIVING/OLDER INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE BLIND SERVICES15
NEBRASKA BUSINESS ENTERPRISES16
NFB-NEWSLINE® FOR THE BLIND18
INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES.....19

**NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED
ANNUAL REPORT FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2023**

INTRODUCTION

The Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) is the State of Nebraska vocational rehabilitation (VR) and the independent living (IL) agency for blind and visually impaired persons. NCBVI is a Core Partner in the Nebraska Workforce Development System, pursuant to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Our mission: Empowering blind individuals, promoting opportunities, and building belief in the blind.

The wide array of programs and services offered by NCBVI make it possible for blind people to become fully participating, contributing members of society. Blind people lead normal lives, work in a wide range of jobs, have families, raise children, and participate in community activities. The following programs and services provide the means for blind persons to achieve their personal vocational or independent living goals:

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Transition services

Nebraska Center for the Blind

Technology Program

Nebraska Business Enterprises

Independent Living/Older Individuals who are Blind Services

NFB-NEWSLINE®

Information and Referral Services

Four methods are used for gauging the level of consumer satisfaction with NCBVI services and gathering information for a needs assessment. First, Gemini Research and Training (GRT), a private contractor, conducts an online survey to assess the level of consumer satisfaction throughout VR services, four months after VR case closure, and three months after graduation from the Nebraska Center for the Blind. Second, Consumers served through independent living (IL) services are given a customer satisfaction survey via the phone six months after case closure. Third, Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) consumers are surveyed by GRT within 30 days of their case being closed. GRT follows up with a telephone call to non-respondents or those who cannot fill out the survey via the internet to assist with completion of the survey. The last form of feedback is via input from consumers received at public meetings and forums, held four times a year with the Board of Commissioners, twice a year at State conventions of consumer organizations, and other times as requested.

FINANCIAL REPORT

NCBVI had non-federal match enabling the capture of reallotment funds available last summer, from states unable to meet the full match for federal funds. In ten of the past eleven years NCBVI has received significant Reallotment funding of the VR program that NCBVI has been able to use to enhance our infrastructure, work with the newest innovations in blindness rehabilitation, and restructure the placement of assets in preparation for implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA.) In SFY 2018, we only received about 10% of the amount of reallotment captured in previous years. Hurricanes in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico caused much of funds available in 2018 to be diverted from the VR program. This improved significantly in 2019 through 2023, but it is a soft money source and will never be consistent funding we can rely on each year.

Social Security Reimbursement funds are soft money and therefore not a consistent, dependable source of funding. Below we show this funding in two places, the program it was spent on and the Social Security Reimbursement funds received.

Expenditures July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023

1. Basic Support	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$ 3,133,870
b. Aid	\$ 1,628,694
2. Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$ 680,614
b. Aid	\$ 628,070
3. Supported Employment	
a. Operations	\$ -0-
b. Aid	\$ 36,995
4. Independent Living Part B/State IL	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$ 34,989
b. Aid	\$ 7,821
5. PILBO (Promoting Independent Living for the Blind of Omaha – Enrichment Foundation grant)	
a. Operations	\$ -0-
b. Aid	\$ 20,560
6. Social Security Reimbursement (also reflected in above totals)	\$ 557,205

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

The VR program prepares blind and visually impaired individuals to enter, retain, or advance in full-time or, if appropriate, part-time competitive employment in the integrated labor market. When fully staffed, NCBVI employs 10 VR Counselors to provide training and placement in quality jobs appropriate to each individual's capabilities, abilities, potential, interest, resources, and informed choice. Some of the services provided include, but are not limited to, development of more positive attitudes about blindness, alternative skills of blindness training, self-advocacy,

elevation of personal expectations, individual and family counseling and guidance, vocational training, job training, job development, job placement, and assistive technology services.

During the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY), 477 consumers received active VR services; of these, 29 achieved competitive employment. Consumers served by NCBVI frequently have significant secondary disabilities. During the FFY, VR services were provided to 195 blind and visually impaired individuals with multiple disabilities. For example, blind and visually impaired veterans returning from active duty often have brain/head injuries as well as vision loss. In addition, more people are surviving serious accidents with traumatic brain injuries than had been the case in the past. Regardless of the secondary disabilities involved, NCBVI counselors work with consumers to build self-confidence and high expectations in order to gain the skills of blindness as well as to achieve their vocational goals.

VR Services may include, but are not limited to career exploration, interest testing, and vocational planning. Assistance with tuition, books, technology, and readers are also available to those pursuing vocational training. When an individual is ready for employment, job readiness, job placement, and follow-up services are provided as well.

Staff development is an important part of high-quality services that are provided to blind and visually impaired consumers. NCBVI personnel receive training on counseling skills, job development, job placement, multiple disabilities, assistive technology, community resources, and consumer organizations as well as other timely emerging topics.

Each of the three districts operated by NCBVI participate and conduct employment workshops and/or conferences in order to prepare job-ready consumers for a systematic search for employment through preparatory skills of job interviews, social skills, resume writing, networking, problem-solving, and self-assertiveness. NCBVI counselors also reach out to educate businesses and public entities about the capabilities of blind workers and promote high-quality employment options for qualified blind job seekers.

This year, NCBVI consumers obtained the following jobs: Assembler/Fabricator, Automotive Service Technician/Mechanic (2), Business Operations Specialist, Childcare Worker, Community and Social Service Specialist, Food Prep and Serving Worker, Computer Occupations/Other, Dietitian/Nutritionist, Education Administrator-Elementary/Secondary School, Elementary School Teacher, Fitness Trainer/Aerobics, Healthcare Support Worker (2), Heating-Air Conditioning-Refrigeration Mechanic/Installer, Helper-Construction Trade, Janitor/Cleaner, Maids/Housekeeping, Mail Clerk/Mail Machine Operator, Massage Therapist, Mental Health Counselor, Packing-Filling Machine Operator/Tenders, Randolph Vendors (3), Receptionist/Information Clerk, Rehabilitation Counselor, Retail Salesperson and Stock Clerk/Order Filler.

NCBVI is committed to helping consumers achieve high quality competitive employment outcomes, not just the first available job, but full-time jobs with good wages and benefits, which includes health insurance and opportunities for advancement. Many of the consumers who achieve employment as a result of NCBVI services no longer need social security benefits or other public supports.

NCBVI, in collaboration with Dynamic Buna, proudly presented the "Emerging and Inclusive World of Work: How Work and Work-Places are Changing" program at the Graduate Hotel Scarlett Ballroom in Lincoln, NE. The live employment seminar, held from June 6th to June 8th, was meticulously designed to equip participants with the essential skills, tools, and mindset needed for success in the competitive world of work. The agenda covered a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from recognizing individual strengths and weaknesses to understanding the evolving nature of work and workplaces. Attendees delved into creating and recreating their professional identity, acquiring advocacy skills, and mastering the art of self-promotion. Notable speakers, including Carlos Servan, Executive Director of NCBVI, and leaders of two consumer organizations came and shared insights on career aspirations, skill sets, and the importance of proper training for individuals with visual impairments. With interactive sessions on creating portfolios, leveraging transferrable skills, job application preparation, and professional document crafting, the program aimed to empower participants with the tools needed for career advancement. The inclusion of a mock interview session and discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion further enriched the learning experience. As the program concluded on June 8th, participants reflected on lessons learned, delved into effective job interview techniques, and identified actionable items to propel their professional growth. This comprehensive program underscored NCBVI's commitment to fostering inclusivity and empowerment in the ever-changing landscape of the workforce.

Employer Outreach

NCBVI continues to educate and serve Nebraska's business community. NCBVI staff make regular contacts with businesses and community partners to educate them about the abilities of blind people and how they are an asset in the workplace. NCBVI has worked with a number of businesses in order to retain existing employees that may be losing their vision. NCBVI also assists businesses in identifying accommodations as well as provides training to the employee in the skills of blindness.

NCBVI staff are represented on the Workforce Development Boards across the state as well as assists the AJC's to be more accessible for blind Nebraskans. NCBVI participates in a number of employment groups such as Employ groups in Lincoln, Omaha, Kearney, North Platte, and the panhandle, in order to learn about the needs of our business partners in order to better work with our consumers to meet identified needs. NCBVI is available to provide Diversity training to employers to demystify the hiring of blind individuals into their workplace. In addition, NCBVI has contacted business colleges across Nebraska in order to provide diversity training to future HR professionals. In conclusion, NCBVI is focused on becoming a partner with businesses in Nebraska to lower the unemployment rate among Blind Nebraskans. NCBVI's efforts are geared to make it easier for businesses to access this untapped labor pool.

TRANSITION SERVICES

NCBVI has always recognized the importance and need for transition services as early as possible for youth in Nebraska. NCBVI prides itself on being a leader in providing meaningful work experiences, job exploration counseling, work readiness skills, postsecondary education exploration, training in independent living skills, self-advocacy, and peer mentoring

opportunities to blind and visually impaired youth to ensure a successful integration into society. NCBVI provides Transition Services to youth ages 14-24. WIOA placed an emphasis on Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), for students with disabilities ages 14-21. NCBVI is mandated to invest fifteen (15) percent of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) funds on Pre-ETS services. WIOA promotes a smoother transition for Pre-ETS students and youth from school to work through a greater focus on job exploration, work readiness skills, postsecondary exploration, work-based learning experiences, and self-advocacy skill development for blind and visually impaired youth.

Statewide Data

NCBVI has agency staff who provide services on a statewide basis in order to strengthen the relationships with schools, families, and local employers in order to ensure short-term and long-term success for blind and visually impaired youth. Below are statewide data and highlights from some of the programs NCBVI provided to increase independence and confidence in the youth served.

1. Number of transition-aged youth who attended Center training: served 5
2. Total number of transition-aged youth (14-24): served 219
 - A. Number of Pre-ETS students: 143
 - B. Number of PE (Potentially Eligible) youth/students: served 0
 - C. Number of SE (Supported Employment) Youth: served 68
 - D. Number of youths doing work experiences: 30
 - WAGES: served 12
 - Giving tours and working the information desk at the Nebraska State Capitol, Shredding documents for a county government office, Performing pet grooming and other related tasks, Bussing tables, and helping with food prep at IHOP, Researching and creating an exhibit on important people who are blind in Nebraska for the Nebraska History Museum, Bussing tables and doing dishes at a campus cafeteria, Bagging orders for customers at a grocery store, and Working with children at a daycare
 - WBLE (Work Based Learning Experience): served 13
 - Kearney Area Children's Museum, Helen Keller National Center, The Teaching Tree, Adam's Corner Market, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Pizza Hut
 - SE youth work experiences: 3
 - McDonald's, IHOP, Askarban Asssisted Living
 - Non-SE Youth Employed with permanent jobs: 3
 - Tommy's Restaurant, Dimensions, Capital Humane Society

WAGES

The WAGES program, (Work and Gain Experience in the Summer) is a six-week long summer program for youth 14-18 designed to empower them with practical work experience in career areas of their choice as well as learn advocacy and social skills by being exposed to blind role models. During the program, participants are provided with a solid base for vocational planning. Students also get a taste of what it is like to live away from home, as participants live in a

dormitory setting on UNL's campus. This year, NCBVI contracted with JB&K (Jessica Beecham and Kevin Kovacs) Services to plan and coordinate the WAGES program. WAGES once again partnered with local employers to provide summer work opportunities for the students, providing valuable work skills. Students were expected to come to work on time, behave in a professional manner on the job site, and perform job duties as assigned. Students participated in various seminars, which covered topics such as: Job readiness; Accessible technology; Blindness organizations, Food labs; and Blind entrepreneurship. During evenings and weekends, students participated in a variety of challenge activities, designed to expand their boundaries, and push them out of their comfort zones. Activities included: swimming, an audio-described movie, a walk to an ice cream parlor, axe throwing, archery, an overnight camping trip with paddle boarding, a group pedal bike therapy ride, rock climbing, and orienteering. Students and parents also had the opportunity to attend either the American Council of the Blind (ACB) National Convention or the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) National Convention.

Winnerfest

Winnerfest is a program for teenagers ages 14-18 that takes place 1-2 times per year. Our Winnerfest program this year focused on Financial Literacy. This specialized program underscores NCBVI's commitment to holistic development, addressing a crucial aspect of independence. Throughout the weekend, participants engage in interactive workshops, discussions, and hands-on activities designed to impart essential financial skills tailored to their unique needs. From budgeting and managing finances through accessible technologies to exploring career opportunities and understanding the nuances of financial independence, the program equips blind youth with the knowledge and confidence needed to navigate the financial landscape. NCBVI's dedication to fostering self-sufficiency is evident in their innovative and inclusive approach, ensuring that blind youth not only gain financial literacy skills but also develop a strong foundation for a successful and independent future.

Blind Savvy Strengths

This year, the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) hosted the Blind & Socially Savvy Strength Series in collaboration with Blind Savvy USA, LLC. This comprehensive pre-employment training program aimed at blind and low-vision students provided a transformative four-day experience, focusing on the development of social skills and business networking. Throughout the series, participants engaged in workshops, discussions, and practical exercises to enhance their confidence, independence, and readiness for the professional world. The program covered a range of topics, including conveying trust, confident communication, respect, and the intricacies of navigating social interactions as individuals with visual impairments. Students also delved into the nuances of creating positive first impressions, mastering intentional body language, and dressing professionally. The series included specialized sessions addressing blindness-specific competencies rarely taught elsewhere, ensuring a tailored and inclusive learning environment. With a strong emphasis on practical application, the program featured practicums that reinforced skills through real-life challenges. NCBVI's commitment to fostering the personal and professional growth of blind and low-vision individuals was evident throughout this impactful program.

Project Independence

Project Independence (PI), marked a transformative experience for participants from July 23rd to July 27th at Camp Calvin Crest in Fremont, NE. Themed "Entering the Independence Era – Past, Present, Future," the program aimed to empower individuals with visual impairments. The itinerary was diverse, commencing with a warm welcome and seminar on the first day, followed by team-building activities, educational sessions, and practical classes focusing on essential skills like Braille, Cane Travel, Homemaking, and Techniques of Daily Living. The schedule seamlessly blended adventurous outings such as the Airboat Tour and Field Trip Adventures with skill development sessions. Notable events included the Project Independence Yogurt Stand Employment Activity and the Annual Home Chore Challenge, fostering independence and self-advocacy. The program concluded with a closing seminar, emphasizing personal growth, and a departure ceremony on July 27th. Project Independence 2023 provided a holistic and enriching experience, fostering a sense of accomplishment and independence among participants as they embarked on their journeys home.

Outreach and Collaboration

During this past year, NCBVI has continued to make efforts to strengthen relationships with teachers of the visually impaired (TVI's) and other education providers by contacting Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in order to reach out to as many youths as possible. NCBVI continued to reach out to schools introducing ourselves and reminding staff that we are the VR agency for blind and visually impaired youth in Nebraska. In addition, NCBVI has entered into a MOU with NDE to define our roles and outline the Pre-ETS services we may provide to blind and visually impaired youth during their school transition years.

NCBVI continues to collaborate and partner with the Nebraska Center for the Education for Children Who are Blind or Visually Impaired (NCECBVI). NCECBVI is a statewide program and facility for blind school-aged youth based out of ESU (Educational Service Unit) 4. NCBVI participated as a virtual stakeholder in NCECBVI's annual advisory meeting, participated on the hiring committee for the new NCECBVI Director, and partnered on collaborative programming opportunities. NCBVI staff also conduct group training sessions in the NCECBVI facility, which are designed to help severely disabled students strengthen their social and work skill abilities. These group trainings consisted of interactive role plays, games, and activities that focused on common workplace scenarios and experiences and included such topics as Appropriate Workplace Behavior; Conflict Resolution; Examining workplace conditions for each student's current career goal; Blindness in the workplace; Real-world and hypothetical problem-solving scenarios; Mock Interviews; Job interview do's and don'ts; and Disclosing blindness as a job seeker. The goal was to provide information that was both relevant and salient to teenagers in the context of finding and maintaining a part-time, after-school job, which is a typical entry point for people entering the workforce. Students were able to relate their own school and pre-employment experiences to the activities.

NCBVI staff continue to help plan and present at various ESU Transition Conferences. NCBVI staff sit on various regional committees of special education directors and transition professionals, which includes the State Transition Advisory Committee and the Nebraska Special Education Advisory Council. Furthermore, NCBVI staff present at various schools about blindness, which includes elementary, secondary, and postsecondary, in particular, UNL's

Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) Program. In conclusion, increasing NCBVI's visibility and community awareness continues to be a priority. It is NCBVI's belief that relationships, partnerships, and programs have led to growth in the professional collaborations for training the blind and visually impaired youth to become contributing members of society.

NEBRASKA CENTER FOR THE BLIND

The Nebraska Center for the Blind is a comprehensive blindness rehabilitation training facility for blind adults living in Nebraska, which provides an estimated fifteen thousand hours of training each year as a component of the federally mandated services provided by NCBVI. Similar to other NCBVI services and programs, the Nebraska Center for the Blind receives the majority of its funding through the Federal VR Grant.

NCBVI continues to welcome older blind consumers in to the Nebraska Center for the Blind, which includes the Center apartments. Nebraskans over the age of 55 experiencing vision loss are eligible to attend the center through the use of state-issued Senior Blind funds. Older blind consumers participating in the center gain the necessary independent living skills and acquire the proper resources to remain in their homes. By immersing themselves in comprehensive residential training, blind seniors can avoid moving into assisted living facilities and reduce the pressure on their friends and family. In FFY 2023, two seniors attended the training center, which is an increase from zero in FFY2022, and equal to FFY2021. The number of seniors in the center in FFY2022 was lower than anticipated due to COVID-19 concerns and staffing shortages statewide.

The Nebraska Center for the Blind utilizes the "Structured Discovery" approach to training students in the alternative skills of blindness, which is the leading cognitive-based training methodology in the field of blindness rehabilitation. Center students are provided training in five primary areas of instruction: Orientation and Mobility, Braille, Communication/Access Technology, Home Management, and Wood Shop. These primary areas of instruction are designed to build a base of practical daily living skills, highly effective observation and problem-solving skills, an enhanced understanding of their vocational potential, confidence, and a positive sense of self-esteem.

Potential Center students are provided initial training in the alternative skills of blindness by NCBVI staff in their home environment. To be eligible for Center Training, an individual must meet the eligibility requirements for NCBVI services and be able to participate in a full-time comprehensive blindness rehabilitation training program. Consumers considering participating in Center Training complete a tour of the Center. Following the tour, if the consumer is still interested, a Three-Day Stay experience is arranged in order to help the consumer make an informed choice of attending the full Center training program.

During the Three-Day Stay, consumers are mentored by more experienced Center students and receive training under sleep shades to give them a more realistic idea of what Center Training will be like. Consumers choosing to attend the Center are aware that training involves eight hours a day, five days per week, and lasts an average of six to nine months. There were sixteen

Three-Day Stays this fiscal year compared with six in FFY2022 and thirteen in FFY2021. Fifty-six percent of consumers that participated in a Three-Day Stay returned for the full Center Training program, an increase from thirty-three percent last year, and decrease from sixty-two percent in FFY2021. Three consumers who completed a Three-Day Stay were unable to attend training at this time due to their health, and four decided that receive services in their home was a better fit for them at this time.

In keeping with the principles of Structured Discovery, Center students are encouraged to solve problems independently during training with minimal assistance from others. This approach to training introduces the student to a series of experiences, ranging from the simple to the complex. This requires the processing of information and how it relates to their blindness. Students with some vision wear sleep shades (blindfolds) in order to focus on the development of non-visual techniques. This eliminates the natural tendency to rely on inadequate or unsafe vision, thereby building confidence in non-visual techniques. Once the students have learned to rely truly on alternative skills, they are better able to make informed choices and decisions regarding when to use visual versus non-visual skills.

Each week, students receive eight hours of instruction in each of the five primary skill areas previously mentioned. Two hours are set-aside during each week for a blindness-related seminar facilitated by one of the students or staff, which is focused on issues related to blindness. In addition, another two hours per month are set aside for a vocational seminar, which is led by the Center staff or guest presenter(s). Center students also meet with the Center Supervisor, when necessary, regarding more personal issues, goals, and objectives through counseling and guidance.

A primary objective of Center Training is the development of a positive overall understanding and adjustment to blindness. Participation in blindness-related group seminars focuses on challenging deeply held attitudes and beliefs regarding blindness, and the capabilities of blind people. With competence in the alternative skills of blindness comes an improved sense of self-confidence and a greater sense of self-efficacy as blind people. Graduates of Center Training are prepared to pursue personal, educational, vocational, and independent living goals to achieve a competitive place in society.

Real-world experiences during activities or classroom instruction help consumers gain firsthand experience interacting with the sighted public. This provides consumers with the opportunity to develop the insights and confidence necessary to respond effectively to prevailing societal attitudes, discrimination, and low expectations. Center students participate in a wide range of activities, either in the Center itself or with the community. This encourages greater independence and access to the world around them using the skills of blindness. Activities have included attendance at Legislative meetings, public hearings, banquets, state and national consumer conventions, engaging in traditional holiday events, community service projects, and other volunteer efforts. The Center tries to have the students participate in at least one activity per month. A total of twenty activities were held during this fiscal year, which is higher than average due to Center students participating in some workshops and conferences hosted by NCBVI.

In addition, the Center Client Resource Counselor coordinates as many as two activities per month in the evenings and on weekends. These activities are optional and do not require the use of sleep shades. It is during weekend and evening hours that consumers learn how best to use their remaining vision, and to appropriately incorporate non-visual skills when visual methods prove unreliable. When a Three-Day stay is involved, the Client Resource Counselor also coordinates a dinner with students in order to welcome the three-day stay participant. Due to staff turnover and increased needs of consumers, less activities are being held in the evenings. However, regular meetings are taking place weekly.

Center students live independently in furnished, studio residential apartments located in downtown Lincoln. NCBVI support of Center students, in accordance with Federal regulations, includes the cost of training/fees, training materials, rent, utilities, transportation expenses, and grocery and activity costs. Center students are responsible for personal expenses, such as personal entertainment, cable television, individual internet service in their apartment, cab fares to and from medical appointments or those related to personal shopping. Center students commute daily between the apartments and the Center by city bus.

Over the last five years, the Nebraska Center for the Blind has served an average of ten students per annum, which has significantly lowered due to COVID-19, staff turnover, and a dramatic increase in new staff being trained since 2020. New staff members go through Center Training for a period of 600 hours, eight hours per day, and five days per week in order to earn their Certification in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling for the Blind (CVRCB). If the NCBVI staff member has functional vision, then sleep shades will be worn during training. This approach to new staff training promotes a deeper understanding of blindness, a stronger belief in the alternative skills of blindness enabling blind people to compete on terms of equality with their normally sighted peers, and achieve greater personal independence. Since 2020, the Center has provided training to twenty-three new NCBVI staff members, twelve just in FFY2023.

The Nebraska Center for the Blind engages in an on-going program of public education to promote the integration of blind persons into jobs, homes, and the community. The Center invites individuals and groups to tour the facility, which promotes a greater awareness of the capabilities of blind people. There were eight tours this fiscal year, an increase from three last year and two the year prior.

Special efforts were made this year to expand opportunities and programs for both staff members and students alike. NCBVI has and will continue to put the resources provided to the agency to the most efficient use in order to help Nebraskans of all age's transition into successful lives and careers as contributing members of society. NCBVI will keep working and being innovate until consumers can take part in the "Good Life" this state offers.

TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

NCBVI Technology Services provide technology services to blind and visually impaired consumers across the state. These services include employment services to current and potential employers in meeting their staffing needs . This also includes supporting them in finding and

retaining valuable employees. This year, NCBVI added a Technology manager to our team. There are amazing technological advances that we want to bring to the clients we serve, such as 3D printing and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies. Our technology manager has taken the lead on projects such as these and much more, and works with the 4 dedicated technology staff to implement this knowledge statewide. NCBVI is an agency that serves individuals of all ages experiencing vision loss. Many of those served have a secondary disability, which required staff to continue to provide high-quality services.

Technology Specialists provide instruction in the use of access technologies such as screen access software, refreshable Braille, screen magnification, and personal note taking devices. Besides access technology, they provide instruction in the use of mainstream technologies such as web browsing, use of smartphones and tablets. They have also provided instruction with Windows and Macintosh/Apple operating systems. They have provided valuable training with word processing skills essential for finding and/or maintaining employment. In addition, the Technology Specialists provide training to NCBVI staff in the basic operation of access technology for the blind. This enables NCBVI staff to work with consumers on their caseloads in completing job responsibilities more effectively. Having additional staff with these basic skills enhances technology services across the state.

Being aware of emerging issues and technology helps NCBVI staff be proactive in resolving potential problems and to demonstrate and recommend the best technology options to consumers. In July the two main consumer organizations held their conventions, which allowed NCBVI Technology staff to participate and learn about additional emerging technologies. NCBVI staff are aware of the resources that are available for teachers across the state that have blind or visually impaired students, allowing us to work together in building STEM skills, which is vital in building our future workforce.

Technology Specialists continue to participate in technology organizations that address the misconceptions on blindness and focusing the abilities of blind individuals. Technology impacts all areas of our life so training to business, software developers and IT staff is imperative in promoting employment opportunities. In providing this training, we have a wide-range impact.

NCBVI Technology Specialists have continued to work closely with school districts across the state as schools. Technology Specialists consulted with school districts to ensure blind and visually impaired students had the proper access technology in order to continue their education remotely and/or in person. Staff provide follow-up to ensure the access technology is working effectively.

In addition, NCBVI works closely with school districts to provide work-based learning experiences to students with disabilities as well as on-the-job training experiences for adults. This means NCBVI consults with area businesses in order to develop work opportunities in the community. These would be additional areas where the Technology Specialists would assist with evaluating technology needs for work experiences.

When it comes to secondary and postsecondary students, Technology Specialists work closely with consumers to have the skills to be able to access academic materials themselves. This would

include how to access textbook materials from Learning Ally, Bookshare, various publisher content portals sites, and the National Library Services for the Blind and Print Disabled. This training also includes teaching younger students how to use their mainstream technologies (i.e., iPhone, iPad, and Android phones and tablets), which may contain capabilities, or can be outfitted with software, which verbalizes the information on the screen or allows the user to read phone output on a refreshable Braille Display. Many blind and visually impaired students use iPads in the classroom for taking notes, reading accessible textbooks, and use other applications for accessing information from smart boards used by teachers. The Apple IOS mobile operating system is a great example of mainstream accessibility where the manufacturer has looked at the necessary features to ensure off-the-shelf accessibility for blind people.

For school or employment needs, the Technology Specialists conduct a technology assessment to evaluate the consumer's present level of skill as well as what is needed to be developed in order to successfully complete the necessary education and gain employment. Furthermore, the Technology Specialists have worked with a number of consumers in pursuit of their vocational goal of self-employment. The self-employed occupations were: Automotive Technician, Fitness Trainer, Massage Therapist, and 3 Randolph Sheppard Vendors.

NCBVI Technology Specialists have also worked closely with the OCIO to resolve technology issues NCBVI staff have encountered with agency computers, printers, and mobile devices. As new updates are pushed out by the OCIO, problems have resulted for NCBVI staff in accessing technology in order to perform job duties, which has significantly impacted NCBVI staff who use access technology. NCBVI Technology. We also provided updated access technology for each of the American Job Centers. NCBVI Technology Specialist and provide training to AJC and DOL staff on the assistive technology in the event they need to assist a consumer in accessing equipment. It is a difficult time to find and maintain staff. As there is often turnover, written documentation to quickly access the access technology was also provided.

NCBVI partnered with the Nebraska Department of Labor to update the accessibility technology that it offered in each of the local offices throughout the state. NCBVI purchased and houses a CCTV (desktop video magnifier) and a LyriQ (document scanner and reader) to assist blind and visually impaired consumers as they utilize services at NDOL offices. NCBVI also partnered with the Nebraska Library Commission to provide a CCTV (desktop video magnifier) in libraries located throughout Nebraska. The libraries have been a great resource for making a beneficial device available in so many of the rural areas. These devices have been used for job applications, reading mail, paying bills, etc.

Technology is continuously evolving, and it is essential that NCBVI Technology Specialists remain up to date on changes. This knowledge is necessary as it is essential in providing NCBVI consumers and employers with high-quality services. NCBVI Technology Specialists hold memberships in the Association of Information Technology Professionals and the National Federation of the Blind Assistive Technology Trainer Division as well as follow several listservs in order to learn what access technology specialists across the country are encountering and to share their knowledge.

Throughout the year, leading mainstream technology developers release information on new

technology that is to be released to the marketplace, in which NCBVI Technology Specialists monitor. NCBVI also has relationships with local access technology dealers in order to facilitate demonstrations to NCBVI staff on the latest technology that is being released.

NCBVI also provides information and testing support to some state agencies to help them have their system accessible. This year, NCBVI tested and provided recommendations to DHHS to have their new service portal accessible to the blind.

INDEPENDENT LIVING/OLDER INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE BLIND SERVICES

IL services are provided to blind and visually impaired individuals with independent living rather than vocational goals. The IL Program serves clients under the age of 55 while the OIB Program serves clients age 55 and older. IL/OIB clients receive training and services promoting greater independence in the home and full participation in community life.

During the FFY, 110 IL and 680 OIB clients received active independent living services. Of the IL clients: 7 clients were 55 years of age or over; 69 were 20 to 54 years of age and 34 were under 19 years of age.

Blind and visually impaired clients receive training in the alternative skills needed in order to pursue IL goals. Instruction typically begins in the home environment, which focuses on areas of cane travel, Braille, and home management. Those needing more intensive instruction often move on to training at the Nebraska Center for the Blind.

NCBVI hosted a statewide conference where approximately 75 consumers who are blind or visually impaired and approximately 50 family members/caregivers came together to learn about adjusting to vision loss, learning alternative techniques, receiving information and referral services, and connected with others across the state.

Eight Orientation Counselors serve the entire state, which reaches many traditionally underserved populations, especially those in rural areas. These counselors provide guidance and counseling services, training promoting positive attitudes about blindness, and encourage clients to regain active and productive lives. Instruction may include training in the skills of blindness such as Braille, travel using a white cane, and activities of daily living, which may include cooking, shopping, housekeeping, money identification, telling time, recordkeeping, managing mail, bill payment, and such.

NCBVI offers IL skills training on a statewide basis and in each district for blind and visually impaired seniors and youth. These programs give consumers the opportunity to build confidence in the alternative skills of blindness in a setting away from home. Group teaching and training programs are conducted using sleep shades. Sessions may include cane travel, Braille, cooking, technology, problem-solving, and focusing on a positive attitude toward blindness. Other training activities promote the use of community resources in order to effectively conduct activities of daily living.

Orientation Counselors provide instruction in the use of NFB-NEWSLINE®, a digital voice newspaper service accessed by phone and internet; Talking Book and Braille Services (TBBS), a library service for the blind offering Braille and audio books and magazines; Radio Talking Book Services (RTBS), a voice newspaper and reading service accessed by radio, television, and the internet; and use of the Internet and email. Instruction is also provided in the use of assistive technology devices and various aids, which includes Braille writing equipment, talking calculators, talking glucometers, Closed Circuit TVs (for reading regular or large print), magnifiers, Braille or talking watches, and such. NCBVI staff members work closely with the local Area Agencies on Aging, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Centers for Independent Living, eye care professionals, and other service agencies.

NCBVI also received The Enrichment Foundation grant for \$15,000 for FY 2023 in support of PILBO (Promoting Independent Living for the Blind of Omaha), for blind and visually impaired adults living in Douglas and Sarpy Counties in need of access technology and services in order to maintain independence in the home. Needless to say, NCBVI continues to serve blind and visually impaired Nebraskans of all ages.

NEBRASKA BUSINESS ENTERPRISES

The Nebraska Business Enterprises (NBE)(referred to as Blind Entrepreneurship Programs (BEPs) nationwide) program provides opportunities for legally blind individuals to manage their own small businesses in the convenience service sector. These individuals primarily service vending machines and operate cafeteria services on federal property, under the Randolph-Sheppard Act; state property under the reciprocal state law; and in a few private businesses. Three full-time staff members support participants (Licensees and/or Vendors) in the program across the state. NCBVI holds the contracts for vending services and supplies all of the vending equipment, repair services, on-going training, assistance in skills development essential for business management, and oversight. NCBVI also provides Licensees with the first stock of inventory and supplies when opening site.

For NBE Licensees 2023 was a very good year. The convenience service industry has continued to see sales improve after drastic losses during the pandemic. This held true in the NBE program where total Vendor gross sales were again higher in 2023 than in 2022. While sales are not on the same trajectory as pre-pandemic, NBE is taking steps to address what the industry is considering the ‘new normal’. One of these steps is working closely with several state agencies to move services away from vending machines and into servicing their locations through micro markets. These market style offerings are scheduled to launch in early 2024. The NBE program is also now fully staffed for the first time in over five years. Being fully staffed will allow NBE to provide more one-on-one services for the Vendors in the program. NBE staff closely monitors trends, analysis, and commentary of the industry in order to assist Licensees in adapting their business practices. In addition, staff is always exploring new avenues of potential service options that may help Licensees better serve their customers.

Currently, thirteen individuals operate their own businesses serving locations under contracts

held by NCBVI under the NBE program. In accordance with the Randolph-Sheppard Act, Licensees make monthly “Set Aside” payments to the agency based on a percentage of sales. This payment helps to cover a portion of new equipment, repairs, retirement, and support necessary to keep the NBE program operating.

While NBE Licensees operate sites across the state, most of the locations are concentrated in the major population centers of Lincoln and Omaha. The NBE program services approximately 400 vending machines across the state. This includes 59 vending machines spread across the twenty rest areas on Interstate 80.

During this FFY, there were over 90 sites for vending and food service managed by NBE Licensees. Examples of the locations are as follows:

501 Building, Lincoln (vending)
Airport Post Office Annex, Omaha (vending)
Cornhusker State Industries, Lincoln (vending)
Craft State Office Building, North Platte (vending)
Denney Federal Building, Lincoln (vending)
Douglas County Civic Center Complex, Omaha (vending)
Executive Building, Lincoln (vending)
Grand Island City/County Building, Grand Island (vending)
Hastings Post Office, Hastings (vending)
Lincoln Main Post Office, Lincoln (vending)
National Guard – Joint Forces, Lincoln (vending)
NDAS – K Street, Lincoln (vending)
NDOC – Central Office, Lincoln (vending)
NDOC – CCCL, Lincoln (vending)
NDOC – CCCO, Omaha (vending)
NDOC – NSP, Lincoln (vending)
NDOT, Lincoln (vending)
NDEE, Lincoln (vending)
Nebraska Law Enforcement Training Center, Grand Island (vending)
NPSC, Lincoln (vending)
Nebraska State Capitol, Lincoln (vending)
Nebraska State Lab Building, Lincoln (vending)
Nebraska State Office Building – Lincoln, Lincoln (vending and cafeteria)
Nebraska State Office Building – Omaha, Omaha (vending)
NTSB, Lincoln (vending)
Norfolk Post Office, Norfolk (vending)
Norfolk Regional Center, Norfolk (vending)
North Platte Federal Building, North Platte (vending)
North Platte Post Office, North Platte (vending)
Omaha Main Post Office, Omaha (vending)
USCIS – Omaha, Omaha (vending)
USCIS – Highlands, Lincoln (vending)
USCIS – Star Building (vending)

USDA Farm Services, Grand Island (vending)
US National Parks – Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Headquarters, Omaha (vending)
US STRATCOM – Offutt Air Force Base, Bellevue (vending and cafeteria)
Veterans Administration Regional Office, Lincoln (vending)
Veterans Hospital Ambulatory Care Clinic, Omaha (vending)
White Hall, Lincoln (vending)
Zorinsky Federal Building, Omaha (vending)

The NBE program continues to grow as blind entrepreneurs are earning an annual increase in income as the program develops more sites across the state. This year over twelve new sites were surveyed and accepted for the NBE program. Services at these sites have either already begun or are scheduled to launch in the first part of 2024.

NCBVI is continuously promoting the NBE program to increase the number of new Licensees as some of our current Licensees seek retiring in the next few years. NCBVI staff assesses all prospective Licensees for skills gaps they need to address to become successful in the program. Skill training occurs in both online and in person formats relating to such areas as human relations, business practices, basic accounting, taxes, marketing costs, inventory control, and non-visual alternative techniques. In addition, the NBE Licensees' Committee, a committee of vendors elected by their peers, meets quarterly to work with NCBVI to ensure Randolph-Sheppard requirements of active participation are being met; and to offer in-service training opportunities.

NBE Statistics

Gross Sales - \$2,720,942.00

Set Aside - \$17,869.80

NFB-NEWSLINE® FOR THE BLIND

NFB-Newsline® for the Blind was established in Nebraska over twenty years ago with the help of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN), and it still continues to grow. This program is an audio information system that allows all blind, visually impaired, print disabled, or persons with other physical disabilities to access local and national newspapers, and a variety of other publications and magazines. Currently, there are over 500 print publications available on NFB-Newsline®. Included are 416 state newspapers, four Nebraska-based newspapers, 14 national papers, 21 international papers, four Spanish publications, 52 breaking news online publications, and 84 magazines, which are all accessible by touch-tone telephone, computer, Amazon Alexa, or through Apple devices. Also available are local weather alerts, weekly store circulars, TV listings, and job listings. The system enables those who cannot read conventional print to have access to all content offered on NFB-Newsline® when traveling throughout the United States.

Listeners using the telephone to access Newsline, may use buttons on the telephone, to first choose a paper or magazine, and second, the category within the paper, such as national, state, or local news, sports, area events, and editorial opinions. The listener will immediately hear the first story of that category. They can then skip to the next story or column, replay it, jump ahead or go

back in ten second increments, adjust the volume, choose a different voice, or exit the category and choose another by pressing a single digit. Listener options also include the ability to slow down or speed up the rate of speech; a special time check key and a pause control option allows the listener to stop reading a story for a period of two minutes without losing his/her place in the story; and the availability to spell a word, go forward or backward by paragraphs, go forward or backward by sentences, and/or to search for a subject throughout the paper by a chosen word. Articles can even be emailed to subscribers with a single key stroke.

The number of subscribers continues to grow and there are currently 2,184 users in Nebraska. NFB-Newsline® is available to qualified readers free of charge, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and in all 93 counties. Email and the internet are the most popular forms of communication today. NFB-Newsline® recognizes this and is constantly developing new ways to keep up-to-date with this fast-paced world. In 2020, NFB-Newsline launched IOS Mobile 3.0 with KNFB Reader Basic, which allows subscribers to utilize the basic features of the award winning KNFB Reader, text to speech application that utilizes your devices camera. NFB-Newsline® online was created for subscribers to browse through papers and have more access to current events without having to be connected to a telephone. NFB Newsline Mobile has become one of the most accessed platforms in Nebraska. Also, users may continue to access COVID-19 news and COVID-19 testing information directly through the breaking news section.

Anyone who cannot read conventional newsprint qualifies for NFB-Newsline®. NFB-Newsline® contributes to a more literate blind population able to understand and master the printed word through better access to daily newspapers and magazines. Because of NFB-Newsline®, blind and visually impaired job seekers are better able to compete for available jobs through greater access of local newspapers. NFB Newsline now offers a limited access subscription for blind children. This subscription allows blind and visually impaired children to access age appropriate materials and they are able to conduct their own research assignments and complete their homework independently.

Many seniors experiencing vision loss are able to resume reading local newspapers and stay actively connected with community affairs. NFB-Newsline® makes it possible for hundreds of blind and print-impaired Nebraskans to address the compelling need for information; thus, affording them the opportunity to become more independent and productive members of society.

INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES

NCBVI staff routinely provide information and referrals to agencies and organizations serving blind and visually impaired consumers. Assistance with the application process or instruction in the use of equipment issued by these agencies and organizations is also available if needed. Some of the more frequently referred to agencies and organizations are: TBBS (Talking Book and Braille Services), RTBS (Radio Talking Book Services), NFBN (National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska), ACBN (American Council of the Blind of Nebraska), and Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation

TBBS is the State Library Service for the Blind and Reading Impaired. NCBVI counselors frequently assist new users of TBBS services through the use of recorded materials on cartridges as well as via email and smart phone or tablet apps. RTBS is a statewide, closed circuit radio reading service for those individuals who have disabilities, visual or physical, preventing them from reading printed material. Special receivers or televisions with the Secondary Audio Program (SAP) feature are required to hear the broadcasts of RTBS, which is also available via the internet. Although there are books and magazines available for the blind and visually impaired, there is still a daily informational void that blind people experience. RTBS makes it possible for blind people to stay in touch with their local community and what is going on around them.

The NFBN and the ACBN are two consumer organizations of the blind in the state. These organizations provide important opportunities for blind people to network with and learn from each other, giving them the peer encouragement and support needed for success. Long after the vocational rehabilitation experience is over, these consumer organizations continue to provide that extra support. When a person becomes blind or even grows up blind, it is very important to associate with other blind people to gain the proper understanding about the capabilities of blind people. It is through this association with positive blind role models provided by consumer organizations of the blind that people struggling with vision loss are able to make a more positive overall adjustment to blindness and develop self-confidence in themselves.

The ACBN coordinates subsidized half-fare taxi coupon programs for blind and visually impaired consumers living in the Lincoln “Give a Lift” and Omaha “Share a Fare” metropolitan areas. NCBVI counselors routinely inform potential beneficiaries of these programs and assist with the application process, if needed. This past year this program had the opportunity for blind and visually impaired consumers to submit for reimbursement for Uber/Lyft ride shares; if that was their preferred choice of transportation. Share a Fare and Give a Lift both allowed participants to use these services to deliver groceries and meals.

The Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation is a low vision clinic located in Omaha. NCBVI may provide financial assistance for low vision aids or devices promoting greater independence in the home or on the job, if recommended, subsequent to a low vision evaluation.

There are many other entities, public and private, across Nebraska, which can benefit persons with visual impairments. NCBVI staff network and partner with a wide range of organizations to assure that resources are maximized for blind Nebraskans. In Omaha, all organizations, including NCBVI, that served individuals that are blind and visually impaired collaborated in developing a resource list as well as had a help line that was operated from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. This help line assisted with information and referral services for consumers to additional resources that were of a high priority for them at that time.

Lastly, NCBVI is a Core Partner of WIOA, which means NCBVI is closely linked to the workforce development system, which helps all job seekers accomplish their employment goals.