

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Saturday, February 8, 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. Chair Heyen reported that Executive Director, Carlos Serván, is not present at today's meeting due to a personal family issue.

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: Erin Brandyberry, Deputy Director-Services; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist; Eric Buckwalter, NBE Coordinator; Jeff Scheer, NBE VR Counselor; Lizzie Heidenreich, NBE Orientation Counselor; Sara Watson, HR Generalist/Specialist.

Public present: Michelle Morgan, Omaha; Mark Bulger, Omaha; Jim Jirak, Omaha; Sandy Alvarado, Omaha; Ronnie Kellogg, Lincoln; Jeremy Richey, Lincoln.

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 2, 2024, Public Meeting Minutes

Commissioner Schonlau moved to approve the Minutes of the November 2, 2024 Commission Meeting. Commissioner Livingston seconded the motion.

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

Report from the Commissioners

Brent Heyen –

Brent reported that he works at a hotel where he demonstrates the abilities of a blind person through the tasks he performs daily, setting a strong example of what a blind individual can achieve. He serves as a positive role model for what someone with blindness can accomplish. Additionally, Brent mentioned that he currently uses a device to assist him in reading the I.D.s of hotel guests.

Patti Schonlau –

Patti stated that on January 9, she attended a Braille Literacy Conversation meeting with Carlos and the Special Education Advisory Council. The focus of the meeting was on promoting braille to blind and visually impaired children. The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 13, in the NDE Conference Room.

Patti also mentioned that she serves as President of the Omaha Council of the Blind and attended their monthly meeting. On January 23, she conducted a Support Group meeting for blind and visually impaired residents at a facility in Papillion.

Miguel Rocha –

Miguel reported that he attended both the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN) At-Large Chapter meetings and the NFBN Board meeting. He shared that he graduated from the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) in December with a degree in Management and Information Systems. Miguel expressed his gratitude to NCBVI for the support he received throughout his academic journey and acknowledged that he knows NCBVI will continue to assist him during his job search.

Miguel also attended the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) conference in Orlando, Florida, at the end of January and the beginning of February 2025. He mentioned that he enjoyed the conference, as it expanded his knowledge of assistive technology.

The conference focused on making technology more accessible and beneficial for people with disabilities. Topics covered included legal rules for accessibility, repurposing old computers as helpful tools, using 3D printing to create assistive devices, and how Microsoft is integrating AI to improve accessibility features. The discussion also explored how AI is being incorporated into both software and hardware. Additionally, updates to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) were provided. The changes now require public websites, online forms, PDFs, mobile apps, and social media platforms used by government agencies, schools, and hospitals to be accessible. The deadline for compliance is 2026 for small organizations and 2027 for larger organizations.

A new certification for Occupational Therapists (OTs), the Certified Vision Rehabilitation Occupational Therapist (CVROT), was introduced at the conference. This qualification

is designed for OTs who work with individuals with vision loss, ensuring they have the necessary skills for vision rehabilitation. However, some experts raised concerns that this certification might overlap with existing credentials, such as CADDIS, and could allow OTs to take on tasks traditionally performed by Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) or Assistive Technology (AT) instructors.

Cheryl Livingston –

Cheryl reported that she has been attending meetings of the Lincoln Chapter of the NFBN, where she was elected Secretary at the January meeting. In addition, she serves on the board of NFBN as the State Treasurer and is also a member of the Convention Committee. NFBN will hold their annual state convention from Thursday, March 27, through noon on Sunday, March 30, at the Omaha Marriott Regency. They are planning an exciting convention and hope that many people will attend.

Linda Mentink –

Since our last meeting, Linda has attended and participated in three AAWSBVI Board meetings, one AAWSBVI ZoomUnion, three NFBN Board meetings, two NFBN Historians Committee meetings, two NFBN Senior Division meetings, two Friends of the Commission meetings, one interview with a researcher for the NFB's Museum of the Blind People's Movement, and one meeting with people from around the country to begin work on a toolkit to help faith communities include blind/low vision people. She has also been in contact with a daughter-in-law of a Columbus resident who is experiencing rapid vision loss.

Friends of the Commission met Tuesday, January 28. They focused mainly on treasury business and approving our revised ByLaws. They are still looking for up to four additional Board members.

Focus Topic: Nebraska Business Enterprise (NBE)
Presented by Eric Buckwalter, NBE Coordinator

Randolph-Sheppard Overview

The Randolph-Sheppard Act was signed into law in 1936 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was introduced in the House and Senate by Senator Morris Sheppard and Representative Jennings Randolph. Known as the Vending Facility Program, the act grants blind individuals priority in operating vending facilities—such as cafeterias, snack bars, and automatic vending machines—on federal property, providing operators with remunerative self-employment opportunities.

Nebraska, like most states, has a reciprocal state law that gives blind individuals the same priority on state property, with a few exceptions.

Known as Business Enterprises Programs (BEPs) — or, in Nebraska, Nebraska Business Enterprises — each state has a State Licensing Agency (SLA) that oversees the program. The SLA owns the units at each location, holds the contract/permit/agreement for the location, and licenses vendors who meet the program's qualifications to operate the locations. Each vendor owns and operates their own business to service the locations.

State of Nebraska Business Enterprises

Sites

The Nebraska Business Enterprises (NBE) program currently operates 65 sites, managed by 17 NBE vendors or trainees. NBE also oversees approximately 30 additional sites operated by third-party companies. Spread across these sites are around 500 vending machines and 7 micro markets.

In FFY 2024, NBE brought on 5 new individuals to operate sites, 4 of whom have already received their licenses. Additionally, NBE added 10 new sites:

- Nebraska Dept. of Education (vending machine and micro market)
- Lincoln Regional Center (vending)
- DHHS Omaha Site (2 micro market locations)
- DHHS Bellevue Site (1 micro market location)
- DHHS Hastings (1 micro market location)
- YRTC Hastings (vending)
- YRTC Kearney (vending)
- USDA Office Lincoln (vending)
- BSDC (vending)
- Beatrice Health and Rehab (private) (vending)

In addition to these 10 new sites, NBE also opened a micro market inside the USSTRATCOM building, alongside our existing vending machine operation. This installation offered customers a place, outside the cafeteria, to purchase snacks and beverages with credit/debit cards. Due to the nature of how credit/debit card readers work on vending machines, these devices are not permitted inside the USSTRATCOM facility. Micro market credit/debit card readers are much easier to hardwire into an internet connection, making them safe to use in a high-security military building.

In all honesty, bringing on 5 new individuals and 10 new sites in one year likely overstretched NBE staff a bit. However, we powered through and learned from our mistakes.

In FFY 2024, NBE vendors' gross sales totaled \$1,426,795.80 at non-interstate locations and \$211,831.75 at the twenty locations along Interstate 80, for a combined gross sales total of \$1,638,627.55. This does not include the gross sales of the Dining Facility inside the USSTRATCOM building, which grossed an additional \$1,151,148.34.

There has been considerable discussion across the industry, post-pandemic, about whether the vending machine industry is dying. The answer is complicated. In general, sales at non-government office buildings are in decline, as many businesses have opted to keep employees working from home after realizing this model worked well for them post-pandemic. Fortunately, NBE does not have sites in these situations.

Initially, post-pandemic, many BEPs across the country experienced this trend. However, most of our sites are located in state and federal office buildings, many of which also continued telework practices after the pandemic. In Nebraska, with the Governor's decision in mid-2024 to have state employees return to working in-office, NBE has seen sales tick up in state office buildings since June.

Sales across the industry remain steady, if not rising, in blue-collar settings. However, this has been a notoriously hard segment of the industry for BEPs to break into, as competition with larger mainstream companies is difficult.

NBE's sales at sites with captive audiences, such as NDCS locations, continue to perform very well. This includes sales to both NDCS employees and guests of the facilities.

One way NBE is pivoting to better meet the needs of customers at our locations is by shifting from the traditional bank of vending machines to the installation of micro markets.

Micro Markets

Micro markets "remove the glass" that separates customers from the product. Items for sale are placed on open shelving, with cold food displayed in glass-door coolers. The concept is designed to convey the ease and openness of a convenience store. Customers can touch products, read nutrition information, and make more informed decisions. Visually and emotionally, the open concept creates a sense of welcomeness and offers a higher-end shopping experience.

Once customers make their selections, they use a self-checkout kiosk, similar to the self-checkout lines at stores like Target, Wal-Mart, Hy-Vee, etc. Micro markets are monitored by security cameras, which can be reviewed if a significant amount of "shrinkage" (industry terminology for theft) is noticed. The self-checkout kiosks also have built-in features that track the most common methods of theft in markets.

Unlike vending machines, which can limit the variety of products sold (as each product takes up one or two rows in a machine), micro markets typically offer a wider range of items, though at reduced quantities. Micro markets also allow for the sale of items that do not traditionally dispense well from a machine. This wider array of options is appealing to most customers.

Vendors who service micro market locations can also more easily offer deals or incentives to customers. The software that powers the markets can track individual

customer purchases. For example, vendors can program the market software to offer a free 20oz soft drink after a customer buys 10. Alternatively, customers who purchase a sandwich could receive a discount on chips, such as \$0.25 off the regular price.

Another feature of micro markets is the ability for customers to purchase gift cards for use at the market. These gift cards could serve as Christmas gifts for coworkers or be used by supervisors to reward employees. Another advantage of micro markets is that, for NCBVI, they are approximately half the cost to install compared to vending machines that fill the same space.

Are there any drawbacks to micro markets?

Yes. Micro markets require more frequent visits and attention by vendors who service them. Since micro markets usually offer more items but at lower quantities, restocking is often needed more frequently. Additionally, markets require more attention to ensure that products are properly faced and merchandised.

Fees Incurred by Vendors

The fees incurred by vendors for the software that powers the micro market are also higher than the fees for credit card readers on vending machines. Additionally, micro markets require a more powerful internet connection than the cell signal used for vending machine credit card readers—yet another added cost for vendors.

Since products in micro markets are typically checked out at the kiosk by scanning the UPC on the packaging, vendors must ensure that each product they carry is correctly entered into the software.

At the level NBE is able to install them, micro markets are usually only a viable option inside closed breakroom settings, where the market is only accessible to employees. For example, installing a micro market inside the State Office Building in Lincoln or Omaha would not be a wise investment, as those areas are accessible to the general public. In a closed breakroom situation, if shrinkage occurs, reviewing the security camera footage will likely reveal an employee whom supervisors can recognize. In an area open to the public, however, it is much harder to identify the person.

NBE operates two cafeterias—one in the State Office Building in Lincoln and one inside the USSTRATCOM building on Offutt Air Force Base in Bellevue.

The cafeteria at the State Office Building uses a catered food service model. Food from local establishments is brought in daily and sold to those who come to the cafeteria for lunch. However, this model of cafeteria service has been in decline for some time, and the pandemic only amplified this trend. The proliferation of food delivery services, rising food costs, and changes to agreements with restaurants (which themselves are struggling with tight margins post-pandemic) have all contributed to this model offering very low or no profits for those operating cafeterias using it.

Current and Future Plans

NBE is currently negotiating a new contract with the State Building Division. As part of this negotiation, NBE is exploring alternative ways to provide food service at this location that improve the cost/profit margin. We are also considering relinquishing the contract if we determine that it is no longer a profitable facility to operate. Several factors hamper food service profitability at this location, including the proximity to numerous food options in the downtown Lincoln area. Additionally, the building's design does not allow for the installation of a ventilation hood system in the cafeteria area, severely limiting the types of food that can be prepared onsite.

Deterrence Diner and New Projects

The cafeteria, Deterrence Diner, inside the USSTRATCOM building is a full-service cafeteria that offers a grill station, sandwich station, pizza station, as well as a salad bar, a daily soup selection, and two daily lunch options. Breakfast is also served, offering daily specials and a selection of breakfast sandwiches and breakfast burritos. A third-party subcontractor operates a full-service coffee shop inside the cafeteria. The cafeteria is open Monday-Friday from 6:00 AM to 2:00 PM (0600 to 1400 for those inside the building).

One of the biggest NBE projects this past year has been working in cooperation with the government to convert a grab-and-go area inside the cafeteria into a second micro market that is open 24 hours a day. This second micro market is slightly larger than the original one in the building and offers frozen meals, ice cream, and 24/7 on-demand coffee drinks. NBE invested in a bean-to-cup coffee machine that can produce fourteen different coffee beverages on demand. Customers make their drink and then use the self-checkout kiosk to pay for the beverage.

Other initiatives NBE has worked on with the government inside the building this year include installing several self-checkout kiosks in the cafeteria to ease the burden on the staffed registers and speed up the checkout process. Additionally, NBE is close to finalizing the ability for those in the building to order food online and then pick it up in the cafeteria, allowing them to skip the line.

Currently, NBE is also in the early stages of working with the government on a remodel and update of the cafeteria. This update will allow for more adaptive food offerings, a permanent salad bar area, and a section to display and sell USSTRATCOM swag (t-shirts, sweatshirts, mugs, challenge coins, etc.), which is allowed under our agreement with the government.

Leveraging Data for Decision-Making

One of the key focuses for NBE over the past year has been the power of data provided by credit card readers. While all revenue from credit card sales at vending machines and micro markets is directly distributed to the vendors, NBE staff has access to the backend of all devices. In addition to credit card sales, the devices also track cash sales. This allows NBE staff to gather data in various ways, enabling us to track sales and make informed decisions about machine profitability, service frequency, and other

key metrics. The data we gather gives us far more information than we could obtain from just visiting a site, though we still conduct site visits as well.

2025 Project Focus

One of the large projects we are focusing on for 2025 that utilizes this data is determining which sites are currently over-machined. By tracking the sales data, we can identify if a machine is underperforming, meaning it is not selling enough product to justify keeping it at a location. For example, if a location has two snack machines, but the employee population has decreased, can NBE redistribute one of these machines to another location — or a new location — without having to purchase a new machine?

Another feature offered by the backend of the credit/debit card readers is the ability for vendors to utilize Vending Management Software (VMS). While there is an additional monthly cost, VMS allows a vendor to program exactly what item is in each individual machine, by the slot it occupies. The vendor then sets their PAR level (Periodic Automatic Restock level) for each product. A PAR is the amount of each item a vendor expects to sell between visits to a location. Before heading out to service a site, a vendor can run a report that tells them exactly how many of each product they need to bring to bring each product back up to its PAR. This is particularly useful for vendors at locations that do not provide onsite storage. When a vendor knows what each machine needs, they can pre-kit — placing items in a tote — and take only what they need. Previously, a vendor would have to: a) take all their product with them, or b) visit the site, make a list of needed products, return to their storage area to gather products, and then return to the machine location to stock it.

For these vendors, VMS significantly reduces the time, energy, and cost it takes to service sites.

Industry Trends and NBE's Sales Recovery

Industry-wide numbers are typically not released until sometime in the first half of the following year, as most businesses operate on a calendar year, not a FFY like NCBVI. So, while the numbers may be slightly off, our FFY numbers indicate that we are on track with the industry's sales recovery post-pandemic.

Industry-wide sales took a major hit in 2020, dropping to \$13.3B from \$24.2B in 2019, the industry's high point. Sales rebounded in 2021, reaching \$19.4B. The upward trend continued in 2022 with \$21.7B in total revenue, though still shy of the 2019 high. In 2023, industry-wide revenue surpassed the 2019 record for the first time since the pandemic, reaching \$26.04B.

NBE's total revenue from all vendors in 2019 was \$1.07M. After taking the pandemic hit, 2020 revenue was just shy of \$900K. Sales rose again in 2021 to just under \$1M, though still below 2019 levels. In 2022, NBE exceeded industry-wide recovery by one year, with gross revenue of \$1.1M. Total sales in 2023 were \$1.3M. NBE looks forward to the release of the 2024 industry-wide numbers to see how our program compares to the industry as a whole.

Note: NBE total sales revenue for this report only accounts for vending machine and NSOB Lincoln sales; sales at Deterrence Diner are tracked separately.

NBE's Operational Size and Industry Comparison

Taken as a whole, NBE's size — based on revenue — places us in the medium-sized category of operations. Medium-sized operations gross between \$1M and \$4.9M in sales annually. This category makes up 26% of all operations in the country, generating an estimated \$5B in sales, or 19.2% of the industry total in 2023. Interestingly, Extra Large operations — those generating over \$10M in sales — make up just 8% of the operations but generate 49% of all total industry sales.

NBE strives to put together a report each year comparing our program to industry-wide trends and numbers. While nothing official, we use this as a guide to assess our program's progress, ensure we're keeping up with industry trends, and inform decisions — especially regarding machine types and placement.

While NBE was unable to complete this analysis for 2023, we aim to accomplish this for the current year and would be happy to share it with the Commissioners when/if it's finished. This report allows us to dive deeper into data, examining individual item sales and other valuable insights.

AWARE Software Implementation

This past year, NBE also began using a standalone component of NCBVI's client management software, AWARE, which is specifically designed for BEPs. This software enables us to track and manage many aspects of the NBE program that were previously handled across multiple, complex spreadsheets. NBE team member Lizzie Heidenreich has taken ownership of this transition process. We're excited to leverage this tool to improve efficiency in the day-to-day operations of the NBE program.

Looking Ahead to 2025

In conclusion, NBE is in a strong position. We are working diligently to improve the aspects we can control while navigating and adapting to the challenges we cannot. NBE is excited and optimistic about 2025. Currently, we have one major project planned for the year: a new USCIS facility in Lincoln that will combine two existing facilities already serviced by NBE.

NBE has now been fully staffed for just over a year, and with fewer large projects scheduled for the upcoming year, we are hoping to focus on fine-tuning the smaller details. Our goal is to establish systems that not only enhance the program for existing vendors but also make it easier to manage future expansions and operations.

Three NBE vendors were present at the meeting to give a presentation.

Jeremy Richey –

Jeremy reported that he services vending machines in Lincoln, managing approximately 50 machines and handling third-party subcontracting. He has a contractor who works for him.

One tool he uses is Seed Cashless Mobile, part of the Cantaloupe software system, which helps gather information before visiting the machines. Before using this system, his contractor would spend about 1.5 hours driving to all the locations, taking inventory of what was needed, returning to pre-kit the items, and then going back to restock the machines. After starting to use Seed Cashless Mobile, that time was reduced by half or more. As a result, he went from paying his contractor 35-40 hours every two weeks to just 21-25 hours, saving both time and money.

Another area where he's saving money is onsite storage. Previously, many of the vending sites he managed had onsite storage, which required meeting the minimum delivery requirements from Pepsi, Coke, and Vistar. Jeremy found this unsustainable, so he consolidated his storage to just two locations. Now, they pre-kit everything from these two sites, leading to less waste across all vending locations.

Jeremy stated that while the Mobile App and website are accessible, they can be cumbersome because they are very visual, and some elements are not labeled correctly. He uses the Mobile App to gather products for pre-kitting.

The Seed Life website is also accessible, but Jeremy doesn't use it as often since he's not very tech-savvy. The website allows him to pull various reports and receive alerts for coin jams and bill jams. However, the alerts can be a nuisance, as sometimes the message is just an error rather than an actual jam. Jeremy mentioned he is also working on reducing the number of product selections, as having too many options can lead to more waste.

Commissioner Rocha asked Jeremy if he conducted surveys. Jeremy responded that while he often speaks to people and asks for feedback, he has not conducted a formal survey.

Ronnie Kellog –

Ronnie has been a licensed vendor since 2017 and has worked at various locations, including the Community Correctional Center, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and Whitehall (a Health and Human Services building). Recently, he has also started operating a micro-market within the prison system in Lincoln. Ronnie mentioned that operating a micro-market has been an interesting experience, as he had never used software to manage his operations before. He now uses the software included in the Cantaloupe package, which allows him to input information such as prices and scan barcodes to keep track of products. However, Ronnie noted that he sometimes faces accessibility challenges with the different software programs he uses.

Commissioner Schonlau asked Ronnie how he responds if something goes wrong, such as a customer pressing the wrong button for a product selection. Ronnie explained that his response depends on the nature of the issue. If it's something he can fix himself, he will do so; if not, he reaches out for assistance. He also noted that sometimes simply restarting the vending machine can resolve the issue.

Commissioner Rocha then asked what information is contained in the barcode. Ronnie explained that the barcode only contains numbers. Commissioner Heyen shared his experience with barcodes, noting that they are typically specific to the product itself, not to each individual package. He added that, in a way, he is also a blind vendor because he manages the micro-market at the hotel where he works. When a product is scanned at the hotel front desk from the micro-market, a series of numbers appears that corresponds to the product and determines its price.

Sandy Alvarado –

Sandy reported that she is the Chairperson of the Blind Licensee Committee and has been part of the NBE program for 15 years. During her time in NBE, she has witnessed many changes within the program.

Sandy explained that she has a captive audience for the micro-market she operates at the STRATCOM headquarters. In addition to the micro-market, she also manages 42 vending machines at the location. However, she noted that they are currently evaluating whether some of these vending machines can be removed, as they are underutilized. These machines cannot accommodate credit card readers due to security issues at the STRATCOM location. Most employees at USSTRATCOM love the micro-market. Sandy shared that she currently employs two contract workers and plans to hire two more. She has been running the micro-market for about a year.

Sandy gave kudos to the NBE staff, praising their out-of-the-box thinking, support, and proactive approach to addressing vendors' concerns. She remarked that the NBE program has come a long way since she first started, becoming more professional with higher expectations for licensed blind individuals. Sandy credited Carlos Servan for playing a key role in moving the program in the right direction when he joined NCBVI as deputy director and took an active interest in NBE.

When Sandy first began as an NBE vendor, she only had five small sites. Since then, the program has expanded significantly. She mentioned that when she heard NCBVI was working on securing the STRATCOM facility for vending, she expressed interest in operating the site if it became available. It took a lot of effort for NCBVI to secure the contract with STRATCOM, not only for the cafeteria but also for the vending machines. Sandy expressed appreciation for having just one location to manage now.

Sandy noted that her experience with the micro-market differs from Ronnie's, as she has a very captive audience, and employees cannot use their cell phones in the facility. She mentioned that her customers love the micro-market

Commissioner Livingston expressed her appreciation for the support NCBVI provides to the NBE program, noting that over the years, things seem to have improved. She highlighted the positive trend of more blind individuals showing interest in becoming vendors and stated that she is pleased to see NBE moving in a positive direction and growing. She also mentioned that the micro-market concept is a great initiative, provided it is accessible for blind people to use.

Commissioner Schonlau inquired about the length of time it takes to complete the training to become a licensed vendor. Eric Buckwalter explained that the process typically begins when someone expresses interest in the NBE program. A member of the NBE staff meets with the individual and their current VR counselor to discuss the details of what being a vendor entails. Many people initially think that being a vendor is as simple as showing up with products and placing them in machines. Once the details are explained, if the individual is still interested, they are encouraged to visit with a current vendor onsite and receive hands-on experience working one-on-one with them. An NBE staff member is usually present to assist during this visit. If the individual remains interested, they are then offered a three-month on-the-job training (OJT) opportunity with a vendor. During this period, they gain a thorough understanding of the responsibilities and requirements involved in being a vendor.

Some other requirements for becoming a licensed vendor include being legally blind, over 19 years of age, and legally residing in the country. The individual must also have basic math skills and be able to read, write, and communicate effectively. Lastly, there must be an available location for placement. When a vending location becomes available, it is put out for bid to current vendors. If more than one person bids, the Committee provides input, but the final decision on who gets the site is made by NCBVI. NBE can also assign a new vendor to the site.

Commissioner Rocha asked Eric to explain the role of a teaming partner and how they work with a vendor when a vendor takes over a facility. Eric explained that most BEPs (Business Enterprise Programs) use what is called a teaming partner to operate a facility. When a vendor enters a cafeteria-type facility, they often lack the experience or skills necessary to manage a full-service cafeteria. Cafeterias are also much more complex to operate than vending machines. In many cases, BEP staff are stretched thin and are unable to be on-site at the cafeteria every day. Additionally, not all BEP staff have the restaurant or food service experience needed to assist with running the facility. A teaming partner is an external business specializing in food service, which works alongside the vendor in a co-management situation. The level of involvement of the teaming partner depends on the vendor's experience. The idea behind this partnership is that the teaming partner helps manage the site, trains the vendor, and over time gradually reduces their involvement until the blind vendor is fully capable of running the facility on their own.

Commissioner Rocha asked about the current set-aside percentage. Erin reported that the set-aside is currently 8%. Since the state owns the machines and holds the

contracts, each vendor is required to pay 8% of their net profit to the agency under the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act. This money is placed into a special fund that can only be used for five specific purposes related to the BEP program. The primary uses of this fund are the purchase of new machines and the repair of existing machines.

Public Comment

Mark Bulger –

Mark thanked Eric for the excellent presentation on NBE and inquired about how much NCBVI has spent on vending machines in the past five years. Eric estimated that NCBVI has spent around \$1,000,000. Mark acknowledged that this seems like a reasonable amount, considering the return the agency is receiving on its investment. He then asked Eric if he anticipates NCBVI needing to spend more money on vending machines in the near future, or if the agency is satisfied with its current position. Eric replied that, with the streamlining of machinery, he believes that, with the exception of a few outliers, NCBVI is likely in good shape for the next several years.

Jim Jirak –

Jim shared his personal journey to becoming a vendor. He explained that he worked for 24 years in a call center at the Hyatt Hotel in Omaha but was let go in 2014. Afterward, he struggled to figure out his next steps and went to work for Cox Cable in Omaha, but soon realized it wasn't a good fit for him. Jim recalled that during a Commission meeting, Carlos approached him and asked if he had ever considered joining the NBE vending program. Although Jim hadn't thought about it before, he decided to go through the interview process.

He described the interview as informal, consisting of five questions. After answering them, he was told he was accepted into the program. Jim then met with his rehab counselor and completed the job-shadowing component. One of the program's requirements was to take math and English tests at Omaha Metro College to ensure he had basic skills in these areas. Jim noted that the English test was easy for him, but he struggled with the math test, as he tried to solve the problems visually in his head without paper. Despite this challenge, he passed both tests.

Jim also completed a Hadley course, an online training program sponsored by the Blind Merchants division of NFB. After finishing the course, he shadowed several other blind vendors. Jim concluded by sharing his advice for those interested in vending: if they can do math and have good customer service skills, they can succeed in the program.

Break:

A break was taken at 10:15 a.m.
The meeting resumed at 10:30 a.m.

Report from the Executive Director: Presented by Deputy Director of Services, Erin Brandyberry, due to Carlos Serván's absence.

I. Administration

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

Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC): The focus was on working on strategies to improve performance standards in Nebraska. As part of this, they reviewed data and statistics and explained how to understand them. As I reported in a previous meeting, I raised the issue of improving Braille literacy in Nebraska. As a result, on January 9, Commissioner Schonlau and I met with the Director of Special Education, the Director of Low Incidence, and the Superintendent of the Nebraska Center for the Education of Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired to discuss improving Braille literacy for blind children in Nebraska. The meeting was positive, and we agreed to move forward with developing a strategy. The next meeting with all five of us will be on February 13.

NCSAB Monthly Meetings: We reviewed the evaluation results from the Fall conference and discussed how to shape the 2025 Spring conference. We also talked about some of the Executive Orders and their potential impact on our services. Are the blind included in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts? Will accessibility policies for the blind be affected?

In a separate Zoom meeting, we discussed the Grant Funds and other political issues arising from the new administration. In short, as long as we don't receive any written directives from RSA, we should continue business as usual. There was concern about drawing our grants, as State Accounting handles that for us. There is a general sense that the Department of Education will not be dismantled. So far, services that are part of the statute cannot be overridden by an Executive Order; such changes would require an act of Congress. However, until Congress addresses the matter, the new administration has the ability to change how things are run. Already, dozens of employees associated with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts have been placed on administrative leave.

Star Tran Monthly Meetings: Aside from approving a couple of plans, we also received reports on some complaints regarding public transportation in Lincoln and progress on hiring new drivers and acquiring new buses. The number of complaints about no-shows has decreased considerably. They currently have 103 bus drivers, just a couple short of the full staff. The Advisory Committee passed a resolution supporting the NBE to operate the vending contract in the new Multimedia Center, which is estimated to be completed in 2026. I will meet with the Director of Transportation on February 13 to discuss next steps.

Olmstead Advisory and Committee Meetings: I attended the Employment Committee, where we discussed statistics on people with developmental disabilities. We would like to see progress in quality integrated employment for this population.

Additionally, at the Advisory Committee meeting, we heard a report from the Deputy Director of HHS regarding Medicaid, followed by a Q&A session. The main focus was the number of hours personal assistants are allowed to provide support.

I attended the Dare to be Remarkable conference in Baltimore, where I was one of the keynote speakers. The other keynote speaker was RSA Commissioner Allen. The conference featured sessions on various topics, including Braille, Home Management, Orientation and Mobility, working with English Language Learners, Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and more.

During December 2024, Tammie and I met with our budget analyst from the Unicameral and began developing a strategy to maintain our budget and explore the possibility of creating an SSP program in Nebraska. I also met with a few state senators to discuss our services and the two issues mentioned above. As a result, Senator Dorn introduced LB 87 on January 10 to create a Support Service Provider (SSP) program in Nebraska. The hearing took place on January 31, 2025, with several consumers showing support, and four deafblind individuals provided powerful testimonies. A couple of senators commented that they would work to find ways to fund this program.

On January 8 and February 4, I attended the Independent Agencies, Boards, and Commissions meeting. During the first meeting, the focus was an update on the Governor's recommendation to decrease the state budget for all agencies and propose legislation to consolidate several Boards and Commissions. In the Governor's budget recommendation, NCBVI will not experience a cut but will receive an increase of \$107,000 for FY 2025 and \$111,000 for FY 2026 for health insurance and wage adjustments. However, there is no increase for the SSP program, as the Governor's Office believes we have sufficient funds to run it. Additionally, NCBVI was not considered for consolidation, which reflects recognition of how well the agency is performing.

During the second meeting, we received a report on several legislative bills that could affect most agencies. Two of them could impact NCBVI if passed: LB 336, which proposes the creation of an agency or office funded by one or two percent of each agency's budget to evaluate how effectively we are expending tax funds, and LB 634, which would impose a sunset on all state agencies created by the legislature.

On January 22, I provided a presentation via Zoom at the led Diversity conference at UNO, where I discussed the capabilities of the blind and the services we provide. On January 23, I attended the annual stakeholder meeting at the NCECBVI. We made recommendations for the 2025 State Plan, and it also gave me the opportunity to continue building trusting relationships.

On January 27, Tammie Dunn, Tim Jefferson, and I met with the State Building Division to discuss space needs for the Omaha office. The State Building Division is considering relocating all the offices from the current Omaha building to a new location. It appears that the building is attracting interest from commercial realtors and maintaining it has

become costly due to its age. This is still under consideration, and a decision will be made after discussions with all the affected agencies.

After the meeting, I went to the office of Lee Will, the DAS Director and Chief Operating Officer, to advocate for the North Platte VR position that had been eliminated. Although I didn't meet with him, I was informed that they would contact State Personnel.

Tactile Images-3-D Works currently has exhibits in four Nebraska museums, and the Great Plains Museum will be added in March. There will be around 120 weeks of exposition. I have been invited by the American Association of Museums to speak about this initiative at their annual conference, which will take place in Los Angeles, California, from May 6-9.

The Business Office:

- We are making progress on improvements to the new student lounge. Demolition has been completed, and renovations are now underway. The estimated time of completion is by the end of February or middle of March.
- We successfully closed the Basic Support 2023 grant, fully maximizing our federal funds, including reallocation. With the agency fully staffed and several projects in development, we anticipate expending all FFY2024 funds by the end of the fiscal year. This achievement reflects innovative ideas to advance our mission and the dedication of our hardworking staff.
- The current fiscal year's budget includes continued support for the SSP pilot project.

Technology Area:

- Distributed Monarch braille devices to staff and clients.
- Coordinated Monarch braille device training for staff. The trainings were recorded and uploaded to YouTube. Audio versions of the trainings were also made available.
- Due to file congestion on the NCBVI network drive, a separate network drive was created for the business office. All business office files were migrated to the new business office network drive.
- Purchased new technology equipment for new staff hires.

Kathy Stephens:

- Completed the 2024 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.
- Made arrangements for staff to attend the CSUN Assistive Technology Conference.
- Organized for 16 staff members to attend the NFB Dare to Be Remarkable Conference in Baltimore.

- Arranged for three staff members to attend the 46th Annual Black Hills Regional Ski for Light Event in South Dakota.

II. Human Resources

Staff Update:

- In the Omaha District, we hired Samand Zeb as a VR counselor, who started Center training on January 6.
- In the Lincoln District, Connie Daly announced her retirement date as of April 30. To recruit and train a replacement for this position, we posted the job opening. Shane Buresh applied and was offered the position. Shane will begin his OC duties in the Lincoln District when Connie leaves.
- At the Center, we posted the Braille teaching position that Shane will be vacating. We hope to hire someone in advance so they can receive training at the Center and be ready to teach shortly after Shane transitions to his new role.
- The vacancy for the VR position in North Platte was eliminated by the Governor as part of his 2024 Executive Order, which states that any vacancies over 90 days will be eliminated. After writing an appeal and having conversations with the office of Lee Will, the Director of Administrative Services, and with State Personnel, we were able to reopen this position as of last week. Other than that, we are now fully staffed in all areas.

Training Opportunities:

- Several counselors attended the Dare to Be Remarkable conference at the Jernigan Institute from November 11-13. This national conference on Structure Discovery is offered every few years.
- Cristal Dimas and Tim Jefferson completed their training with the National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI) in December 2024.
- Nancy Coffman and Jessica Bartenbach successfully passed the 2025 Freedom Scientific JAWS exam.
- Tammie Dunn, Pam Rademacher, and Hugh Phan were accepted to participate in the 2025 NRLI. Their first session was from February 3-7.
- The State Staff meeting is scheduled for March 4-6 in Lexington. The Mayor of Lexington, John Fagot, will be our keynote speaker. He is a blind individual who received services from our agency several years ago.
- Amy attended an in-service with the Autism Center staff.
- Kaytlyn attended three trainings: Valued Roles of Society Workshop (a two-part series), ESU 6 Interagency Collaboration – Who to Include, Why to Include Them, When to Invite Them, and ESU 6 Transportation Training in Transition Workshop.
- Several staff members participated in training on the use of the Monarch device.
- Alanah Purkapile participated in Vanessa Kunz's (Accountant I) two weeks of staff training from November 8 to November 22.
- Sara Watson (HR/Policy/PR) completed six weeks of training on January 10.

- Alanah Purkapile (VR Tech, Omaha) attended one week of training from January 6–January 10.
- Samand Zeb (VR Counselor, Omaha) began staff training on January 6.
- Jason completed training through the Nebraska State Leadership Certificate courses.

III. Field Services

WINERFEST was held in November, with the training titled “Blind Students Doing Forensics.” This training demonstrated how blind students can learn science using adaptive equipment and software. It was conducted by Independent Science, an organization run by blind scientists.

The Lincoln District continues to have GATE, and it is well attended.

Nine high school-aged blind students attended a leadership/advocacy event in Washington D.C. from February 1-5.

Field staff continue networking and building partnerships with stakeholders across Nebraska. These activities help us better understand businesses, teachers of blind students, and the community in general. Likewise, these stakeholders get to know us better, which enables us to improve our services and find new opportunities for our clients.

Some of the events our field staff participated in include:

Lincoln District:

- Collaborated with a TVI from Lincoln Public Schools to allow a student to attend a tour of the Center in December.
- Attended the Project Search Steering Committee Meeting and the Lay Advocate Update Meeting.
- Presented to the Lincoln Public School Vision Teams to discuss and provide information about NCBVI services.
- Taught two classes at the Nebraska Center for the Education of Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired (NCSAB).
- Attended the monthly Employ Columbus meetings and the Columbus United Way food security meeting.
- Participated in the Spanish Networking Group in Fremont and attended the Native American Heritage Month meeting via Zoom, celebrating U.S. Department of State Indigenous Peoples' Contributions to Diplomacy.
- Met with the Greater Lincoln Workforce Development Board, toured the Lincoln Food Bank, and discussed ways to connect our consumers struggling with food insecurity to the Food Bank.

Omaha District:

- Attended the Peer Support group at Outlook Enterprises to support mutual clients of NCBVI and the Outlook Enterprises program.
- Met with the Blind Interagency team to support LB87.
- Pursued partnerships with the Kiewit Luminarium and Durham Museum to strategically create employment opportunities for Pre-Employment Transition students and members of the Older & Deaf Blind communities.

North Platte District:

- Met with the ESU 10 staff, director, TVI, and O&M specialist to discuss potential partnerships and service enhancements for students.
- Connected with Summit Real Estate in Grand Island to arrange an informational interview.
- Collaborated with the Department of Labor office in Lexington to provide information about NCBVI services and scheduled job search and mock interview sessions.
- Engaged with Sidney High School, Independence Rising, Fort Meade Veterans Affairs VIST Coordinator Amber Larson, and the Brain Injury Alliance of Nebraska.
- Participated in the Northfield Retirement Community Health Fair.
- Met with Hy-Vee to discuss an OJT opportunity.
- Participated in Employ Grand Island, Hastings, and Project Search at the Grand Island and Kearney sites. Attended IEP meetings and networked with NCECBVI, Grand Island Central Catholic, and Alma High School while closely collaborating with the schools' TVIs.
- Presented information about NCBVI services to the Kearney Visually Impaired Peer Support (VIPS) group.
- Provided in-service training to Panhandle Public Health District employees and assisted with completing the 7OB report.

Client Statistics:

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

OIB clients was 474.

IL clients under 55 was 70.

VR clients was 412.

We had consumers obtain jobs as:

- Childcare Worker
- Customer Service Representative
- Fabric and Apparel Patternmaker
- Farmer/Rancher
- Fitness Instructor/Trainer
- Janitor/Cleaner
- Management Analyst
- Market Research Analyst
- Randolph Sheppard Operator

- Receptionist/Information Clerk
- Registered Nurse
- Teacher/Instructor – Secondary Education

IV. Training Center

As of January 27, 2025, the Nebraska Center for the Blind has nine individuals attending training: six VR consumers (including three Pre-ETS), two OIB consumers, and one staff trainee. We expect another VR consumer to begin on February 10, which will bring our enrollment to ten individuals.

During this quarter, five consumers toured the Center, and two had three-day stays. The consumers who participated in the three-day stays have scheduled their start dates for January 27 and February 10, respectively.

Activities included shopping at Nebraska Crossing and a Secret Santa gift exchange on December 6. These activities gave students the opportunity to practice nonvisual shopping and gift wrapping.

Nikki Jackson and Karen Anderson from the NFB Jernigan Institute conducted a two-day vocational workshop on December 10–11. Monthly virtual vocational seminars continue.

The National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB) sent Becky Keller and Jimmy Morris for our triennial recertification visit on December 12–13. Their report was submitted to the NBPCB for review, and we were granted the full three-year recertification.

Center staff are participating in a virtual five-part training series conducted by the NBPCB, focusing on working with consumers with multiple disabilities.

The Braille classroom and Center Supervisor's offices were switched to provide more space for Braille. Braille is now located in room 108, across from the Shop, and Jessica's office is in room 102 at the east end of the hall, across from the former NBE storage area.

V. Nebraska Business Enterprise

Federal Building: NBE has recently completed the launch of a new micro-market location in the USSTRATCOM building. NBE now oversees the operation of two micro-markets, vending machines, and the dining facility inside the building. Due to the addition of another micro-market, NBE will be seeking permission to reduce the number of vending machines in the building. The micro-markets are able to accept credit card purchases, something the vending machines cannot do at this location due to their reliance on cellular signal. This has led to reduced use of the vending machines.

NBE continues to work with USSTRATCOM on the upgrade/remodel of the cafeteria area.

State Building: The project to combine two existing USCIS facilities in Lincoln into one location has been delayed. The projected occupancy date for the facility is no longer this March, but instead Fall 2025. NBE currently services both Lincoln USCIS facilities and is working with GSA on the new location, which will utilize a micro-market concept.

Vendors: We currently have 16 individuals actively servicing routes, with one individual currently in training.

At the last NBE Blind Licensee Committee meeting in September, four of the 16 vendors mentioned above received their licenses.

NBE has received some complaints over the last quarter regarding understocked vending machines and micro-markets. NBE staff continues to work with these vendors to understand why the sites are underserved and to devise plans to assist vendors in managing sites so that this does not continue to be an issue.

NBE is working on implementing management software that is a companion to NCBVI's existing client management software, AWARE. FFY 2025 data is being entered into the system as it occurs. For NBE to make the best use of the system, no less than five years of back data needs to be entered, as well as information on all vending machines. This is a time-consuming process that must be manually entered.

NFB Newsline Update – by Jamie Richey

Happy New Year and thank you for your continued support of NFB-NEWSLINE®! This invaluable service enables hundreds of blind and print-disabled Nebraskans to access critical information, fostering greater independence and productivity in their daily lives. For those unfamiliar, NFB-NEWSLINE provides free, independent access to newspapers, magazines, TV listings, job postings, weather alerts, and more through various platforms, including touch-tone telephones and mobile devices. It is an essential resource for the blind and low-vision community, both in Nebraska and nationwide. This quarterly report covers NFB-NEWSLINE usage in Nebraska from August through December 2024. Due to system downtime during the last quarter, no reports could be generated. Sit back, relax, and enjoy these stats!

August 2024

In August, the Nebraska NFB-NEWSLINE system had 2,146 subscribers, with 10 new subscriptions added. Users logged an impressive 56,536 call minutes and accessed the system online 62,522 times. Content was accessed 43,267 times, with an average frequency of 6.12 minutes. Telephone usage included 570 calls, with an average length of 16.36 minutes, and 59.98% of these were local calls. Online usage showed 9,860 web sessions, 516 mobile sessions, 12,862 In Your Pocket deliveries, and 437 email

deliveries. Nebraska Newspapers were accessed 5,402 times, along with 49 weather and emergency alerts, 607 national newspapers, 2 international newspapers, 173 breaking news articles, 218 magazines, and 288 TV listings.

September 2024

September saw a slight increase in subscribers to 2,148, with 3 new subscriptions. Total call minutes dropped significantly to 7,097, while total online accesses fell to 19,711. Content access frequency also decreased to 3.55 minutes. Telephone usage included 637 calls, averaging 11.14 minutes per call, with 34.44% being local calls. Online activity showed 9,147 web sessions, 610 mobile sessions, 9,526 In Your Pocket deliveries, and 428 email deliveries. Nebraska Newspapers were accessed 5,198 times, alongside 55 weather alerts, 671 national newspapers, no international newspapers, 48 breaking news articles, 186 magazines, and 341 TV listings.

October 2024

Subscribers reached 2,149 in October, with just 1 new subscription. Total call minutes rose slightly to 7,717, and online accesses remained stable at 19,647. The content access frequency improved to 3.61 minutes. There were 585 telephone calls, with an average length of 13.19 minutes, and 48.43% were local. Online activity included 8,913 web sessions, 520 mobile sessions, 9,709 In Your Pocket deliveries, and 505 email deliveries. Nebraska Newspapers were accessed 5,314 times, along with 59 weather alerts, 621 national newspapers, 1 international newspaper, 46 breaking news articles, 374 magazines, and 333 TV listings.

November 2024

In November, the number of subscribers rose to 2,160, with 11 new subscriptions. Total call minutes increased to 9,554, while total online accesses dropped sharply to 5,614. Content access frequency saw a notable increase to 8.58 minutes. Telephone activity included 652 calls, averaging 14.65 minutes each, with 54.08% being local. Online usage consisted of 2,420 web sessions, 511 mobile sessions, 2,204 In Your Pocket deliveries, and 479 email deliveries. Content accesses included 14,025 Nebraska Newspapers, 208 weather alerts, 1,801 national newspapers, 3 international newspapers, 142 breaking news articles, 638 magazines, and 978 TV listings.

December 2024

December closed the year with 2,165 subscribers and 5 new subscriptions. Total call minutes slightly decreased to 9,440, while total online accesses increased to 6,360. Content access frequency remained stable at 8.62 minutes. Telephone usage included 706 calls, averaging 13.37 minutes each, with 38.36% being local. Online activity featured 3,080 web sessions, 568 mobile sessions, 2,225 In Your Pocket deliveries, and 487 email deliveries. Nebraska Newspapers were accessed 4,218 times, along with 129 weather alerts, 492 national newspapers, 198 international newspapers, 240 breaking news articles, 44 magazines, and 383 TV listings.

Wow, that was a lot! While this report provides a detailed look at NFB-NEWSLINE usage over the last two quarters, data for the Alexa skill is not currently available. That

said, the Alexa skill continues to improve, with ongoing updates aimed at enhancing its functionality. In October, I had the pleasure of presenting to the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska Senior Division on how the Alexa skill can be used to access different types of content. While the skill is still somewhat challenging to use, developers are actively working to make it more user-friendly and intuitive.

This concludes my report. As always, if you have any questions or need additional information, please don't hesitate to reach out. I look forward to providing you with updates throughout the new year as we continue to improve and expand the service!

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or Issues

Erin Brandyberry reported that since the November 2024 Commission meeting, all the prior CAP cases had been resolved. NCBVI did have a CAP case come up in the Omaha area within the last week or so and it is very close to being resolved. A meeting has already been held and the parties agreed to a resolution. A consumer had requested a different counselor due to their current counselor being new and they felt it was taking them too long to receive technology, therefore, they went to CAP. NCBVI had some resolutions to the issues and we were able to put those into place. Tim Jefferson will be working with that consumer, and we have some technology ordered. Therefore, this case should be resolved soon.

New Business

Award to the Mayor of Lexington – A Former Blind Client

Erin Brandyberry shared that John Fagot has served as the mayor of Lexington for 25 years, a truly remarkable achievement. As an outstanding role model for the blind community, he embodies NCBVI's philosophy and has made a significant impact through his work. Erin recommended that the commissioners consider honoring John Fagot with one of the awards they established. She also mentioned that he will be the keynote speaker at the upcoming State Staff meeting in Lexington, suggesting that it would be an ideal opportunity to present him with an award during the event.

The NCBVI Commissioner's Book states:

Awards

The Commission Board has created two awards that can be given out to organizations or individuals that go out of their way to help us in our mission. These awards are not given out on a regular basis but are awarded at the board's discretion. The board always welcomes nominations for either award.

Ally in Blindness Independence Award

The Ally in Blindness Independence Award is a proclamation in the form of a certificate that is awarded to an individual or organization that shows their commitment to the Commission or the blindness movement in their actions.

An example of the text of the certificate would be:

“For exemplary service shown in the support of the efforts of the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired and Blind Nebraskans everywhere the Nebraska Commission for the Blind Board of Commissioners hereby proclaims “name” an Ally in Blindness Independence.”

Commissioners’ Advocacy in Blindness Award

The Commissioners’ Advocacy in Blindness Award is a little closer kept and awarded only at times of more profound demonstrations of dedication or action.

This Award is in the form of a Plaque in the shape of Nebraska with the NCBVI Logo in the Panhandle and the name of the recipient as well as a description of their service on the rest of the plaque.

Commissioner Schonlau moved to approve giving the Commissioners’ Advocacy in Blindness Award to John Fagot, the mayor of Lexington.

Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Nays:

Abstained:

Motion Carried

Commissioner Livingston will present this award to John Fagot since she will attend the upcoming State Staff meeting.

Public Comment

Jim Jirak –

Jim stated that with the proposed legislation LB 433, it seems we are now in a climate of legislative hostility. He strongly urged the NCBVI Board, consumers, ACBN, and NFBN to stay vigilant about what the current administration — whether in Lincoln, Nebraska, or Washington, DC — might do next. Jim expressed concern that the current administration is pushing the boundaries of their executive authority.

Additionally, Jim was asked by Patti to mention that the ACBN convention will be held on Saturday, March 22, from 8:30 AM to 7:30 PM at St. James United Methodist Church, 4343 Capehart Rd, Bellevue, Nebraska.

ACBN is also excited to announce a half-day workshop titled "Empowering Through AI," which will take place on Friday, March 21, from 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM, followed by a banquet dinner. This event is in collaboration with the Nebraska Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired (NCBVI). The workshop will focus on Artificial Intelligence (AI), presented by Jeff Bishop, IT Accessibility Consultant at the University of Arizona and

current Blind Information Technology Specialist (BITS) President, an affiliate of the American Council of the Blind. The session will cover what AI is, its capabilities, its use in daily life, and how AI can help level the playing field for individuals with disabilities. The four-hour workshop, social, and banquet will also take place at St. James United Methodist Church on March 21.

Mark Bulger –

Mark commented that one of the Board's responsibilities is to monitor NCBVI's spending. He specifically addressed an event that NCBVI plans to help sponsor, an Art Tour that will take blind individuals across Nebraska to visit museums. While Mark thinks this is a great initiative, he asked how NCBVI plans to fund it without violating RSA regulations. He inquired if NCBVI has specific funding allocated for such events. Erin explained that NCBVI will not use federal funds for the Art Tour; instead, state funds will cover the trip. For non-consumers attending, outreach funds and similar resources, which offer more flexibility, will be utilized. The purpose of the event is to raise awareness about the accessibility of art for blind individuals.

Mark pointed out that the event seems to coincide with the NFBN convention and asked if ACBN was also approached about the event and given the same opportunity. He also mentioned that during a presentation at the Center, the final instruction was that NCBVI must review and approve the ACBN convention agenda before approving attendance. He asked if the NFBN agenda had been reviewed and approved as well.

Erin responded that the timing of the Art Tour coinciding with the NFBN convention was unintentional. Due to a narrow window of time, the Great Plains tour dates happened to overlap with the convention. Erin emphasized that she made it clear on the registration form that the Art Tour is not affiliated with the NFBN convention. She acknowledged Mark's comment and stated that while the Art Tour's timing may create an impression of overlap, efforts are being made to ensure participants know the events are unrelated. Regarding the agendas, Erin noted that NCBVI had previously been stricter about reviewing both the NFBN and ACBN agendas before issuing approval for convention attendance. However, this sometimes prevented NCBVI from supporting attendance at those conventions. Since NCBVI is now more familiar with what to expect at these events, a joint memo was sent out to staff confirming full support for the ACBN convention, including the AI training, banquet, and speaker. NCBVI will also offer full support for attendance at the NFBN convention. The only requirement is that hours for some agenda items, such as the Auction, must be approved as they cannot count as work time.

Mark thanked Erin for her explanation.

Final Announcements

Commissioner Livingston and Commissioner Schonlau expressed their interest in attending the 2025 Silver Summit. Erin Brandyberry stated that she will make sure that their names are on the list.

The next NCBVI Commission Board meeting will be held on Saturday, May 3, 2025, in Scottsbluff, Nebraska.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:21 a.m.

If you have an item that you would like to have placed on the agenda of the May 3, 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