

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Saturday, February 7, 2026; 9:00 a.m.

4600 Valley Road, Room 4A
Lincoln, NE 68510

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 9:00 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, Bellevue.

Staff present: Carlos Serván, Executive Director; Erin Brandyberry, Deputy Director-Services; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist; Sara Watson, HR Generalist/Specialist; Joshua Golden, NBE Manager; Brandy Harper, Accountant II.

Public present: Jodi Bodnar, CAP Representative, Omaha; Jim Jirak, Omaha; Jamie Richey, Lincoln; Jeremy Richey, Lincoln; Kimberly Rocha, Bellevue.

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 Newsline® and Radio Talking Book. The Notice was also sent to ACBN, NFBN, and the NCBVI listservs.

Approval of the November 8, 2025, Public Meeting Minutes

Commissioner Livingston moved to approve the Minutes of the November 8, 2025, Commission Meeting. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Report from the Commissioners

Brent Heyen:

Chair Heyen reported his attendance at the November NFB Lincoln Chapter meeting and the Christmas party for the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Nebraska.

Brent noted that he serves as a blind individual in the workforce of hotels. He provided a professional update regarding his work in the hospitality industry, noting that due to recent staffing changes and the departure of the previous General Manager, he may be transitioning into the General Manager role by the next board meeting.

Patti Schonlau:

Commissioner Patti Schonlau shared observations from a recent holiday trip to Panama. Patti reported that her brother, who is totally blind, and his wife now live in Panama. Patti noted that you did not see a lot of blind people out walking the streets. She provided a detailed assessment of the lack of accessibility infrastructure in the region, specifically noting the absence of functional sidewalks, the presence of steep drop-offs, and the overall difficulty of independent navigation for blind individuals compared to the United States. She noted the impact of these conditions on the mobility of her brother, a blind resident of Panama.

Patti also confirmed her continued involvement with the Omaha Council of the Blind

Miguel Rocha:

Commissioner Miguel Rocha reported his participation in the NFB of Nebraska at-Large Chapter meetings. He formally announced that he has begun his new position as the blind on-site manager at the USSTRATCOM Cafeteria and expressed his appreciation to the Commission for their support during the transition into this role.

Cheryl Livingston:

Commissioner Cheryl Livingston informed the Board of her re-election as Secretary of the NFB Lincoln Chapter for the upcoming year. Cheryl also noted that she has been appointed to serve on the NCBVI Board of Commissioners for another four years.

Cheryl provided an extensive report on her participation in the Black Hills Regional Ski for Light program in Deadwood, South Dakota. She detailed her experiences with various adaptive winter sports, noting that while cross-country skiing presented challenges, she found success in snowshoeing and downhill "sit-skiing." She described the technical logistics of the "bucket" sit-ski and the assistance provided by program volunteers.

Linda Mentink –

Since our last meeting, Commissioner Mentink has attended two NFBN Board of Directors meetings and two NFBN Senior Division meetings, serving as Secretary of both; one NFBN Historians Committee meeting and one Friends meeting. She continues to work at Bible Baptist Christian School, where she plays the organ for the daily chapel services and teaches vocal music to grades 3 through 11.

Friends met January 20. Members are still working on grant writing. Friends will be purchasing snacks and drinks for the spring NCBVI Staff meeting. The board is still looking for three more members to bring the total to ten.

Linda also reported that she has also been appointed by the Governor to serve another four years on the NCBVI Board of Commissioners.

Focus Topic: Client Assistance Program (CAP)
Presented by Jodi Bodnar, CAP Coordinator

Jodi Bodnar, representing the Client Assistance Program (CAP), provided a comprehensive overview of the program's operations, statutory mandate, and collaborative relationship with state agencies. Jodi noted that CAP is a required service under the Rehabilitation Act for any state that maintains a Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. The primary purpose of CAP is to ensure individuals understand the services provided under the Act, are informed of their rights, and have a clear avenue to address concerns or resolve disputes.

Jodi detailed the primary functions of CAP, which include explaining agency policies and procedures, assisting clients with problem-solving, and helping individuals prepare for meetings and professional communication with agency staff. A central goal of the program is to resolve issues at the lowest possible level through informal advocacy and clarification. By educating clients on existing regulations and policies, CAP often empowers individuals to engage in self-advocacy, frequently preventing the need for formal mediation or fair hearings. To date, the program has successfully resolved all recent concerns without moving to formal legal proceedings.

The presentation distinguished between Individual Advocacy and Systemic Advocacy.

- Individual Advocacy: Includes direct support to clients of NCBVI, Nebraska VR, and independent living centers (such as the League for Human Dignity and Independence Rising).
- Systemic Advocacy: Involves CAP's participation in committee and council meetings to identify patterns of barriers that affect service administration. Jodi attends monthly NCBVI supervisor meetings to remain current on policy development and provide a client-centered perspective, particularly for unserved or underserved populations.

Jodi provided details on how individuals can access CAP services, noting that the program serves the entire state of Nebraska. The primary contact method is a 24-hour voicemail line, often referred to as the **Hotline for Disability Services** – a name that predates the federal mandate. CAP also accepts inquiries via email at cap.info@nebraska.gov. Jodi noted that the program aims for a response time of 24 to 48 hours, though complex cases requiring policy research may take longer.

A significant portion of the report addressed the responsibility of agencies to notify clients of CAP's existence. Jodi stated that staff must inform clients about CAP at specific milestones:

1. Initial application or orientation.

2. During the development of the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).
3. Any time a service is denied, reduced, or pended.
4. At the time of case closure.

Regarding program statistics, Jodi reported that during the last fiscal year (October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2025), the program received over 650 information and referral calls, averaging two to three calls per business day. Actual complaint-based cases remained lower, ranging between 12 and 20 annually. She observed an increase in general guidance inquiries due to an "uncertain climate" regarding benefits and regulatory changes.

Jodi addressed the administrative structure and future of CAP. While currently housed under Nebraska VR for grant funding purposes, CAP remains an independent advocate. She noted that recent legislative changes have eliminated the separate grant for CAP, creating a "realm of the unknown" regarding future funding structures. However, she reassured the Board that because VR programs cannot exist without a CAP, the service will continue, potentially housed within the disability rights network or another state program.

Finally, Jodi discussed the nature of collaborations with NCBVI. She praised the agency for its commitment to client engagement, noting that NCBVI staff often go "above and beyond" to find ways to fund services within policy limits. She highlighted that CAP is also a resource for agency staff, who may contact CAP for consultation on policy interpretation or for help advocating for a client's needs to their own supervisors. Jodi is supported by Sherry Behinski, who works 30 hours a week and handles a lot of the information and referral workload, while Jodi focuses on complaint-based cases.

Jodi answered a board inquiry regarding response times, confirming that CAP typically responds to initial client inquiries within 24 to 48 hours, though the timeline for reaching a final resolution varies based on the complexity of the case.

Jodi further clarified the operational scope of the Client Assistance Program (CAP), emphasizing its role as a short-term service. The program is designed to address specific issues or complaints rather than providing long-term mediation. Once a resolution or plan is identified, CAP typically concludes its involvement to ensure it does not over-mediate agency decisions. If a client encounters a new issue later in their process, a separate case is opened to maintain a clear definition of goals and desired outcomes.

The duration of CAP involvement varies significantly. Some cases are resolved with a single phone call or email followed by a one-month check-in to ensure the issue remained resolved. Conversely, prolonged cases typically indicate that a client is pursuing formal mediation or a fair hearing. Jodi noted that while individuals do not require CAP's assistance to file an appeal, the program must perform a merit determination to decide if it will formally support the client's case. If a case is found to

lack merit, CAP may fade into a background role, providing general navigation and advocacy without formally endorsing the client's specific resolution.

In response to board inquiries regarding the call statistics provided earlier in the meeting, Jodi clarified that the data reflects all disability-related inquiries, not just those from NCBVI stakeholders. Because callers are not applying for services directly through CAP, the program does not historically use an exhaustive checklist for data collection during Information and Referral (I&R) calls. However, CAP has recently implemented enhanced data-gathering protocols to better track referrals from specific stakeholders, including NCBVI, Nebraska VR, the League for Human Dignity, and Independence Rising.

Finally, Jodi highlighted the intensive nature of CAP's services compared to national resource lines like 211. While national lines often keep calls brief or refer to waitlists, CAP calls are more targeted and research heavy. The program frequently takes an active role in reconnecting clients with agencies when they have been misdirected or have experienced a lapse in communication. Jodi emphasized that because CAP deals specifically with the disability community and maintains a manageable call volume, it can provide a higher level of specialized support and advocacy for each individual.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Break:

A break was taken at 9:50 a.m.
The meeting resumed at 10:05 a.m.

Report from the Executive Director:

I. Administration

Meetings and Activities:

Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC):

Reports were presented by several special education directors outlining recent activities and training opportunities.

The Nebraska Center for the Education of Children who are Blind and Visually Impaired (NCECBVI) shared updates related to its 150th anniversary and highlighted several key initiatives, including its Student and Family Support Program, statewide technical assistance for teachers of the visually impaired, and the coordination of a statewide conference for teachers of the visually impaired (TVI). NCECBVI also noted its ongoing collaboration with the American Printing House for the Blind and reported results from

its annual student census, identifying approximately 740 blind or visually impaired students served across Nebraska.

The Parent Training and Information (PTI) program provided an update summarizing its efforts to support parents statewide.

Additionally, the Board elected a new member to serve on the Executive Committee.

Olmstead Advisory Committee:

The cost of the Aging and Disability Waiver has increased by approximately 300%, creating a pressing need for budgetary adjustments. Individuals with severe disabilities and their families have expressed serious concerns about how the proposed cuts were implemented. Many reported feeling insulted and marginalized, as they were neither informed in advance nor consulted about how the reductions would affect their services.

Consumers emphasized that reducing in-home services could lead to higher overall costs, as transitioning individuals to nursing homes is significantly more expensive than supporting them in their own homes. This concern is particularly acute in rural areas, where the number of nursing home facilities is insufficient to meet potential demand. Just this week, it was reported that HHS and the Governor's office listened to consumers, resulting in some proposed cuts being reversed, so the outlook in this area is now more promising.

NCSAB Monthly Meetings:

Union representatives at the U.S. Department of Education reported in December that the Memorandum of Agreement to transfer RSA and Special Education functions to the Department of Labor is in its final stages. Federal law prohibits the transfer of funds from one department to another; however, the proposal transfers duties and management responsibilities, not appropriated dollars. The intent is to keep RSA and Special Education aligned within the same administrative structure.

Government Shutdown and Appropriations

Five appropriations bills, including funding for the Department of Education, have been approved through the end of the fiscal year in September.

Randolph-Sheppard Program

Until early December 2025, discussions continued regarding a possible waiver from the Department of Education that would exempt the Army from applying Randolph-Sheppard priority. The Secretaries of Defense and the Army expressed concerns that some blind vendors were not actively engaged in managing cafeteria and vending operations, asserting that large corporations were effectively running the facilities.

Although the majority of blind vendors are highly active and directly involved, a few isolated cases were used to generalize the overall performance of the program.

By the third week of December, NCSAB held a conference call with the U.S. Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), Kimberly Richey, to provide clarification and highlight the long-standing success of the Randolph–Sheppard Program. She indicated that she was familiar with the program and noted that, during her tenure in Florida, she helped strengthen it. The meeting left attendees cautiously optimistic.

However, on December 23, 2025, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, Linda E. McMahon, issued the waiver, stating that Randolph–Sheppard priority would not apply to the Army. The primary concern is that this waiver could expand to other branches of the Armed Forces and potentially to other federal agencies. Currently, the waiver applies only to Army cafeterias and does not extend to vending machines. However, the National Association of Blind Merchants (NABM) had a call with the Secretary of the Army’s procurement office, where it was stated that the waiver references Randolph–Sheppard broadly and does not exclude vending machines. However, on a recent call with the U.S. Secretary of Education, she clarified to the callers that the waiver does not apply to vending machines.

Older Individuals Who Are Blind (OIB) Survey

A positive development—state agencies provided a strong response rate to the RSA OIB survey.

Lobbying and Influence Restrictions

Nonprofit organizations such as the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) and the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) are prohibited from using federal funds for lobbying or influencing federal officials. A recent federal memo further restricts these organizations from engaging in activities intended to influence public officials or federal entities.

NCSAB, as an organization, cannot directly advocate for a specific policy position or instruct the federal government on what actions to take if it is using federal funds. NCSAB will use its nonfederal revenue—fees from exhibitors at national conferences—to advocate.

Responding to a request from a federal entity or a congressional inquiry does not constitute lobbying.

WIOA Board:

The meeting focused on presentations from several nonprofit organizations outlining their services and explaining their funding requests. The Nebraska Department of Labor

reported that available grant funding for these programs is approximately two million dollars less than in previous years.

Boards and Commissions:

We received a presentation from the Ombudsman's Office, which investigates irregularities and potential illegal activities within state agencies. Most complaints involve the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Corrections. According to their report, there are very few—if any—complaints involving Boards and Commissions. While the Ombudsman's Office does not have enforcement authority, it may forward its findings to the media and state legislators.

We also received a presentation from the Governor's Policy and Research Office (GOPR) regarding LB-660. This bill, passed last year, requires agencies to submit a fiscal report as well as a detailed report on activities related to each chapter of statute governing the Commission for the Blind. According to GOPR, many reporting requirements are still not fully clarified. We are actively working to understand these expectations and prepare accordingly. The first report is due by the end of June 2027.

Other Activities:

We are currently developing amendments to the Combined State Plan in collaboration with multiple state agencies, as required under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. The plan is due March 4, 2026. A draft will be posted for public comment by January 30 to allow for a 30-day comment period, and a public hearing is scheduled for February 10.

The Governor is recommending a 5% budget reduction for all state agencies. If approved, we will be required to discontinue our Support Service Provider program for individuals who are deaf-blind in Omaha. In addition, we will need to significantly reduce—or potentially eliminate—our PSA outreach efforts.

We have received funding for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2026 under a continuing resolution, including allocations for Vocational Rehabilitation Basic Support, Independent Living for Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB), and Supported Employment.

The agency is currently utilizing FFY 2025 Basic Support carryover funds and anticipates full use of available federal grant funding. In addition, \$119,954 was transferred to the OIB program in accordance with federal guidelines.

On January 25, 2026, just a couple of weeks ago, nine of the seventeen states renewed their attack on Section 504. They are asking the courts to block the rules of integration from all Sections of 504 and their updated rules from 2024. Thanks to the advocacy from the organized Blind, Nebraska is no longer part of this lawsuit.

The NCBVI Budget hearing is scheduled for Tuesday, February 10, 2026, at the Capitol in Room 1524.

Business Office Highlights – Tammie Dunn

The Business Office continued its financial literacy initiative through Supervisors' Meetings and targeted staff discussions. These sessions focused on budgeting fundamentals, procurement requirements, and financial reporting expectations, supporting consistent understanding and fiscal accountability across the agency.

In light of proposed budget reductions from the Governor's office, the Business Office is proactively reviewing and adjusting budget strategies to ensure continued services and support for Nebraskans who are blind.

Progress was made in refining inventory processes to improve tracking, reduce excess stock, and strengthen internal controls. Baseline inventory levels have been established to increase efficiency, reduce processing time, and ensure commonly requested items are readily available to counselors and consumers.

The Business Office reviewed practices related to fixed assets assigned to consumers and has implemented clear procedures and documentation requirements for asset disposition, ensuring compliance with state policies and improved accountability.

The Business Office continues to provide guidance and develop standardized tools to support administrative staff and supervisors with contract development and procurement compliance, promoting consistency and adherence to state requirements.

Revised front desk workflows have been implemented to create a more structured and transparent request-tracking system.

At the direction of the State of Nebraska, payroll processing will transition from financial system in E1 to our LMS and HR system in Workday. Brandy Harper, Katie Mihulka, and Tammie Dunn will work in collaboration with Sara Watson to support planning, testing, and implementation of this transition.

Technology Highlights – Charles Anderson

The following outlines key progress across our technology infrastructure, staff enablement, and assistive technology evaluation:

- Successfully completed the comprehensive setup and configuration of the agency's new Google Workspace environment, including the implementation of streamlined user account creation protocols. This foundational work enhances collaboration, security, and digital workflow efficiency across the organization.

- Finalized the creation and deployment of dedicated AIRA accounts for all blind and low vision staff members, ensuring immediate, high-quality, and reliable visual assistance to support daily operations and professional autonomy.
- Successfully developed and facilitated a multi-session technology training curriculum during November 2025-January 2026. These sessions focused on maximizing staff proficiency with new systems and tools, contributing to a more technologically capable and adaptive workforce.
- NCBVI Website Accessibility Audit: we have successfully gathered and reviewed all competitive bids to select a partner who will ensure full compliance with the WCAG 2.1 standards, affirming our dedication to digital inclusivity.
- Route Management Software Exploration: This effort is aimed at centralizing and streamlining the reservation process for agency vehicles and drivers, promising improved efficiency and resource utilization.
- Next-Generation Smartglasses Testing: Procured and began an intensive testing phase for two cutting-edge assistive smartglasses: the Solo Ally smartglasses by Envision and the Echovision smartglasses by AGIGA. This evaluation is critical to identifying best-in-class tools for enhancing staff and client capabilities.
- Coordinated and hosted a successful demo day with Nanopac. Technology staff attended the event.

Kathy Stephens

- Completed the 2025 Annual Report and sent it to the Governor and Senators. It is also on file with the Unicameral.
- Worked on updates to the NCBVI website as needed.
- Coordinated the creation of new and updated business cards for staff.
- Set up Zoom meetings for staff and Friends as needed.
- Arranged for seven staff members and three consumers to attend the 47th Annual Black Hills Regional Ski for Light Event in South Dakota.
- Assisted with the transfer of Monarchs to consumers as their cases were closed.

Human Resources

Staff Updates:

Kristal Platte, Omaha District VR counselor, will complete Center training on February 11 and will begin field work on February 12.

Denise Torticollo, Lincoln District Orientation counselor, is expected to complete training during the last week of February.

Josh Golden was hired as Supervisor of the Nebraska Business Enterprises program effective December 1, 2025.

A candidate was interviewed for the Technology Specialist position in the North Platte District; however, the position has been reopened. This is currently the only vacant position at the agency.

Training Opportunities:

Field counselors participated in a 1.5-day training conducted by the Mississippi State National Research and Training Center (NRTC) on business services. Staff also received training on increasing job retention and building strategic partnerships for VR consumers in technology careers.

Mark Coleman was accepted into a graduate certificate program at Louisiana Tech University, where he is taking online classes and completing additional sleepshade hours.

Candice Dollar was accepted into the Master's in Rehabilitation Counseling virtual program at George Washington University, funded through an RSA grant.

Shane Buresh attended the NCECBVI Fall Foliage training on cognition and reading strategies for individuals with vision impairments or blindness.

Technology staff attended the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) conference in January, which focused on emerging assistive technologies.

Staff also participated in webinars covering topics such as Notebook LM, JAWS, Gemini, and ChatGPT.

Several staff attended two training courses through Mississippi State University's National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision focused on Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening and Support and Questions About Vision Loss.

Gracie attended numerous local and regional training courses, including food security meetings, supported employment services, community partnership initiatives, job expo planning, agricultural fairs, IEP and MDT meetings, and supported employment networking events across Nebraska.

The NCBVI Spring State Staff meeting will be held March 16-18, 2026, in Lincoln, Nebraska.

II. Field Services

Field staff statewide continue to build and strengthen partnerships with employers, businesses, and public schools. These partnerships improve service delivery and expand employment and training opportunities for consumers.

Staff actively:

- Deliver presentations on NCBVI services
- Participate in IEP meetings

- Identify work-based learning experiences
- Promote and provide technical assistance on workplace accessibility

Key Stakeholder Partners by District

Lincoln District:

- Planning is underway for the 2026 Disability Pride event on Saturday, July 25, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Antelope Park.
- Collaborated with the American Council of the Blind in preparation for its 50th anniversary.
- Held GATE programs in November, December, and January.
- Completed the first VR group program, RISE—Ready, Inspired, Skilled, and Empowered.

Omaha District:

- Met with the Omaha Chamber of Commerce to establish employer networks.
- Met with Equitable Access at the Blue Barn Theatre.
- Met with the Director of Human Resources at QLI to establish medical/health career pathways.
- Tim appeared as a guest on the Radio Talking Book show in December.
- Met with Omaha Metro regarding downtown accessibility improvements.
- Continued collaboration with ABLR to provide technology training and micro-credentials.

North Platte District:

- Attended IEP meetings across multiple school districts.
- Continued participation in EmployGI and Project SEARCH.
- Established connections with assisted living facilities, ILCs, and Leader Dogs.
- Supported employer engagement and workforce development partnerships.

Overall, these programs, training, and partnerships reflect NCBVI's continued commitment to empowering consumers, expanding employment and training opportunities, and strengthening both local communities and the statewide service network.

Client Statistics

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

- OIB (Older Individuals who are Blind): 381
- IL (Independent Living) clients under 55: 65
- VR (Vocational Rehabilitation): 424

Successful Consumer Closures in the Following Occupations:

- Combined Food Preparation and Serving Worker
- Gaming Change Person/Booth Cashier
- Janitor/Cleaner
- Legal Support Worker

- Physical Therapist Assistant
- Receptionists and Information Clerk
- Registered Nurse (2)
- Sales Representative
- Stock Clerk/Order Filler
- Transportation/Storage/Distribution Manager

III. Nebraska Center for the Blind

We have eight people attending training, including six Vocational Rehabilitation consumers and two staff trainees. One VR consumer graduated, one VR consumer discontinued training due to health reasons, and one OIB consumer met his personal goals after six months but did not meet graduation requirements. The out-of-state consumer decided to complete immersion training at Saavi in Tucson, another Structured Discovery training center with milder winter weather. A VR consumer began training on January 5 and another VR consumer began training on February 2. Two consumers toured and three consumers attended three-day stays, with one ending early due to health.

Drops, mini meals, commencement meals, techniques of daily living, weekly philosophical seminars, and monthly virtual vocational seminars continued this quarter.

Home Management kitchens have reopened, new refrigerators have been purchased, stoves and ovens were serviced, and students are thrilled to be able to cook regularly again.

Community-based activities this quarter included shopping at Five Below and baking at the apartments; wrapping gifts and decorating for the holidays; volunteering at Matt Talbot Kitchen and Outreach to prepare and serve salads to patrons; volunteering at the Center for People in Need to pack food boxes for distribution; and attending the Black Hills Regional Ski for Light event at the end of January (three students, one staff trainee, and four Center staff).

During winter break, the Center underwent several upgrades. Office doors were sanded and refinished, and Jessica's hollow door was replaced with a solid, soundproof wood door. The former student lounge was converted into a dedicated Travel office for Sarah. This change allows for further reorganization: Mark will now share an office with Ted, freeing up Mark's previous office for Candice. Having her own office will allow Candice to better concentrate on Center and NBE projects, away from the distractions of Travel classes.

IV. Nebraska Business Enterprise (NBE)

Federal Buildings:

At USSTRATCOM, we have successfully transitioned to a new teaming partner, Sodexo Inc., to support cafeteria operations alongside our selected blind vendor, who has been appointed as the on-site blind manager. While the cafeteria remodeling has resulted in a few minor challenges, we continue to collaborate closely with USSTRATCOM on the ongoing upgrade. The project timeline has been extended, with completion now anticipated in March 2026.

The project to consolidate two existing USCIS facilities in Lincoln into a single location is still underway and there have not been any updates as to when the completion of construction will be finished.

At the Ashland National Guard Camp, the cafeteria services solicitation under the Randolph-Sheppard Act is currently under review by the National Guard Bureau. Their goal is to provide the solicitation to the Commission and Ms. Beecham by February 1.

NBE currently has 16 licensed vendors actively servicing routes. One individual is currently still in training, which brings the total number of vendors in the program to 17.

State Buildings:

There have been no changes related to State Buildings at this time. The vendor assigned to manage vending machines in the Lincoln State Office Building remains active, and NBE continues to explore long-term solutions to ensure continued cafeteria services.

Additional Activities:

NBE is still mentoring one Pre-ETS student, who has been gaining valuable experience across multiple aspects of the Randolph-Sheppard Program.

Director Serván asked the commissioners if they had any questions regarding his report.

Commissioner Mentink initiated a discussion regarding the Vending Program, expressing concerns over the current training requirements for blind vendors. She specifically questioned whether there are plans to implement a standardized, formal training curriculum to replace or supplement the existing model of shadowing and direct assistance from Commission staff. Commissioner Mentink noted that she had remembered reading about complaints regarding operational issues, such as expired products, and suggested that structured training in inventory management and general work ethics would benefit vendors who may struggle with those specific aspects of business ownership.

In response, Director Serván clarified that issues related to expired products are generally isolated incidents tied to specific vendors rather than a systemic failure of the program. It was noted that such topics are frequently addressed during vendor retreats to emphasize the importance of maintaining fresh stock. Additionally, the individual

associated with the specific complaints mentioned by Commissioner Mentink is no longer participating in the program and has been replaced.

Joshua Golden, Nebraska Business Enterprise (NBE) Manager, provided further technical detail on the current training approach. He explained that training is presently conducted on a case-by-case basis, tailored to the individual needs, prior knowledge, and specific challenges of each consumer. Josh informed the Board that he is currently investigating more streamlined, structured training opportunities and software solutions to provide vendors with a better framework for inventory and business management. He acknowledged that while new technology exists to simplify these processes, adoption remains a challenge for some vendors who are less comfortable with technical platforms. Finally, Josh noted that the NBE department is now at a full staffing capacity of 3.5 members, which will allow for more consistent oversight and the development of these improved training initiatives.

Commissioner Miguel Rocha raised inquiries regarding the current status of military dining contracts, specifically concerning the relationship between the U.S. Army and the National Guard. The Board discussed recent developments in which the Army has begun soliciting large-scale contracts from the private sector to manage major cafeteria operations. It was noted with concern that approximately seven blind vendors nationwide are at risk of losing their sites due to this shift toward private-sector solicitation.

Regarding the National Guard facility in Ashland, Nebraska, Executive Director, Carlos Serván expressed hope that its remote location and smaller scale would make it less attractive to large private corporations. However, concern was noted regarding the lack of communication from military officials over the past week. A clarification was made regarding the state's legal positioning: it was the Attorney General, rather than the Governor, who reached the decision regarding the state's involvement with the National Association of Blind Merchants (NABM).

NFB-Newsline® Nebraska

Prepared by: Jamie K. Richey, Newsline Coordinator

Love is in the air, and lately I have been hearing a lot about how much people love NFB-Newsline®. Here in Nebraska, we are especially lucky, because NFB-Newsline® is fully funded by the Nebraska Commission for the Blind. Other states are not so lucky. Some have lost NFB-Newsline® services due to budget cuts and changes tied to National Library Service funding. Because of my role on the National Federation of the Blind Board of Directors, we hear directly from subscribers who share how much they love NFB-Newsline® and how much of a lifeline it truly is. With so many news access options out there, NFB-Newsline® continues to stand out as the most accessible, all in one place, for newspapers, TV listings, magazines, and even job listings. That is something worth a little extra love.

This past quarter, Nebraska NFB-Newsline® served 2,190 subscribers, and we added 10 new subscribers along the way, which is always a heartwarming trend. Over the telephone, November brought 438 calls with 7,075 total minutes read and an average call length of 16.15 minutes, with 56.92 percent using the local number. December turned up with 683 calls and 7,925 minutes read, and the average call length was 11.60 minutes, with 43.99 percent using the local number. Then January arrived and wow, people were really listening with their hearts, because callers logged 530 calls and a big jump to 9,126 minutes read. The average call length climbed to 17.22 minutes, and 54.70 percent of calls used the local number. January did not have the most calls, but it did have the most minutes, which tells me Nebraska subscribers were settling in, getting comfortable, and really enjoying their news, kind of like slowly savoring the chocolates in the heart shaped box.

Subscribers also showed plenty of love through digital access. NFB-Newsline® Online was used 4,382 times in November, 5,576 times in December, and 6,212 times in January, which is a steady climb that just keeps getting sweeter. The NFB-Newsline® mobile app, including the new Android app, was accessed 510 times in November, 603 times in December, and 560 times in January. For those who like their news ready to go, automatic downloads to a device were strong all quarter, with 2,623 publications downloaded in November, 2,971 in December, and 3,147 in January. Email deliveries stayed wonderfully consistent too, with 392 emails sent in November, 379 in December, and 398 in January. If NFB-Newsline® had a Valentine, I think it would be Nebraska!

When we look at the types of content people choose, we can see some clear favorites. On average over the last three months, Nebraska newspapers were the most popular by far, with about 5,002 accessed per month. National newspapers were next at an average of 463 per month. TV listings averaged 228 per month, and breaking news online averaged 167 per month. International newspapers averaged 151 per month, and magazines averaged 91 per month. Local weather and emergency alerts averaged 60 per month, making it the least used category this quarter, but it is still an important one.

A few updates for you, with a little broken heart. Scott White is no longer with NFB-Newsline®, and Jack Mendez is now the Program Manager. Scott served as director of NFB-Newsline® for around 15 years, so this is a significant change. Jack is still getting his feet under him, but once he does, he has many new ideas to enhance the system, and I am looking forward to what is ahead. In December, subscribers across the country began having problems with the TV listings, with issues ranging from minor problems to not being able to access them at all. As of last week, this issue appears to be resolved, but as always, if you have problems or know someone having problems, please let me know. Also in December, we had an issue with the voicemail box for NFB-Newsline® Nebraska, where messages were being sent to a former coordinator instead of me. I worked with the business office at NCBVI, and this problem should now be resolved.

Subscribers can call 402 471 8102 and leave a message which I receive by email so I can respond. Subscribers can also email newsline@ne.nfb.org.

Thank you for supporting and using NFB-Newsline®. If you have questions or need help getting started, please contact me anytime. Wishing you a happy Valentines Day with lots of sweet news and may NFB-Newsline® keep delivering the content you love!

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or Issues

There were no CAP complaints or issues during the past quarter.

New Business

Discussion: Staff Feedback to Commissioners

Chair Heyen introduced the agenda item regarding staff feedback to the Commissioners. He stated that some individuals noticed an executive session was held on this matter at the previous meeting. This was because the issue was originally raised during an executive session conducted as part of Carlos's evaluation last year, and he decided to continue the discussion in that setting for consistency.

However, it was later brought to his attention, as well as to other board members, that several individuals wished for the discussion to take place publicly.

Jamie Richey was present to speak on the matter. The discussion would then be opened to others who wished to provide input. Testimony from Mike Hansen regarding this matter was also received and read into the record.

Jamie Richey stated that her biggest issue was that, at the November Lincoln Chapter meeting of the National Federation of the Blind, it was reported that a staff survey was not conducted because no complaints had come in, so it was assumed everything was fine. She said, "you don't know what you don't know," and explained that not doing a survey just because everything seems fine wasn't a sufficient reason.

She noted that the survey was estimated to cost \$7,000, which she agreed was excessive, and said she was not sure why it would cost that much. She suggested that even a simple Google survey or something similar could be considered as a low-cost alternative.

Jamie Richey emphasized that surveying staff is important because you never know what they might be thinking. Staff might not bring concerns directly to leadership, but they may be more willing to provide feedback through a survey. She noted that she was speaking not only as a consumer who is blind, but also as a former staff member. She acknowledged that staff surveys had not always been completed in the past and understood why investing \$7,000 could be a concern. However, she stressed that finding an alternative way to gather staff feedback would still be valuable.

Jamie Richey said she wanted the topic revisited because it had previously been discussed in executive session, and details about why the survey was not done had not

been fully shared. She said it should be considered to ensure staff satisfaction, especially considering recent retirements, departures, and new hires. She concluded by stating that providing staff with an avenue to give input anonymously would allow them to share feedback without feeling pressured or singled out.

Chair Heyen stated that the topic had been discussed in an executive session. He explained that one of the primary reasons the board decided not to proceed with the proposed avenue was the associated cost. He noted that in the past, participation in this initiative had been low. Mike, who served as chairman of the Board of Commissioners when the initiative was previously discontinued, mentioned that some comments made it obvious who had submitted them, which diminished confidence in the anonymity of the process.

Chair Heyen added that the board had concluded it was best not to pursue this avenue at the current time, although they still valued feedback and impressions from staff. He emphasized that avenues for providing input remain available, as would be evident in Mike's forthcoming testimony. The decision was influenced by low participation in previous attempts, some unhelpful or non-anonymous comments, and the cost associated with the proposed approach.

Chair Heyen suggested that Mike Hansen's testimony be read first to provide context for further discussion. Chair Heyen noted that this would be helpful and allow attendees to comment more effectively. It was agreed that discussion would continue after the testimony review.

A written testimony from former Chairman Mike Hansen was read into the record, providing historical context for the evaluation process.

History of the Current NCBVI Executive Director Evaluation Process

2026-12-01

NCBVI Commission Board,

I am writing to you in response to a request from Chair Heyen asking me to share information on the history of the NCBVI Executive Director Evaluation process, and specifically on portions intended to pull in staff input.

As near as I can tell, when the Commission Board was formed in 2000, the Executive Director evaluation process was organized around five main goals whose first letters spelled out the word BLIND.

Goals:

1. Believing that it is respectable to be blind;

2. Listening and responding to concerns from staff and consumers alike;
3. Identifying priorities and seeing them through;
4. Negotiating creatively to hire quality staff and fund exemplary service delivery;
5. Dreaming progressive steps toward true equality for the blind.

These goals were also sent out to the staff who worked with the Executive Director on a regular basis so that they could provide feedback.

The Commission Board then took this feedback, along with their own thoughts, and rated the Executive Director on a scale from one to five for each of the five goals outlined above. Finally, a conversation with the Executive Director would occur, and then a letter would be drafted to serve as the official evaluation. This letter was sent to the Governor's office and placed in the Executive Director's personnel file.

In July of 2002, it was decided to create a questionnaire that would be sent out to the entire staff, allowing them to provide feedback. It is my understanding that the results of this questionnaire were compiled together and the results included in the Executive Director's evaluation, as well as shared publicly.

I don't have a copy of the questionnaire from 2002, but I have included a copy of the questionnaire from 2013 along with this letter.

Throughout the history of the board, there has been concern by some staff that the staff survey was not a confidential process.

Early on, there were efforts by the board to explain what they meant when they said that the results of the staff questionnaire would remain confidential. Essentially, the responses by the staff were compiled (summarized) together with the intention that no one specifically could be linked to a specific response. For purposes of the multiple-choice questions, this should have worked reasonably well. However, due to the small size of NCBVI, it was more difficult to conceal who wrote the responses to the open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire.

Originally, these questionnaires were just emailed to the Commission Board. Later on, an anonymous submission process was set up through an outside entity to further conceal who made each submission, even from the Board of Commissioners.

In 2013, the State of Nebraska started to move to a standardized evaluation tool for all state personnel. Even though there was no requirement for the board to use this tool, it did discuss whether it should move to this tool as well for the evaluation of the Executive Director. One major drawback of the new tool was that it wasn't accessible to the blind. The ACB State President at the time, Paulette Monthei, forwarded a copy of an evaluation tool she had developed and used for another organization. The board decided to continue to look into both options.

During the public comment period of the June 2013 Board Meeting, a staff member commented on how hesitant the staff was to even complete a staff survey and that staff morale was very low.

During the August 2013 Board Meeting, Paulette Monthei gave a presentation covering a revised version of her tool that she worked on with other members of the Board.

During the November 2013 Board Meeting, the evaluation process was further described as a three-part process.

1. Would be to have Commission Board members interact with staff during the State Staff meeting to get their opinion on how things are at the agency.
2. Would be to formulate questions and have the Executive Director address those questions.
3. Would be the collection of all of the documentation throughout the year (i.e., State Plan, Action Plan, Budget, etc.).

Later in that meeting, it was voted on that this new process would be used for the 2014–2015 evaluation period. A copy of that evaluation process is also included along with this letter. It is my recollection that the procedure did not change before my term as a board member ended in 2019.

In summary, as far as staff participation in the evaluation of the Executive Director seems to have started first with a questionnaire given to direct reports and then expanded into an all-staff survey. Unfortunately, completion rates of the survey could vary. I know that in 2008, thirty percent of the staff completed the survey, and in 2010, twenty-eight staff members completed the survey. Also, for much of that time, there were comments about how the staff didn't feel they could truly complete the survey or that they might be retaliated against if they said something unfavorable. For those reasons, the survey was done away with, and Commissioners were encouraged to attend NCBVI events periodically, getting to know the staff and making themselves available for private conversations.

I am sorry that I was not able to attend the meeting, but I hope that this letter helps to explain the history around the Executive Director's evaluation process and staff participation in that process.

Respectfully,

Mike Hansen

Former Commissioner, Jim Jirak, stated that Mike's assessment was generally accurate. He recalled that during his tenure on the board, along with Julie Johnson, Nancy Oltman, Bill, and others, there had been concerns that staff might not feel "safe," if that was the appropriate term, in completing the survey. He noted, however, that

many of the individuals who expressed those concerns at the time are no longer with the agency.

Jim Jirak acknowledged that there has been significant staff turnover and that he is not familiar with many of the current employees. Nevertheless, he expressed the opinion that if the board were to conduct a survey again, as Jamie had suggested, it would likely result in greater participation. He indicated that the previous concerns about staff hesitation are probably no longer relevant, as those employees have retired, moved on, or otherwise left the agency.

He emphasized that returning to a survey is a good idea, but cautioned against paying \$7,000 for it, regardless of the format. He suggested considering more cost-effective alternatives, such as SurveyMonkey, which could achieve similar results at a much lower cost. He concluded by strongly recommending that the board encourage staff participation in any future survey.

Commissioner Schonlau asked who had organized and analyzed the results of the last staff survey, questioning whether it had been handled by a staff member or someone outside the agency. Kathy Stephens recalled that it had been the commission board.

Jim Jirak agreed, noting that the staff did not see the surveys at all; they remained with the commission board. Commissioner Schonlau then asked whether the board members personally knew the staff, as she personally did not know many of them.

Jamie Richey responded that historically, the staff present at the commission 10 or 15 years ago had been long-standing employees, and board members generally had personal relationships with them. At that time, it was possible to identify who submitted specific survey responses. However, Jamie noted that the current staff is largely new, and it is no longer feasible to know who wrote what. She suggested that modern tools, such as AI, could help anonymize responses while still gathering useful feedback.

Jim Jirak added that even he could identify who had written a survey in the past.

Jeremy Richey commented that in Mike Hansen's written testimony, individual responses are as important as percentages, emphasizing that giving staff an avenue to provide feedback is valuable, particularly for those who may not feel comfortable approaching the board directly.

Erin Brandyberry recommended further discussion regarding the approach to collecting staff feedback, noting that there may be two related but distinct purposes: evaluating Carlos and assessing the overall functioning of the agency. She stressed the importance of clarifying the purpose and method of communication, as staff may have questions about anonymity. She noted that while the board may not know who submitted specific responses, in the context of Carlos' evaluation, he could potentially identify staff members. Despite the agency's small size limiting full anonymity, she supported providing opportunities for staff feedback and noted that some input is

already collected through the CSNA, while additional feedback directly to the board would be beneficial.

Chair Heyen stated that the survey shared by Mike was primarily intended for evaluation purposes, but he acknowledged that input from staff could also be valuable. He agreed with Jim that there are less expensive ways to collect information, such as SurveyMonkey.

Jamie Richey added that Google surveys had been used successfully for clients, and there was no reason they could not be used for staff as well.

Chair Heyen noted that the \$7,000 survey previously considered involved Dr. Bell and his academic-style evaluation, which explained the cost, but he personally would not object to a more straightforward, lower-cost method of gathering staff input.

Jodi Bodar inquired whether a survey was the only way for staff to provide feedback or if other formal methods existed, citing examples from other agencies where staff could submit questions to leadership through a website. Sara Watson added that while true anonymity may be impossible, she could aggregate data confidentially to preserve anonymity while filtering out irrelevant or outlier comments, providing a clearer picture of staff concerns.

Sara Watson noted that in the past, the agency may not have had in-house human resources, which could have limited the options for handling staff feedback. She explained that while true anonymity might not be possible, she could aggregate the data so that individual responses would not be visible to others. She emphasized that she is experienced in handling confidential information and could manage the process to avoid the problem of irrelevant or random comments skewing the results. She clarified that a single outlier comment could be identified and, if necessary, excluded from reporting to prevent misrepresentation. Sara indicated that she was not advocating for this approach but offered it as an option to ensure staff could provide feedback while maintaining confidentiality and meaningful aggregation of the data.

Chair Heyen expressed support for the idea of a website portal for staff to submit questions to the commission, noting it could also benefit clients.

Director Serván stated that he is not opposed to surveys but emphasized the agency's open-door policy. He explained that supervisors are expected to engage staff and ensure buy-in when implementing policy changes, and feedback is important for understanding staff perspectives. He noted that surveys or third-party evaluations, such as those conducted by Dr. Bell, can provide additional insights but may be more academic and costly.

Commissioner Mentink reflected on her experience since joining the commission board four years ago. She noted that, at the time, it seemed unusual that evaluations of Carlos relied solely on his own perspective. She expressed concern that a single viewpoint

might be one-sided and not fully objective. During a prior training meeting, she recalled that broader evaluation methods had been avoided due to issues arising from a previous suggestion box, which had reportedly caused significant problems.

The topic of conducting a survey was revisited recently. Carlos suggested that Commissioner Mentink consult with another commission executive director. That director advised that if the staff is competent and funding is sufficient, additional evaluation mechanisms might not be necessary. While Commissioner Mentink acknowledged this perspective, she indicated she still felt some unease about relying solely on existing procedures. She also noted that pursuing a formal evaluation through a Dr. Bell-style approach would require significant resources, both in time and money.

Commissioner Mentink emphasized the importance of allowing staff members to share their feedback. She reported hearing informal concerns that some employees felt hesitant to speak freely, unsure of how to communicate concerns other than through personal conversations. She noted that, as someone who has personal relationships with some staff, she would not object to such discussions.

She highlighted the need for a balanced evaluation process that considers multiple perspectives. Commissioner Mentink stressed that this approach is intended to ensure fairness and thoroughness in evaluating Carlos' performance, not to suggest any deficiencies, as he has demonstrated strong performance in his role.

The Board discussed the importance of addressing internal issues and ensuring staff satisfaction. It was noted that there has been significant turnover within the agency, and while the Board hears that individuals have moved on, they are generally not informed of the specific reasons for these departures.

Jamie Richey addressed the Board regarding the proposed staff survey, stressing that the push for a survey is not strictly due to complaints. Richey noted that surveys are a tool for capturing suggestions and confirming the agency's status as a premier organization. Richey expressed that while Nebraska is known as a top agency, the Board should not become lax. The survey would provide a way for staff to share ideas they might not feel comfortable taking to a supervisor. Richey referenced a previous survey conducted after the state convention which yielded valuable suggestions that would not have otherwise surfaced.

Commissioner Schonlau discussed her experience with the Executive Director's evaluation in May, noting it was her first time participating in that process. Commissioner Schonlau expressed that an outline or more information on the process would have been helpful, as the current method of hearing only from the director himself felt insufficient. She advocated for hearing from consumers and staff to understand the true climate of the agency. Commissioner Schonlau suggested that the survey should be handled by an outside entity to ensure that results are compiled neutrally and that no one within the agency has the capability of sharing confidential information, citing concerns regarding HIPAA and potential misspoken statements. She noted that while

the current interaction between Carlos Serván and the staff appears positive during her attendance at State Staff meetings via Zoom. the Board does not know what occurs behind closed doors. Commissioner Schonlau remarked that the reports she read reflected a sense of fear, where staff might worry that negative reflections could lead to job loss.

Jim Jirak provided historical context, noting that when the Commission Board was first established in 2000 under LB 352, the evaluation process was conducted in public. He recalled that during Barb Loos's time as chair, these public evaluations could become a spectacle and were often uncomfortable. Jirak stated that research eventually led the Board to move these reviews to private sessions, as a job review should not be a public spectacle. He expressed that it is better for these evaluations to be done behind closed doors where the Board can be more direct.

The Board discussed the timeline for the survey. It was noted that because the next meeting is already the scheduled evaluation for Carlos Serván, it is too late to gather staff data for this cycle. Commissioner Schonlau suggested that between now and the next meeting, each board member should investigate specific types of surveys and determine what information they want to gather to ensure confidentiality.

Commissioner Schonlau made a motion to table the discussion until the May meeting. At that time, the Board will discuss in closed session what each member has researched and determine how to go forward with a survey.

Director Serván provided a point of order, clarifying that while personal evaluations of an individual can be closed, the discussion of a general document or survey process must remain in open session.

Commissioner Schonlau amended the motion (remove was amended) to reflect that the discussion will be in open session. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Director Serván suggested that the Board review the previous questionnaire put together by Paulette Monthei and previous commissioners as a starting point, as it balanced questions about the director with the general health of the agency. The Board agreed this was a good suggestion. The main challenge identified for the May meeting will be determining who will compile the survey and how the data will be delivered to the Board.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Final Announcements

The next NCBVI Commission Board meeting will be held on Saturday, May 9, 2026, in Lexington, Nebraska.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:28 a.m.

If you have an item that you would like to have placed on the agenda of the May 9, 2026 Commission Board meeting, please email it to the NCBVI Commission Board at ncbvi.commission-board@nebraska.gov.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist
NCBVI

Chair Heyen, Chairperson
NCBVI Board of Commissioners