

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Saturday, November 2, 2024, 9:00 a.m.

Omaha State Office Building
1313 Farnam Street, Room 227
Omaha, Nebraska

Minutes

Call to Order. Welcome and introductions. Announcement concerning public comment periods, meeting agendas, open meeting act, proof of publication, recordings and other logistics

Brent Heyen, Chairman of the Board of Commissioners, called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m. The meeting began with introductions.

Commissioners present: Brent Heyen, Chairperson, Lincoln; Cheryl Livingston, Vice Chairperson, Designee of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska, Lincoln; Linda Mentink, Executive Secretary, Columbus; Patti Schonlau, Designee of the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska, Bellevue; Miguel Rocha, Scottsbluff.

Staff present: Carlos Serván, Executive Director; Erin Brandyberry, Deputy Director-Services; Tammie Dunn, Deputy Director-Finance; Timothy Jefferson, Omaha District Supervisor; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist.

Public present: Jim Jirak, Omaha; Nancy Flearl, Omaha; Cory Brenner, Senior Vice President, Vancro Integrated Interpreting Services.

A copy of the Nebraska Open Meetings Act was available in both print and Braille formats. The Notice of the Meeting was published in the Lincoln Journal Star, the State Government Calendar, NCBVI Website, NFB Newline® and Radio Talking Book. The Notice was also sent to ACBN, NFBN, and the NCBVI listservs.

Approval of the July 27, 2024 Public Meeting Minutes and October 12, 2024 New Commission Orientation Meeting Minutes

Commissioner Livingston moved to approve the Minutes of the July 27, 2024.

Commission Meeting. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

Roll call: Ayes: Rocha, Mentink, Heyen, Livingston, Schonlau

Nays:

Abstained:

Motion Carried

Commissioner Rocha moved to approve the Minutes of the October 12, 2024, New Commission Orientation Training. Commissioner Schonlau seconded the motion.

Roll call: Ayes: Rocha, Mentink, Heyen, Livingston, Schonlau

Nayes:
Abstained:
Motion Carried

Report from the Commissioners

Brent Heyen –

Brent reported that he attended the NCBVI New Commissioner Orientation training in Omaha on October 12, and also participated in the Center's 50th Anniversary celebration on October 15.

In addition to his involvement in these events, Brent works at a hotel where he demonstrates the capabilities of a blind person every day through the work he performs. He sets a positive example of what a blind individual can accomplish. Brent also shared that, the previous night, he had the opportunity to speak with a grandfather who was canceling a reservation after learning that his grandson, whom they had brought over from South Korea, was going to be severely disabled. Brent offered some comfort, reassuring the grandfather that being disabled is not necessarily a negative thing.

Miguel Rocha –

Miguel reported that he attended the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN) At-Large Chapter meetings and the NFBN Board meeting.

He also mentioned that he is currently attending the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) and is set to graduate in December 2024.

Miguel shared that he attended the NCBVI New Commissioner Orientation training in Omaha on October 12, as well as the Center's 50th Anniversary celebration on October 15.

Additionally, Miguel noted that yesterday, while at the airport, he was approached by a woman who inquired about blindness. She mentioned that a friend of hers in Colorado was becoming blind. Miguel explained that the two briefly discussed the topic of blindness.

Cheryl Livingston –

Cheryl serves as the treasurer of the Senior Division of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN). She has also been the treasurer of the NFBN since 1988 and is currently in her second term as secretary of the Lincoln Chapter of the NFBN. Cheryl remains very active within the National Federation of the Blind.

She reported attending both the New Commissioner Orientation training and the Center's 50th Anniversary celebration. Cheryl stated that it was a great event, with

excellent speakers, and everything went smoothly. She expressed pride in the Center's work for blind individuals, noting her pleasure that the Center has been serving the community for 50 years. Cheryl hopes it will continue to thrive for many more years to come.

Additionally, Cheryl attended the NCSAB Fall conference in Seattle, Washington, during this past quarter. She found the conference very interesting and shared her report on the event.

Cheryl Livingston – Report on the NCSAB Conference

The National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) conference was held in Seattle, Washington, from October 23–25. There were approximately 150 attendees from various agencies around the country and about 20 exhibitors, including Aira, Tactile Images/3D Photoworks, Envision, SAAVI, Vispero, and many others. The Wednesday morning session kicked off with a panel presentation led by R SA Commissioner Dante Allen regarding the ways in which artificial intelligence will help employees gain access to information in the workplace, as well as understanding some of the drawbacks. One of the presenters, Alison Levy of the U.S. Access Board, made a comment that really resonated with me. The comment included the phrase, “nothing about us without us.” The afternoon sessions included a panel discussion about some of the uses of artificial intelligence. Representatives from Aira, Be My Eyes, and Vispero demonstrated some uses of AI. A picture was shown, and AI was asked to describe it. It did a pretty good job of the description. Then a picture was taken with an iPhone of the people in the meeting room and the room's features. AI described some of the people, indicating their gender and the color of their clothing, and gave a description of the walls, light fixtures, and floors. It was explained that sometimes AI does not describe things accurately and can even hallucinate, giving descriptions of things that are not there or incorrectly describing them. Aira then used an agent to review the picture and indicate if there were any inaccuracies. If I remember correctly, AI was accurate.

The Thursday morning program included a panel of representatives from Vispero, Microsoft, and Amazon discussing opportunities for blind employees to gain and keep employment with their various companies, and a presentation from members of the National Association of Blind Merchants about opportunities in the Randolph-Sheppard program. Nebraska took the stage on Thursday afternoon to discuss structured discovery. Our own Director, Carlos Servan, was the facilitator, and Deputy Director Erin Brandyberry presented the topic. Following this presentation was a panel discussion on the Nebraska initiative, which is a program in partnership with Tactile Images, a company that produces tactile recreations of art, science, and maps. An exhibition has begun in Nebraska to include tactile images at five different museums throughout the state over a period of 100 weeks. This will allow blind and low-vision museum and science center patrons to enjoy and learn about such topics as the shape and geography of Nebraska and how the solar system works. The final presentations on Thursday were from Wayfinder Family Services, presenting on a 12-month program through the Hatlen Center in California to learn skills of blindness, and a presentation

from Leader Dogs for the Blind on a week-long course in cane travel that is taught to prepare a person to begin working with a guide dog.

The Friday morning session was the business meeting of the NCSAB, in which elections were held. Director Servan and I headed out to the airport at 9:45 to catch our flights back home.

I would like to relate a few of my experiences while at the conference. There were some exhibitors who demonstrated low-vision glasses that will help a person see objects from far away. I tried some of them, and it was amazing how close some far-off objects felt. Also, I visited with Dr. Cassandra Williams-Stokes, the president of NCSAB, briefly on Thursday morning. She is the director of the Arkansas agency for the blind, and they are a commission similar to ours. They also have concerns about their legislature deciding to consolidate their agency under the rehab umbrella, and I told her that we are always on the watch for any movement toward consolidation in our legislature as well. I also found it interesting that Leader Dogs says they can teach a person enough cane travel in a week to be able to use a guide dog. A person can come back as many times as they need for a refresher. One person in the audience applauded their teaching and said it was wonderful. In NCBVI's structured discovery center, it is estimated to take six to nine months to learn cane travel effectively.

I am glad I had the opportunity to attend the NCSAB conference and found it interesting and worthwhile. There are many dedicated people who work in rehab with the blind, and it was instructive to learn some of their perspectives.

Patti Schonlau –

Patti reported that she currently has her fifth leader dog, and she really likes Leader Dogs.

Patti reported that she attended the New Commissioner Orientation training on October 12 where she received some valuable training as a new commissioner. On October 15 Patti also attended the Center 50th Anniversary celebration. Patti stated that she enjoyed the speakers. Patti noted that many years ago she taught at a facility in Saint Louis that is very similar to the Center.

Patti stated that she serves as President of the Omaha Council of the Blind, and she also attends the meetings for the ACBN State Chapter and she is active on the committee for the 2025 State convention which will be held on March 22, 2025 in Bellevue.

Linda Mentink –

Since our last quarterly meeting, Linda has attended and participated in our new Commissioner Orientation, three NFBN Board meetings where she is Secretary, three NFBN Senior Division meetings where she is Secretary, two NFBN Historians Committee meetings, two NFB of Kansas Blind Christian Group meetings, two Alumni Association of the Wisconsin School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (AAWSBVI)

board meetings where she is President, one AAWSBVI quarterly zoomunion, one Friends of the Commission quarterly meeting where she is Vice President, and a Faith Inclusion Network pannel discussion concerning including and reaching out to blind/low vision people. She continues to meet for lunch monthly with the members of the former NFBN Columbus Area Chapter. She did not attend the 50th Celebration of the Training Center because she was teaching music at Bible Baptist Christian School.

Linda was contacted by a music teacher at a Columbus Parochial School who has a blind music student. Linda gave her some much-appreciated information, and she and her student are now learning and using Braille music.

At Tuesday's Friends of the Commission meeting, Barbara Loos ended her many years on the board. Lori Burns joined and is now Treasurer. Linda was re-elected Vice President. Friends is still looking for four members to bring the number to ten. Erin has put out some feelers.

Focus Topic: Omaha_SSP Program – Presented by Cory Brunner, Senior Vice President, Vancro Integrated Interpreting Services

Introduction: Vancro was founded in 2004 by Chris Crosby and Janson Vandeford Evans. It is a Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business. In 2018, the company began working on sign language interpreting contracts, and in 2021, it started focusing on DeafBlind contracts.

Contract History:

In 2023, Vancro was awarded a contract from the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) and Friends of the Commission to provide SSP services as a pilot program in Omaha, Nebraska. This contract resulted from years of advocacy by the interagency team. The program directly impacts the health and well-being of Deaf and Blind Nebraskans living in Omaha. The goal of the contract is to enhance the quality of life for individuals with dual sensory hearing and vision loss.

Running an effective SSP program requires the recruitment of SSPs, solid training, outreach to the DeafBlind community, training on how to use the program, attendance at tabling events, a streamlined system for making requests and scheduling SSPs (to prevent systemic barriers), and the ability to address concerns.

Omaha Pilot Details and Data:

- 374 requests to date
- Hosted two SSP trainings
- Two tabling events: Silver Summit and NFBN conference in Scottsbluff (NCBVI tabled for us)
- 20 active SSPs and four on a waitlist
- 15 DeafBlind participants and two on a waitlist

A statewide program depends on funding. It's important for any program to consider non-direct costs such as fringe benefits, employee-related expenses, necessary technology, and sign language interpreting costs. Additionally, training costs and tabling fees should be factored in.

Legislative action will require finding a legislative champion in state government to get a bill passed. Working with and leveraging partners and key stakeholders, as well as getting in front of the legislature to testify, will be critical.

What is an SSP and Why is This Important?

Referred to as DeafBlind, Nebraskans 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 individuals elect not to attend to their health or enjoy recreational activities.

The introduction of Support Service Providers (SSPs) dismantles these barriers. SSPs are highly trained professionals who serve as sighted guides, offering visual, social, and environmental descriptions of surroundings, and providing transportation access. This program allows DeafBlind Nebraskans to lead more autonomous lives, fostering independence and self-determination.

The provision of these services not only enhances the physical and mental health of Nebraskans but also creates valuable employment opportunities.

The pilot allows for up to 15 DeafBlind individuals to access services, and to date, we have reached maximum capacity. We have received over 317 requests for SSPs and provided more than 800 hours of direct service. There is a waitlist of three individuals ready to join the program. Vancro employs 21 SSPs, who undergo a two-day, 16-hour training that provides all necessary content and hands-on practice. Our trainings are conducted by DeafBlind professionals and subject matter experts. Every consumer of services, upon acceptance into the program, receives a one-on-one introduction. We have hosted two SSP trainings in Omaha.

NEBRASKA

Service Area: Omaha, Nebraska

Program Established: July 2023

Funding Sources: Two-year grant of \$110,000 from NCBVI and a \$10,000 grant from the Friends of NCBVI to establish an SSP pilot program in the Omaha metro area. During this two-year period, permanent program funding will be sought from the Nebraska State Legislature.

Eligibility: Service recipients must have varying levels of combined vision and hearing loss: 1) **Vision** - visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with corrective lenses, or a field loss such that the peripheral diameter of the visual field subtends an angular distance of no greater than 20 degrees, or progressive visual loss with a prognosis leading to one or both of the above conditions; and 2) **Hearing** - chronic hearing disabilities so severe that most speech cannot be understood even with optimum amplification, or progressive hearing loss with a prognosis leading to the above condition. Confirmation of vision and hearing loss must be provided in writing by a qualified professional. In addition, the DeafBlind participant must have the capacity to give instructions and make decisions independently when utilizing SSP services. DeafBlind participants must provide a Nebraska photo ID to prove they have been a Nebraska resident for at least one year and are age 14 or older. Anyone under the age of 18 will require parental consent to use SSP services.

Certification/Endorsement: Continuing Education Units (CEUs) from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) are offered for initial SSP training. Vancro is willing to work with other professional organizations to procure CEUs based on participant interest.

Types of Service Requests: Running errands, attending events, attending appointments, reading mail, and assisting with in-house tasks like setting up computer access and online shopping.

Training Requirements: Two-day training for SSPs and participants.

Program Coordination: Part-time.

SSP Pay Rate: As of 2024, SSPs are paid \$20/hour. The program covers mileage and travel time.

Transportation: SSPs are allowed to drive or use public transportation.

Here are some quotes from DeafBlind People:

- “The SSP program has been a godsend, expanding 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 or running into other people or objects. I actually have a decent workout. Exploring different trails and parks while walking at a brisk pace with an SSP is a game changer for me. Being in touch with my body and becoming more active physically helps improve my mental health and, more importantly, grows me spiritually, giving me a sense of purpose.”
- “The SSP program has enabled me to independently participate in everyday activities and be an active member of my community. Without the help of SSPs, I would be unable to independently work, go to doctor visits, shop for groceries, or complete continuing education certifications.”

- “When with an SSP, I feel that I have regained a lot of independence that is lost with dual sensory losses. I don’t want to trouble family or friends all the time; it feels like I am using them to do the things I want or need to participate in.”
- “I have more freedom to get out and do what I need and want. It eases the burden on my spouse. I cannot sing the praises of the SSP program more than I already do! This program has allowed me to regain my independence! No more begging neighbors, friends, or family for rides and being at their mercy. I can now make my own decisions about where I want to go and how I want to engage with the world around me again. There are simply no words to explain how freeing it is to make my own choices again and have a reliable assistant to support me. SSPs rock!”
- “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.”

Cory concluded her report and asked if there were any questions.

Miguel Rocha inquired if there is a checklist for how an SSP (Support Service Provider) describes a room visually. Cory explained that the approach to visual descriptions starts by asking the DeafBlind person what they would like to know. However, the general rule of thumb is to begin with a broad description and gradually move to more specific details. For instance, an SSP would start with an overview of the room, mentioning larger objects and the number of people present, then provide more detailed descriptions. The DeafBlind individual may then ask specific questions, such as where a certain person is seated. The SSP would also describe the atmosphere of the room—whether people seem excited, whether there’s a lot of conversation or if it’s quiet, or whether people appear angry, and so on.

Cheryl Livingston asked how they select the individuals they will serve. Cory responded that, generally, the program operates on a first-come, first-served basis, with services provided to the first 15 people who sign up. The program is regularly reviewed, as some individuals use the service weekly, while others may use it only quarterly. This variation allows the flexibility to potentially add a 16th person if needed.

Cheryl Livingston asked whether a person needs to have a certain level of deafness or blindness to qualify for the program. Cory explained that some programs, like the one in Missouri, have specific requirements for vision and hearing loss. However, the SSP Pilot Program in Omaha does not have such criteria. Eligibility for the Omaha program is based on whether an individual’s combined hearing and vision loss creates a significant barrier to performing daily activities. Cory noted that if statewide legislation on SSP services is introduced in Nebraska, it could include specific requirements. To qualify for the Omaha SSP Program, a person must be a client of the NCBVI.

Patti Schonlau mentioned that she moved to Nebraska from Missouri about a year and a half ago and has friends who have benefited from the SSP program for several years. In Missouri, there is no Commission for the Blind; the equivalent agency is called Rehabilitation Services for the Blind.

Cory noted that many SSP programs are typically housed under either a Commission for the Blind or a Commission for the Deaf.

Cheryl Livingston remarked that the SSP Program provides both guiding services and visual descriptions of rooms and the people in them. She asked what happens when a person is an experienced cane traveler or guide dog user and doesn't need the guiding aspect of the service but would still appreciate the visual descriptions and other cues.

Cory explained that their motto is "The DeafBlind person leads." In line with the philosophy of "not being us without us," the DeafBlind individual directs the SSP provider on what they want and need, ensuring the service is tailored to their preferences.

Brent Heyen remarked that he has noticed many similarities between the SSP program and the process of a blind person hiring a reader to read documents. He explained that, much like a reader adjusting their pace to suit the blind person's needs—reading faster or slower as requested—the guiding and description services in the SSP program are similarly flexible to the needs of the DeafBlind individual.

Cory agreed, acknowledging the similarities, but added that the key difference is the use of additional assistive technologies to communicate information, particularly because these individuals are both deaf and blind. One such technology is an environmental descriptive system called *haptics*, which is commonly used. Haptics allows a DeafBlind person to receive environmental information through tactile sensations, typically on their back. Cory explained that, as part of their training, SSP providers teach DeafBlind individuals how to use haptics. For example, if a DeafBlind person entered a room and was unable to verbally describe the environment, the SSP would position themselves behind the individual and "draw" the room's layout on their back, identifying the people in the room. Additionally, the SSP would inform the person when someone raised their hand or what they were saying by providing that information through haptic feedback.

Miguel Rocha asked if haptics is typically as fast as verbal communication. Cory explained that it depends on the complexity of the space and the activities taking place. For example, if the space is large or there is a lot happening, it may take a bit longer to convey the information through haptics.

Cory also noted that while haptics training has not yet been conducted in Nebraska, it is part of their plans for the future.

The commissioners thanked Cory for her informative presentation on the SSP Program.

Public Comment

Nancy Flearl –

Nancy shared that throughout her career, she had the opportunity to work with individuals who are DeafBlind. She, along with Bob Deaton, a former NCBVI deputy director, and Cheryl Poff, a former NCBVI DeafBlind coordinator, worked for many years to establish an SSP provider in Nebraska. Before her retirement, they identified Vancro as a potential SSP provider. Nancy emphasized that she believes this program is crucial for the community.

She urged everyone to help identify DeafBlind individuals in Nebraska, noting that the more information they can provide to legislators when advocating for funding for an SSP program, the better.

Break: A break was taken at 10:02 a.m. The meeting resumed at 10:17 a.m.

Report from the Executive Director:

I. Administration

During the last quarter, I attended the following meetings and activities:

Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC): At the September meeting, the Nebraska Department of Education focused on the federal report regarding special education. We learned that Nebraska ranks 45th in performance for special education. I raised the issue of teaching braille in public schools at an early age. So far, the response has been that there are not enough vision teachers to implement this. At another meeting on October 30, directors of Special Education and several stakeholders met to begin discussing new strategies for improving special education in Nebraska. During this meeting, I had the opportunity to speak with Tanya Armstrong, the superintendent of the Nebraska Center for the Education of Children who are Blind and Visually Impaired (NCECBVI), about braille literacy for blind children at an early age. We agreed to follow up on this important issue and plan to meet with the state director of Special Education in the near future.

NCSAB Monthly Meetings: NCSAB did not receive the grant we applied for with George Washington University (GWU). Most of the other meetings were focused on coordinating the Fall Conference, which took place on October 23, 24, and 25, in Seattle, Washington. Commissioner Livingston also attended this conference. A new focus was artificial intelligence. Some directors had a meeting with RSA to discuss the future of AI and our role in shaping it. One of the areas discussed was using AI as a tool for counselors to make their jobs easier and to allow more time for improving our services. NCBVI was selected to present on our Structured Discovery Center, and Erin

Brandyberry did a great job. 3D-PhotoWorks also presented on the Nebraska initiative with various museums. Reports were provided on the progress in Washington, including continuing resolutions for FY2025, OIB funds, and potential changes in the Rehab Act as part of WIOA.

Star Tran Monthly Meetings: Aside from regular business items, we discussed making bus stops accessible to the blind. Star Tran will meet with blind consumers to determine the best approach. Additionally, I suggested the possibility of placing our vending machines in the new Multimedia Center, set to be completed in 2026. The Advisory Board does not have the power to approve recommendations but will write a letter of support for this initiative. I will work with consumers to bring this opportunity to the attention of the City Council.

I attended the Independent Agencies, Boards, and Commissions meeting on October 8. The topic was the administrative rules process, including the new administrative rules upload site at the Nebraska Secretary of State's office.

Tammie Dunn and Erin Brandyberry attended the Friends quarterly meeting, where they discussed record-keeping and future communication with NCBVI, among other topics.

The 50th anniversary ceremony of our Training Center was a success. I would like to express my gratitude to the committee that helped organize this event and to our sponsors, as we were unable to purchase food with state or federal funds. Barbara Loos, Jessica Bartenbach, and I delivered remarks, and we had a consumer representative from each decade, spanning the seventies to the present. Additionally, students provided tours of the Center.

I met with the owner and founder of Independence Science, Dr. Cary Supalo, to discuss the possibility of hosting a statewide conference on making science accessible for blind students. He will submit a proposal, and we will see if the state will approve a sole-source contract.

Hugh Phan and I attended the American Foundation for the Blind annual Leadership Conference, which focused on AI.

On October 21, I gave a remote presentation to the Virginia Workers Compensation about motivating injured workers to pursue training and lead productive lives.

On October 31, I was one of the panelists at the Hispanic Youth Leadership annual conference. Additionally, I was invited to present as a keynote speaker at the national conference "Dare to Be Remarkable" in Baltimore, Maryland, from November 11-13.

I have been asked to be the NCSAB representative at the National Rehabilitation Research & Training Center on Employment of People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision, starting in 2025. My role will be to advise on better ways to provide rehabilitation services for blind consumers nationwide.

I was also invited to serve on the Omaha Special Education Advisory Board, which will give me an opportunity to influence quality education for blind students in the largest public school system.

Tactile Images-3-D Works has launched exhibits in five Nebraska museums: The Joslyn, Kiewit Luminarium, Great Plains Art Museum, Hastings Museum Natural & Cultural History Planetarium, and The Durham Museum. There will be around 120 weeks of exposition. The kickoff was at the Joslyn on September 8, coinciding with their grand reopening after two years of renovation. A Public Service Announcement (PSA) has been developed for each exhibition opening and is now available for distribution by each museum. 3D PhotoWorks is hosting the PSA on tactileimages.com and distributing it alongside their press release. NCBVI is also airing these PSAs on some TV and radio stations, as well as on social media.

The Business Office:

At the close of the federal fiscal year, we had a remaining balance of \$459,881 in Basic Support Grant funds. These funds have been fully obligated for the purchase of Monarch devices and tactile-audio maps for both the U.S. and Nebraska.

The current fiscal year's budget continues to include state appropriations for the SSP pilot project in Omaha. Additionally, Friends of the Commission has contributed \$20,000 in support of this project.

For the Center celebration, all members of the Business Office were involved in supporting the Center Supervisor, volunteers, and teammates by coordinating logistics, organizing activities, and ensuring that every detail was in place. We are proud of the outcome.

We are making progress on the development of a new student lounge area. A contract has been signed, and we anticipate that remodeling will begin on November 4, 2024.

Technology Area:

Hugh Phan worked on renewing JAWS and Duxbury licenses for staff. He purchased technology equipment for new staff, ordered Monarch braille displays for staff and clients, and coordinated training for the use of this new equipment. Additionally, he attended the AFB 2024 Leadership Conference to learn more about accessibility and AI. He added a 50th Center anniversary page on the NCBVI website and set up and streamed the 50th Center anniversary presentation live on YouTube. He is also evaluating the possibility of obtaining a group license for NCBVI for all staff and clients.

Kathy Stephens:

Kathy completed registration and hotel reservations for staff and clients to attend several conferences, including the college workshop, NCSAB Fall Conference, Dare to

Be Remarkable conference, AFB conference, Blast conference for NBE, and technology conference.

The Year-End fixed assets inventory was completed and submitted to Administrative Services before the August 31, 2024, deadline.

Kathy processed CVRCB Certificates for new staff as their applications were approved, and she also processed re-certification documents for existing staff whose certificates were about to expire.

She made updates to the NCBVI website as needed and attended a Hotel Engine training session. Hotel Engine is a collaboration that aims to provide users with a platform to view hotel properties, access live inventory, and manage trips in one easy-to-use location. This training covered onboarding agencies onto the Hotel Engine platform, GSA limits, direct billing, and more. The state recommends using this new system.

Kathy facilitated the replacement of NCBVI leased vehicles and handled additional vehicle requests with the Transportation Services Bureau (TSB).

II. Human Resources

Staff Update:

In the Omaha District: We are excited to share that Alanah Purkapile is joining the NCBVI team as a VR Tech in the Omaha District office. Alanah brings valuable customer service experience from the Department of Health & Human Services. She will start working with us on November 12. We still have one VR counselor position vacant.

In the North Platte District: Jason Baker (VR Counselor) completed Center training on October 11 and is now working in the field. We still have one VR counselor position open in the North Platte area.

We also hired Cindi Walz, who started as a VR Specialist on September 16. This position will assist field counselors in obtaining the necessary documentation to work with clients and help coordinate programs.

In Administration: We hired Katie Mihulka as Accountant II, who started working on August 12. Sara Watson has joined NCBVI as our new HR Generalist/Specialist. With Sara in this role, NCBVI staff will benefit from timely, efficient, and high-quality HR support. In addition to core HR duties, she will handle public relations and policy management.

The Lincoln District, Training Center, NBE, and Administration are all now fully staffed.

Training Opportunities:

We had our State Staff meeting on September 16-18, which Commissioner Livingston also attended. Some of the training focused on internal control, personal accountability, and AI for consumers.

Cristal Dimas and Tim Jefferson attended their third cohort at the National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI). Pam Rademacher and Tammie Dunn have been accepted into the next NRLI cohort and will begin their first session in February 2025.

Erin Brandyberry, Cristal Dimas, Tim Jefferson, Commissioner Livingston, and I attended the Fall NCSAB Conference in Seattle, Washington.

In August, Gracie, Amy, and Kaytlyn attended the Project Discovery PRE-ETS Kit Training in Kearney, which was a VR training session with Nebraska public schools. Pam participated in an Eschenbach webinar.

While in New York at the Helen Keller Center, Kaytlyn requested and received a tour of the Center and connected with staff to discuss services available for deaf/blind clients. Her initiative resulted in valuable information and resources to better serve our consumers who are deaf/blind.

In October, Gracie, Amy, Kaytlyn, and Pam attended a Supported Employment Training via Zoom presented by Erin Brandyberry.

III. Field Services

The Lincoln district continues to have GATE teaching programs, which are well attended.

Classes started in the public schools, and field counselors resumed attending IEPs and other school events to meet students and their parents and continue partnering with teachers.

We had a college workshop from October 18-20 in Lincoln. Our field staff participated in several presentations and networking events.

In the Lincoln District:

- Kaytlyn and Pam continue to work monthly with the American Job Center, participating in job forum Zoom calls and board meetings.
- Kaytlyn attended a Lay Advocacy Meeting to connect with other advocates and learned about new trends, policies, and practices that may impact Special Education. She also participated in a job site tour of Legacy Estates, hosted by the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development.

- In early August, Connie and Charli presented at Legacy Terrace about NCBVI services. Connie also provided information to the Falls City Senior Center and the Lifetime Vision Center in Auburn.
- In early September, Amy and Shane Buresh conducted an in-service for the Lincoln North Star theater students at the teacher's request. The students, who are performing "The Miracle Worker" in October, wanted to accurately portray and learn about blindness for an authentic representation.
- In late September, Pam attended a morning session at the Optical Symposium in Omaha to educate optometrists about the benefits and services of NCBVI.
- In early October, Pam and Gracie attended the York County Health Fair. Later that week, Kathy, Gracie, and Pam attended the 8th Annual Project Homeless Connect in Norfolk, which consistently attracts a large audience. We made a new connection with Unity Health Eye Care in Norfolk.
- Also in October, Pam and Charli were invited to the Lincoln airport staff meeting to discuss improving customer service skills for assisting customers with blindness or low vision. Our visit was well received, and we've been asked to return for further training, including video presentations.
- Gracie attended the Employ Columbus monthly meetings, the Norfolk Family Collaboration meeting, the Collaborative – Food Access and Security: Area United Way, the CFP Community Collaborative meeting, Little Priest Tribal College, Village Market Winnebago – Career Day, and a Spanish Networking Group with Fremont Commercial Commerce – Business Leaders.
- Kathy presented at the Golden Oaks Senior Center in Oakland in October, reaching 26 participants.
- Gracie provided a presentation on NCBVI services to Medical Language Link (interpreters for medical offices across the state) via Zoom and offered professional input for the Norfolk MTAP Walk Audit concerning increased safety for streets and sidewalks for our consumers.

In the Omaha District:

- The Omaha staff hosted a booth and provided information at the Academy of Eye Physicians and Surgeons, where Tim Jefferson delivered a brief presentation during the luncheon.
- The Omaha district co-coordinated the "Experience the Cosmos" event with the Kiewit Luminarium for members of the blind community. Members of the Luminarium staff are working to create a more accessible experience and are open to future partnerships with NCBVI.
- Kelly Coleman and Alex France took the Pre-TABS group to Sensory Safari.
- Alex France and Kaytlyn Hilligas provided skills training to NCECBVI students. Kaytlyn Hilligas will be the lead coordinator for scheduling future activities with NCECBVI.
- Candace Dollar and Craig Kneifl attended a kickoff fair with Amazon to learn about their updated hiring process, which will increase job opportunities for job seekers in the Omaha district.

- Craig attended the ESU 3 Parent Open House and presented information about NCBVI services. He also attended a PTI Resource Fair for Spanish-speaking families and utilized an interpreter to present information about NCBVI services.
- Craig was invited to speak at a weekly breakfast for the Optimist Club regarding NCBVI services.
- Mickie Saltzman and Tim Jefferson provided an in-service to the HWS AJC front-end staff about the use of the Lyriq and Onyx devices purchased by NCBVI. They also presented information on how to assist blind customers who enter the AJC.
- Mickie and Tim presented information on adaptive technology and the stages of grief related to the adjustment to blindness to the staff at the North Point Substance Abuse Treatment Center. Tim Jefferson also gave a brief disability awareness and informational presentation to the Dynamic Workforce staff. This presentation is part of a collaborative effort between Dynamic Workforce and NCBVI to increase referrals between the two programs and enhance job opportunities for NCBVI clients.
- The Omaha staff met with members of the Metro Moby Outreach team to provide information that would make riding Moby more accessible for NCBVI consumers.
- Tim Jefferson is continuing to work with the Metro transportation staff to increase accessibility to their electronic applications and phone apps for blind consumers. He is also working to create a memorandum of agreement with the Outlook Enrichment program.

In the North Platte District:

- Kimberly continues to be involved in employment groups such as Employ Grand Island and Hastings.
- Kimberly also networked with the following businesses: Target, Menards, Hy-Vee, Salvation Army, Buffalo Records, and St. Francis Hospital. She continues her involvement with the Kearney and Grand Island Project Search sites.
- Grace networked with the Lewellen Community Wesleyan Church, Hay Springs City Hall, and Lied Scottsbluff Public Library. She attended an ISP meeting with Integrated Life Choices (ILC). Angie networked and met with staff at the newly established VA Primary Home Care Program, and she collaborated with the physical therapy department at a local hospital to provide cane training.
- Kimberly participated in UNK's Disability in the Workplace panel. Grace provided in-services to the Excel Development Group in Ogallala and the Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska in Gering. Cristal attended the Greater Nebraska Workforce Board meeting held in Lexington. Jason and Cristal provided an in-service to the North Platte Area Agency on Aging staff. Kimberly participated in the Central Region Transition Agency Fair hosted by Educational Service Unit 10. Angie provided an in-service to Area Agency on Aging staff in Scottsbluff and presented at a fall prevention class hosted by the Scottsbluff hospital. Angie also attends and participates in the OIB program managers' meeting via Zoom.

- Josh, Grace, Kimberly, Cristal, and former Center students attended the Center's 50th Anniversary celebration. Jason worked at the college workshop held in Lincoln. Kimberly served on the Project Independence Committee and worked at the program held in Fremont. Angie presented on OIB best practices at the State Staff meeting and has been collecting data for the 7OB report with Julie. She provided training to the new home management instructor both via Zoom and in person, teaching her sewing alternatives.

Client Statistics:

Number of Clients in All Statuses Served at the end of the Period:

OIB clients was 745.

IL clients under 55 was 104.

VR clients was 513.

Total of 1362 consumers. This is around 10% more than a year ago and 30% more than seven years ago. However, we have around 80% more in OIB.

We had consumers obtain jobs as:

Accountant/Auditor

Art/Drama/Music Teacher

Business Operations Specialist

Childcare Worker

Civil Engineer

Food Prep/Serving Worker (2)

Customer Service Representative (5)

Dishwasher

Postsecondary Teacher

Elementary Teacher (2)

Farm/Ranch Manager

General Manager

Graphic Designer

Healthcare Support Worker

Information Clerk

Janitor/Cleaner (2)

Landscaping/Grounds keeping (2)

Lodging Manager

Massage Therapist (2)

Mental Health Counselor

Office Clerk

Physical Therapist

Project Management Specialist

Psychiatric Technician

Randolph-Sheppard Vendor

Reception/Information Clerk

Stock Clerk (2)
Teacher (All Other)
Teaching Assistant (Pre-School), and
Teaching Assistant (Special Education).

IV. Training Center

As of October 21, the Nebraska Center for the Blind has eleven individuals attending training: five Vocational Rehabilitation consumers, one Older Individual who is Blind consumer, two Pre-Employment Transition Services consumers, and three staff trainees.

During this quarter, we had four consumers tour the Center and facilitated three three-day stays. After the last report was submitted, we also provided a tour for two staff members from Senator Pete Ricketts' office.

Katie Mihulka is attending two weeks of staff training from October 21 through November 1, Vanessa Kunz will attend from October 28 through November 8, and Sara Watson is attending six weeks of staff training between October 28 and January 17.

Between October 1, 2021, and September 30, 2024, twenty-seven staff members attended Center training. In fiscal year 2024, we had ten staff trainees, thirteen consumer tours, ten three-day stays, and twelve students. Of the thirteen tours, four were OIB (Older Individuals who are Blind) clients, one was IL (Independent Living), one was Pre-ETS (Pre-Employment Transition Services), and the rest were VR (Vocational Rehabilitation). Among the ten three-day stays, two were OIB clients, three were Pre-ETS, and the remaining five were VR. Out of the twelve students, one was from out of state, one started as OIB but switched to VR, two were Pre-ETS, and the rest were VR.

Activities this quarter included a visit to Gateway Mall, grilling on charcoal grills, a tour and lunch at Southeast Community College's dining hall, a Saturday at the downtown farmers market, and a sensory safari at the Lincoln Children's Zoo. Drop-in sessions were also held for all students. Additionally, several students served mini or commencement meals. Monthly vocational seminars continued, along with a two-day workshop conducted by staff from the National Federation of the Blind in August. Three Center students attended the college workshop in October.

For professional development, Center staff worked with Adelmo Vigil during the week of August 12 to update the curricula in each class. We also attended training hosted by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board on August 26. Classes were not held during the week of September 11 due to our fall statewide staff meeting. On September 27, Center staff met virtually with their counterparts from across the country to share ideas and ask questions.

Out of the eight staff members, six are Certified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for the Blind, four have National Certification in Unified English Braille, three have National Certification in Rehabilitation Teaching for the Blind, one has National Orientation and Mobility Certification, one is a National Orientation and Mobility Certified Trainer, one is a Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant, and one has Freedom Scientific JAWS certification. We expect to be evaluated by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board by the end of the year to maintain our certification as a Structured Discovery Training Center, which is approved to provide immersion, internship, and apprenticeship opportunities for those wishing to work in the field of Structured Discovery.

V. Nebraska Business Enterprise

Vending Site Update

The micro markets that NBE opened in Omaha, Bellevue, Hastings, and Lincoln are performing well. Late this summer, NBE assisted a current vendor trainee in the Beatrice area with opening a new site at a local private business. This business was dissatisfied with its current service provider and reached out to the NBE vendor to inquire about having him service their location. It is a great fit, and the machines are doing very well.

A new traditional vending site opened this past summer at the new USDA office in Lincoln. Plans to consolidate the two USCIS offices in Lincoln, which are both served by the same vendor, have been postponed from an expected opening date in late winter or early spring 2025. The new building is now scheduled to open in the fall of 2025.

The new micro market attached to the cafeteria in the USSTRATCOM building on Offutt AFB is currently under construction. NBE expects to have access to the area to begin installing equipment the week of November 12, 2024. This will be our largest micro market to date and will offer frozen food, ice cream, a bean-to-cup coffee machine, and a cappuccino machine.

STRATCOM Diner

NBE is coordinating with USSTRATCOM on their planned refurbishment of the cafeteria. This project is still in the planning stages.

NBE Licensed Vendors

There are currently 12 licensed vendors and 5 trainees in the NBE program. NBE staff is aware of at least two other individuals who have expressed interest in the program.

Vending Site Complaints

NBE staff has received some complaints in the last quarter regarding understocked vending machines and micro markets. NBE staff is working with the vendors who service these machines to understand why the sites are being underserved and to devise a plan to prevent this situation in the future.

Other

NBE staff, along with Executive Director Carlos Serván, will attend BLAST in Nashville in November. BLAST is a conference of the National Association of Blind Merchants (NABM), a group that is part of NFB. In addition to a session solely for SLA staff (staff members from state agencies),

Commissioner Rocha inquired about whether NCBVI staff work with a specific contact at a company like Menards, or if there is a broader corporate connection. Director Serván explained that in this case, the outreach was in a specific city, North Platte, as he believes. He clarified that when NCBVI staff engage with a company, the approach is twofold: first, to educate the company about how to work with blind individuals, and second, to assess whether there are job opportunities for blind people. If the company has a human resources representative, they focus on discussing job opportunities. If not, they typically speak with the general manager.

Commissioner Rocha then asked whether companies usually accept these meetings, or if it is more of an ongoing conversation. Director Serván noted that the discussions are ongoing but not necessarily monthly. Companies typically follow up with NCBVI when a job opportunity becomes available, so it is a case-by-case conversation.

Erin Brandyberry added that the employment groups that NCBVI staff attend in various cities across Nebraska help maintain corporate connections. By the various agencies utilizing the same employer contact, such as Department of Labor and Nebraska General VR, it keeps the work we do more at the forefront of their mind and sometimes we are able to find successful employment as a result. However, because NCBVI's services are individualized, most employer connections are one-on-one with an HR representative or manager.

Chair Heyen expressed surprise upon learning that Nebraska ranks 45th in the nation for special education. Given that the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) is highly ranked nationally, one would expect special education to be performing better. Director Serván pointed out that, when it comes to general education, Nebraska ranks very high nationally. He also emphasized NCBVI's success in working with students who often have very low skill levels, noting that the organization's efforts are critical in helping these students progress. Director Serván added that NCBVI is actively working to change this perception, and the data provided gives him the "ammunition" needed to advocate for braille education.

Commissioner Schonlau stated that one thing that is sad, but often happens, is that braille is not taught in schools, and it is not required for parents to approve it. However, parents *do* have to approve it before it is taught. Unlike other subjects—such as English, history, science, and math—that all students receive without requiring parental consent, braille instruction for visually impaired students requires parental sign-off. As a result, many students do not receive braille instruction, and further down the road, if the student loses all their vision, they are left illiterate. Commissioner Schonlau expressed

her willingness to help if there is ever an opportunity for her to be a voice on a committee or elsewhere.

Director Serván mentioned that there is a State Education Advisory Board that meets every three months, with the next meeting scheduled for January or February 2025. The committee sometimes allows public comments, so it would be beneficial for Commissioner Schonlau to attend and share her thoughts. However, Director Serván noted that the attitude at these meetings is often such that public comments may not always receive responses. He emphasized that he always requests that public comments be included in the meeting records.

Commissioner Schonlau thanked Director Serván for the opportunity.

NFB Newsline Update – by Jamie Richey

There was no NFB Newsline report for this quarter because the website used to retrieve the Newsline statistics was down. Jamie Richey will provide a six-month report in February 2025.

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or issues – By Jodi Bodnar, Program Director, Nebraska Client Assistance Program

1. The NE Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) had two Client Assistance Program (CAP) cases for FY24. Both cases were resolved in favor of the client through informal mediation with a CAP advocate and NCBVI staff. Case Summaries: 1. The student is receiving Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) at their school. The student's parent contacted CAP to inquire about Pre-ETS and how they are administered in the school setting. The parent reported their student was being seen by NCBVI staff previously at their school but was unsure of the status or next steps. The parent was having difficulty getting into contact with their local NCBVI staff. CAP staff provided information about Pre-ETS services and what they can look like. We also discussed that the student might not be ready for Pre-ETS and would like to discuss independent living services. The parent signed the release of information. CAP staff contacted the local NCBVI office and reconnected them with the parent to coordinate services. In reviewing the case, NCBVI did not have a permanent NCBVI staff re-assigned to the student's school, and NCBVI staff were providing coverage.

2. An eligible client who is receiving services and interested in developing an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) for vocational services. Additionally, the client is engaged with the Support Service Provider (SSP) Program, <https://ncbvi.nebraska.gov/services/omaha-ssp-program>. The client reported that he had used NCBVI services for a long time and that his previous NCBVI staff retired. The client added that they could not reach their newly assigned NCBVI staff person. The CAP advocate and the client discussed potential solutions, and they clarified their

preferred method of communication. While reviewing the case, CAP advocate learned that the client had previously stated that they had planned to move out of state and would be closing their case. The client never followed up with NCBVI to inform them that they had decided to stay in Nebraska. The client's complaint of NCBVI staff not being responsive was resolved in the client's favor through informal mediation with NCBVI staff.

New Business

Date/Time/Location/Focus Topics for 2025 Board meetings

The commissioners discussed dates, locations and focus topics for the upcoming 2025 Commission Board meetings. The following was decided upon.

Saturday, February 8
Lincoln, Nebraska
Focus Topic: NBE

Saturday, May 3
Scottsbluff, Nebraska
No Focus Topic as the Annual Evaluation of the Executive Director will take place.

Friday, August 1
Lincoln, Nebraska
Focus Topic: Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

Saturday, November 8
Omaha, Nebraska
Focus Topic: Job Placement

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Final Announcements

The next NCBVI Commission Board meeting will be held on Saturday, February 8, 2025, in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Commissioner Rocha requested support to attend the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) 2025 Conference in Orlando, Florida.

Commissioner Livingston moved to approve Miguel's request to attend this conference. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

Roll call: Ayes: Mentink, Heyen, Livingston, Schonlau, Rocha
Nays:
Abstained:
Motion Carried

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:10 a.m.

If you have an item that you would like to have placed on the agenda of the February 8, 2025 Commission Board meeting, please email it to the NCBVI Commission Board at ncbvi.commission-board@nebraska.gov.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist
NCBVI

Brent Heyen, Chairperson
NCBVI Board of Commissioners