

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

**ANNUAL REPORT
FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2024**



NCBVI

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**NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED
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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Transition services

Nebraska Center for the Blind

Technology Program

Nebraska Business Enterprises

Independent Living/Older Individuals who are Blind Services

NFB-NEWSLINE®

Information and Referral Services

Four methods are used to gauge consumer satisfaction with NCBVI services and gather information for a needs assessment. First, Gemini Research and Training (GRT), a private contractor, conducts an online survey to assess consumer satisfaction with VR services, four months after VR case closure and three months after graduation from the Nebraska Center for the Blind. Second, consumers served through Independent Living (IL) services are given a customer satisfaction survey by phone, six months after case closure. Third, Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) consumers are surveyed by GRT within 30 days of case closure. GRT follows up with a phone call to non-respondents or those who cannot complete the survey online, offering assistance. The final form of feedback is input from consumers gathered at public meetings and forums, held four times a year with the Board of Commissioners, twice a year at state conventions of consumer organizations, and at other times as requested.

FINANCIAL REPORT

NCBVI successfully secured \$500,000 in federal reallocation funds after meeting the required non-federal match. These funds were captured last summer from states that were unable to meet their full federal match obligations. Over the past twelve years, NCBVI has received significant reallocation funding in eleven of those years. This funding has played a crucial role in strengthening our infrastructure, integrating innovative practices in blindness rehabilitation, and reallocating resources to align with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

However, reallocation funding is considered 'soft money,' making it an inconsistent and unreliable source for annual financial planning. For example, in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2018, reallocation funds dropped to only 10% of prior years' levels due to the diversion of VR program funds to hurricane recovery efforts in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico. Thankfully, funding levels improved significantly from 2019 through 2024.

Similarly, Social Security Reimbursement funds are also classified as soft money, which limits their reliability for long-term financial planning. In financial reports, these funds are reflected both in the programs where they are spent and in the Social Security Reimbursement revenue received.

Expenditures for July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2024

Category	Amount
1. Basic Support	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$4,656,116
b. Aid	\$1,445,105
2. Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$733,057
b. Aid	\$300,489
3. Supported Employment	
a. Operations	\$0
b. Aid	\$13,655
4. Independent Living (for individuals under 55 years old)	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$70,215
b. Aid	\$13,829
5. PILBO (Promoting Independent Living for the Blind of Omaha – Enrichment Foundation grant)	
a. Operations	\$0

Category	Amount
b. Aid	\$7,006
6. Social Security Reimbursement (also reflected in the above totals)	\$581,983

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

The VR program prepares blind and visually impaired individuals to enter, retain, or advance in full-time or, when appropriate, part-time competitive employment in the integrated labor market. When fully staffed, NCBVI employs ten VR counselors who provide training and placement in quality jobs that align with each individual's capabilities, abilities, potential, interests, resources, and informed choice. Some of the services provided include, but are not limited to, developing more positive attitudes about blindness, alternative blindness skills training, self-advocacy, raising personal expectations, individual and family counseling and guidance, vocational training, job training, job development, job placement, and assistive technology services.

During the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY), 495 consumers received active VR services, and of these, 40 achieved competitive employment. Consumers served by NCBVI often have significant secondary disabilities. During the FFY, VR services were provided to 197 blind and visually impaired individuals with multiple disabilities. For example, blind and visually impaired veterans returning from active duty often have brain or head injuries in addition to vision loss. Furthermore, more people are surviving serious accidents with traumatic brain injuries than in the past. Regardless of the secondary disabilities involved, NCBVI counselors work with consumers to build self-confidence and high expectations, helping them gain blindness skills and achieve their vocational goals.

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

Staff development is a key component of the high-quality services provided to blind and visually impaired consumers. NCBVI personnel receive training in counseling skills, job development, job placement, working with multiple disabilities, assistive technology, community resources, consumer organizations, and other emerging topics.

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

This year, NCBVI consumers obtained the following jobs: Accountant/Auditor, Art/Drama/Music Teacher, Business Operations Specialist, Childcare Worker, Civil Engineer, Food Prep/Serving Worker (2), Customer Service Representative (5), Dishwasher, Postsecondary Teacher, Elementary Teacher (2), Farm/Ranch Manager, General Manager, Graphic Designer, Healthcare Support Worker, Information Clerk, Janitor/Cleaner (2), Landscaping/Grounds keeping (2), Lodging Manager, Massage Therapist (2), Mental Health Counselor, Office Clerk, Physical Therapist, Project Management Specialist, Psychiatric Technician, Randolph-Sheppard Vendor, Reception/Information Clerk, Stock Clerk (2), Teacher (All Other), Teaching Assistant (Pre-School), and Teaching Assistant (Special Education).

NCBVI is committed to helping consumers achieve high-quality competitive employment outcomes—not just securing the first available job, but full-time positions with good wages and benefits, including health insurance and opportunities for advancement. Many consumers who find employment through NCBVI services no longer need Social Security benefits or other public support.

Employer Outreach

NCBVI continues to educate and serve Nebraska's business community. NCBVI staff regularly contact businesses and community partners to educate them about the abilities of blind individuals and how they can be valuable assets in the workplace. NCBVI has worked with several businesses to help retain employees who may be losing their vision. Additionally, NCBVI assists businesses in identifying accommodations and provides training to employees in the skills of blindness.

NCBVI staff are represented on Workforce Development Boards across the state and assist the AJCs in becoming more accessible to blind Nebraskans. NCBVI participates in several employment groups, such as those in Lincoln, Omaha, Kearney, North Platte, and the Panhandle, to better understand the needs of our business partners and collaborate with consumers to address those needs. NCBVI is also available to provide diversity training to employers to help demystify the process of hiring blind individuals. Additionally, NCBVI has reached out to business colleges across Nebraska to offer diversity training to future HR professionals. In conclusion, NCBVI is committed to partnering with businesses in Nebraska to reduce the unemployment rate among blind Nebraskans. Our efforts are focused on making it easier for businesses to tap into this untapped labor pool.

TRANSITION SERVICES

NCBVI has always recognized the importance and need for transition services for youth in Nebraska as early as possible. NCBVI prides itself on being a leader in providing meaningful

work experiences, job exploration counseling, work readiness skills, postsecondary education exploration, training in independent living skills, self-advocacy, and peer mentoring opportunities to blind and visually impaired youth to ensure their successful integration into society. NCBVI provides transition services to youth ages 14-24. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) places an emphasis on Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students with disabilities ages 14-21. NCBVI is mandated to invest fifteen (15) percent of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) funds in Pre-ETS services. WIOA promotes a smoother transition from school to work for Pre-ETS students and youth by focusing on job exploration, work readiness skills, postsecondary exploration, work-based learning experiences, and self-advocacy skill development for blind and visually impaired youth.

Statewide Data

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

1. Number of transition-aged youth who attended Center training: served 5
2. Total number of transition-aged youth (14-24): served 214
 - A. Number of Pre-ETS students: 149
 - B. Number of PE (Potentially Eligible) youth/students: served 0
 - C. Number of SE (Supported Employment) Youth: served 56
 - D. Number of youths employed: 97
 - WAGES (Work and Gain Experience in the Summer): 17 participants
 - Places of employment: Lancaster County Records, Canine Design, Nelnet, UNL Children's Center, Lincoln Pet Parlor, Nebraska Commission on Latino-Americans, Johnson Flodman Guenzel & Wasserburger LLP, CHI St. Elizabeth, Nebraska State Capitol, Havelock Manor, Willa Cather Dining Center, HyVee, Ivanna Cone, IHOP, Mana Games
 - WBLE (Work Based Learning Experience): 7 participants
 - Places of employment: Kearney Area Children's Museum, Helen Keller National Center, The Teaching Tree, Adam's Corner Market, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Pizza Hut
 - Youth Employment - Supported: 12 consumers
 - Places of employment: SVRC LLC, YMCA – Omaha, Bath & Body Works, Taco Bell, Express Employment, Walmart, Packer Sanitation, Hy-Vee, McDonald's, Shel's Gas Stop, CC&F Retail, GCA Services Group, Marcus Midwest, Cheesecake Factory, Memorial Community Health, Sheldon Pizza Ranch
 - Youth Employment – Non-Supported: 65 consumers
 - Places of employment: Lincoln Children's Zoo, Lincoln Country House LLC, Remarkable Caregivers, Primecare Medical, Scooter's Coffeehouse, Harbor Freight, Game and Parks, Harrison Village

Childcare, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Millard Childcare & Preschool, City of Central City, BWW Resources, Team Honey Badger, Papa Murphy's Pizza, Community Pride Care Center, Cinema Entertainment, Fairfield Inn & Suites, A Cut Above, Truman Medical Center, The Makers, Bosselman Pump & Pantry, Children's Discovery Center, Walmart, G-Tek LLC, HyVee, Neidhardt Sandblasting, Omaha Truck Center, Small Miracle Childcare Village, Childtime Childcare, Bartolome & Koepke Contract, Beita LLC, Five Below, Ross Dress for Less, Outlook Nebraska, Simran Inc, Target, Norfolk Country Club, PF Changs, Scott Kendra LLC, Community Memorial Hospital, Stone Hearth Estates, Territorial Plumbing & Heating, Marshalls, Cherry Hill Co LLC, Lincoln Children's Museum, Cracker Barrel, Jims Food Center, Heritage H R LLC, Smith Todd Fitness, Knotts Custom Diesel, Advance Services, Thermo King, Metro Community College, Beatrice Community Hospital, Family Practice Associates PC, Fiserv, Creighton University, IPGGIS US Inc, Bakers Food 4 Less, Heartland Lawns, Omaha Symphony Association, Ld Studios LLC, Yellow Brick Road Child Care, Blue River Area Agency on Aging, Pawnee City Thriftways, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Valentine Community Schools, Finish Line, Brimax LLC, Taco Johns, Bodan Aksan IA LLC, Super Saver/Russ's Market, Leonard Management, Arby's, Sweden Crème, Good Times Bar & Grill, Sapp Bros Petroleum, PFCJJS One Zero Six LLC, Nineteenth Hole Inc, YMCA-Hastings, Cozad City Schools, NorthStar Services, Pender Public School, Apex Foster Care Inc, Goodwill Industries

WAGES

The WAGES program, designed for youth ages 14-18, empowers participants with practical work experience in career areas of their choice, while also helping them learn advocacy and social skills through exposure to blind role models. During the program, participants are provided with a solid foundation for vocational planning. Students also experience living away from home, as they stay in a dormitory setting on the UNL campus. This year, NCBVI contracted with JB&K (Jessica Beecham and Kevin Kovacs) Services to plan and coordinate the WAGES program. WAGES once again partnered with local employers to provide summer work opportunities for students, helping them develop valuable work skills. Students were expected to arrive on time, behave professionally on the job site, and perform assigned duties.

Students participated in various seminars covering topics such as job readiness, accessible technology, blindness organizations, food labs, and entrepreneurship for blind individuals. During evenings and weekends, students took part in a variety of challenge activities designed to expand their boundaries and push them out of their comfort zones. Activities included swimming, an audio-described movie, a walk to an ice cream parlor, axe throwing, archery, an overnight camping trip with paddleboarding, a group pedal-bike therapy ride, rock

climbing, and orienteering. Students and parents also had the opportunity to attend either the American Council of the Blind (ACB) National Convention or the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) National Convention.

Winnerfest

Winnerfest is a program designed for teenagers ages 14-18, held twice this year. This year, the program focused on financial literacy and expanding access to science for the blind. It underscores NCBVI's commitment to holistic development by addressing a crucial aspect of independence. Over the first weekend, participants engaged in interactive workshops, discussions, and hands-on activities aimed at equipping them with essential financial skills tailored to their unique needs. These activities covered topics such as budgeting, managing finances using accessible technologies, exploring career opportunities, and understanding the nuances of financial independence. Additionally, during the second weekend, blind participants engaged in forensics, using adaptive lab and science equipment under the supervision of a blind scientist. NCBVI is dedicated to ensuring that blind students in Nebraska have access to the STEM field. The program's innovative and inclusive approach not only fosters financial literacy and access to science but also provides a strong foundation for a successful and independent future.

Blind Savvy Strengths

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

Project Independence

Project Independence (PI), designed for blind students ages 7-12, marked a transformative experience for participants from July 21st to July 25th at Camp Calvin Crest in Fremont, NE. Themed "Achieving My Gold Medal to Independence," the program aimed to empower individuals with visual impairments. The itinerary was diverse, beginning with a warm welcome and seminar on the first day, followed by team-building activities, educational sessions, and practical classes focusing on essential skills such as Braille, Cane Travel, Homemaking, and Techniques of Daily Living. The schedule seamlessly blended adventurous

outings, such as the Airboat Tour and Field Trip Adventures, with skill development sessions. Notable events included the Project Independence Yogurt Stand Employment Activity and the Annual Home Chore Challenge, both fostering independence and self-advocacy. The program concluded with a closing seminar that emphasized personal growth and a departure ceremony on July 25th. Project Independence 2024 provided a holistic and enriching experience, fostering a sense of accomplishment and independence among participants as they embarked on their journeys home.

Outreach and Collaboration

During the past year, NCBVI has continued its efforts to strengthen relationships with teachers of the visually impaired (TVIs) and other education providers by reaching out to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to connect with as many youth as possible. NCBVI has also worked to introduce ourselves to schools, reminding staff that we are the VR agency serving blind and visually impaired youth in Nebraska. Additionally, NCBVI has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) to define our roles and outline the Pre-ETS services we can provide to blind and visually impaired youth during their school transition years.

NCBVI continues to collaborate with the Nebraska Center for the Education of Children Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired (NCECBVI), a statewide program and facility for blind, school-aged youth based at ESU (Educational Service Unit) 4. NCBVI participated as a virtual stakeholder in NCECBVI's annual advisory meeting and partnered on various collaborative programming opportunities. NCBVI staff also conduct group training sessions at the NCECBVI facility, designed to help severely disabled students strengthen their social and work skills. These training sessions include interactive role plays, games, and activities that focus on common workplace scenarios and experiences. Topics covered include appropriate workplace behavior, conflict resolution, examining workplace conditions related to each student's career goals, blindness in the workplace, real-world and hypothetical problem-solving scenarios, mock interviews, job interview dos and don'ts, and disclosing blindness as a job seeker. The goal is to provide information that is both relevant and practical for teenagers in the context of finding and maintaining part-time, after-school jobs, a typical entry point into the workforce. Students are encouraged to relate their own school and pre-employment experiences to the activities.

NCBVI staff continue to help plan and present at various ESU Transition Conferences. They also serve on regional committees of special education directors and transition professionals, including the State Transition Advisory Committee and the Nebraska Special Education Advisory Council. Additionally, NCBVI staff present at schools about blindness, including elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels, with a particular focus on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's (UNL) Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) Program. In conclusion, increasing NCBVI's visibility and community awareness remains a priority. NCBVI believes that relationships, partnerships, and programs have fostered growth in professional collaborations, helping blind and visually impaired youth become contributing members of society.

NEBRASKA CENTER FOR THE BLIND

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

NCBVI continues to welcome older blind consumers into the Nebraska Center for the Blind, including the Center's apartments. Nebraskans over the age of 55 who are experiencing vision loss are eligible to attend the Center through the use of state-issued Senior Blind funds. Older blind consumers participating in the Center acquire the necessary independent living skills and resources to remain in their homes. By immersing themselves in comprehensive residential training, blind seniors can avoid moving into assisted living facilities and reduce the pressure on their friends and family. In FFY2024, one senior attended the Center, compared to two in FFY2023, none in FFY2022, and two in FFY2021. The senior who attended this fiscal year later switched to vocational rehabilitation. A second individual in the 55 and older age group attended as a vocational rehabilitation consumer.

The Nebraska Center for the Blind utilizes the "Structured Discovery" approach to training students in the alternative skills of blindness, which is the leading cognitive-based training methodology in the field of blindness rehabilitation. In 2024, the Center celebrated the 50th anniversary of using this training methodology and offering full-time residential training to blind Nebraskans. Center students receive instruction in five primary areas: Orientation and Mobility, Braille, Communication/Access Technology, Home Management, and Wood Shop. These areas are designed to build a foundation of practical daily living skills, highly effective observation and problem-solving abilities, an enhanced understanding of vocational potential, confidence, and a positive sense of self-esteem.

Potential Center students receive initial training in the alternative skills of blindness from NCBVI staff in their home environment. To be eligible for Center training, an individual must meet the eligibility requirements for NCBVI services and be capable of participating in a full-time, comprehensive blindness rehabilitation training program. Consumers interested in participating in Center training complete a tour of the Center. Following the tour, if the consumer remains interested, a Three-Day Stay experience is arranged to help the consumer make an informed decision about attending the full Center training program.

During the Three-Day Stay, consumers are mentored by more experienced Center students and receive training under sleep shades to provide a realistic preview of what Center training will be like. Consumers who choose to attend the Center understand that training involves eight hours a day, five days a week, and lasts an average of six to nine months. There were ten Three-Day Stays in FFY2024, sixteen in FFY2023, six in FFY2022, and thirteen in FFY2021. Sixty

percent of consumers who participated in a Three-Day Stay returned for the full Center training program in FFY2024, compared to fifty-six percent in FFY2023, thirty-three percent in FFY2022, and sixty-two percent in FFY2021. Of the forty percent of consumers in FFY2024 who completed a Three-Day Stay but did not begin Center training, three-fourths have a start date scheduled for the next fiscal year and are actively working with field staff to prepare for entry into the Center.

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

Each week, students receive eight hours of instruction in each of the five primary skill areas previously mentioned. Two hours are set aside each week for a blindness-related seminar, facilitated by either a student or staff member, focusing on issues related to blindness. Additionally, two hours per month are dedicated to a vocational seminar, led by the Center staff or guest presenters. Center students also meet with the Center Supervisor or Client Resource Counselor, as needed, to discuss personal issues, goals, and objectives through counseling and guidance.

A primary objective of Center Training is the development of a positive overall understanding and adjustment to blindness. Participation in blindness-related group seminars focuses on challenging deeply held attitudes and beliefs about blindness and the capabilities of blind individuals. As students gain competence in the alternative skills of blindness, they develop an improved sense of self-confidence and a greater sense of self-efficacy. Graduates of Center Training are prepared to pursue personal, educational, vocational, and independent living goals, ultimately achieving a competitive place in society.

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

participating in workshops and conferences hosted by NCBVI or in partnership with other agencies.

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

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

Over the last eight years, the Nebraska Center for the Blind has served an average of ten students per year, with numbers varying annually due to staff turnover and a significant increase in new staff being trained since 2020. New staff members undergo Center Training for 600 hours—eight hours per day, five days per week—to earn their Certification in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling for the Blind (CVRCB). If the NCBVI staff member has functional vision, they will wear sleep shades during training. This approach to staff training fosters a deeper understanding of blindness, strengthens the belief in the alternative skills of blindness, and enables blind individuals to compete on equal terms with their sighted peers, achieving greater personal independence. Since the start of FFY2021, the Center has provided training to twenty-seven new NCBVI staff members.

The Nebraska Center for the Blind engages in an ongoing program of public education to promote the integration of blind persons into jobs, homes, and the community. The Center invites individuals and groups to tour the facility, which promotes a greater awareness of the capabilities of blind people. There were twenty tours this fiscal year, an increase from eight in FFY2023, three in FFY2022, and two the year prior.

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

TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

NCBVI Technology Services continues to provide innovative support to blind and visually impaired consumers across Nebraska. Building on last year's achievements, the agency continues to work toward ensuring access to advanced technologies and opportunities for all consumers.

By focusing on integrating advancements, we have provided tangible benefits to consumers, enabling improved independence, education, and employment outcomes. Our commitment to serving individuals of all ages, including those with secondary disabilities, highlights the importance of delivering high-quality, adaptable services.

NCBVI Technology Specialists provide quality instruction in access technologies such as:

- Screen access software
- Refreshable Braille displays
- Screen magnification tools
- Note-taking devices

Additionally, training is offered in mainstream technologies such as web browsing, smartphone and tablet usage, and operating systems (Windows and macOS). In 2024, these training services expanded to include advanced skills, such as navigating AI-powered tools and collaborative platforms, ensuring that consumers are well-equipped to meet the evolving demands of the job market.

In collaboration with NCBVI staff, the technology team continues to build capacity within the agency by offering training on basic access technology, which increases efficiency and service quality. For example, staff were trained in troubleshooting updates to agency systems, minimizing disruptions caused by OCIO security updates.

NCBVI staff have collaborated with administrators across Nebraska to support blind and visually impaired students. Significant efforts included:

- Consulting with districts to implement accessible technology for learning.
- Providing follow-up support to ensure functionality and accessibility.
- Enhancing STEM education for blind students through tools like accessible coding platforms and 3D models.
- Expanding work-based learning experiences to foster readiness for postsecondary education and employment.

Younger students benefited from training in using mainstream technologies, such as computers with screen readers, iPads and refreshable Braille displays, ensuring they could actively engage in classrooms equipped with smartboards and digital learning tools.

NCBVI acquired the state-of-the-art Monarch 320-cell Braille display for staff and Pre-ETS

consumers. The Monarch Braille Display, with its innovative multi-line refreshable braille and tactile graphics capabilities, is set to revolutionize how blind students and staff access information. For students, the Monarch enables more efficient engagement with STEM subjects by providing tactile diagrams, charts, and graphs alongside braille text, fostering a deeper understanding and participation in diverse educational activities. For blind staff, the device enhances productivity by allowing access to complex data and documents in a streamlined, tactile format. Its versatility supports seamless collaboration, making it an invaluable tool for academic success and professional achievement.

For adult consumers, Technology Specialists conducted detailed assessments to identify and develop the skills required for job success. This included:

- Accessing academic and workplace materials via platforms like Learning Ally, Bookshare, and the National Library Service.
- Assisting with vocational goals and job placement

Staff also participated in technology conventions hosted by consumer organizations, gaining insight into emerging tools and techniques to better serve Nebraskans with vision loss. Technology staff attended the CSUN 2024 Assistive Technology Conference, which provided opportunities to learn and stay up to date with the latest assistive technologies available to consumers.

Technology staff remained committed to staying informed about emerging trends through memberships in organizations like the National Federation of the Blind Assistive Technology Trainer Division and the Association of Information Technology Professionals. Active participation in national listservs and collaboration with local technology dealers ensured that the team had access to the latest developments.

Technology is evolving rapidly, and NCBVI is prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities ahead. By maintaining a proactive approach, embracing innovation, and strengthening partnerships, NCBVI will continue to empower blind and visually impaired Nebraskans to achieve their goals in education, employment, and beyond.

INDEPENDENT LIVING/OLDER INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE BLIND SERVICES

Independent Living (IL) services are provided to blind and visually impaired individuals with a focus on independent living rather than vocational goals. The IL Program serves consumers under the age of 55, while the Older Independent Blind (OIB) Program serves consumers aged 55 and older. IL/OIB consumers receive training and services that promote greater independence at home and encourage full participation in community life.

During the FFY, 104 IL and 745 OIB consumers received active independent living services. Of the IL consumers, 10 were 55 years of age or older, 55 were between 20 and 54 years of age, and 39 were under 19 years of age.

Blind and visually impaired consumers receive training in the alternative skills needed to pursue IL goals. Instruction typically begins in the home environment, focusing on areas such as cane travel, Braille, and home management. Those needing more intensive instruction often transition to training at the Nebraska Center for the Blind.

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

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

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

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

NCBVI also received a \$15,000 grant from The Enrichment Foundation for FFY 2024 in support of PILBO (Promoting Independent Living for the Blind of Omaha), benefiting blind and visually impaired adults living in Douglas and Sarpy Counties who need access to technology and

services to maintain independence in the home. NCBVI remains dedicated to serving blind and visually impaired Nebraskans of all ages.

NEBRASKA BUSINESS ENTERPRISES

The Nebraska Business Enterprises (NBE) program (referred to as Blind Enterprise Programs (BEPs) nationwide) provides opportunities for legally blind Nebraskans to own, manage, and operate small businesses in the convenience service sector under the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act. Each state's BEP is operated by a designated State Licensing Agency (SLA); in Nebraska, this designation falls to the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI).

Signed into law in 1936 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Randolph-Sheppard Act (20 U.S.C. § 107 et seq.) is a federal law that mandates a priority for blind individuals to operate vending and cafeteria services on federal property. The Act's primary sponsors were Representative Jennings Randolph (D-WV) and Senator Morris Sheppard (D-TX). The law has been amended twice since its original signing—once in 1974 and again in 1982. The 1982 amendment, the Kennelly Amendments to the Surface Transportation Act, authorized the priority for BEP participants to operate vending facilities at interstate rest areas. NBE operates all vending along I-80 in Nebraska.

Nebraska Revised Statute 71-8611 provides the same priority to blind individuals to operate vending/micro market and cafeteria services on state property, with a few exceptions.

Individuals within NBE primarily service vending machines, micro markets, and operate cafeteria services on federal and state property. Several individuals also service private locations, an area in which we are looking to grow. With federal and state office numbers shrinking, expanding in the private sector presents the best opportunity for increased income for vendors. However, there are certain challenges to overcome when competing with other companies for private sector contracts.

Under the rules of the Act, NCBVI holds all contracts and agreements for facilities operated by vendors. NCBVI also provides all the equipment necessary to operate the facility: vending machines, micro market fixtures, self-checkout kiosks, credit card readers on vending machines, restaurant equipment, etc. NCBVI covers all repair costs for this equipment, with a few exceptions. Vendors are also provided with the initial stock of product for new machines or micro market locations. After the initial stock, replacement stock is paid for and provided by the individual vendor. NBE staff also provide ongoing training, assistance in skills development essential for business management, and program oversight.

As the Act is a federal program, NCBVI is required to report detailed information each year to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). Vendors submit monthly profit and loss documentation (P&L) to NBE staff for this report. In addition, these P&L documents are used

to establish the Set-Aside fee that each vendor is assessed each month. Under the Act, SLAs may work with an established Committee of Blind Vendors to create a Set-Aside fund. Each month, vendors pay into the Set-Aside. Set-Aside is a protected budget area that can only be used for five very specific purposes under the Act. Essentially, this money belongs to the vendors and can only be used for areas that enhance the NBE program.

The structure of the Act can be confusing. One simplified way to think about it is that if NCBVI were not a state agency, but a private company, it would operate as a Contractor/Subcontractor relationship, with the subcontractor paying a commission to the owning company. However, in this case, the 'commission' can only be used for specific items/services.

The convenience service industry has continued to see sales improve after the drastic losses during the pandemic. Industry-wide statistics are always a year behind, but reported 2023 numbers indicate that industry revenue surpassed pre-pandemic (2019) levels for the first time. Industry-wide sales numbers are as follows: \$24.20B (2019), \$13.30B (2020), \$19.40B (2021), \$21.70B (2022), and \$26.04B (2023).

For NBE Licensees, FFY 2024 was a very good year and generally followed the recovery trends in the industry shown nationwide. Program-wide gross sales (excluding the cafeteria operated in the USSTRATCOM Building on Offutt AFB) were: \$972,722 (2019), \$899,088 (2020), \$995,386 (2021), \$1,181,446 (2022), and \$1,121,205 (2023). The 2024 numbers for NBE totaled \$1,638,627. The large increase from 2023 to 2024 was due in part to NBE growing the program by adding sites: Lincoln Regional Center, Beatrice State Developmental Center, Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (Hastings and Kearney), two micro markets at Department of Health and Human Services locations, a private business location in Beatrice, among others. The number of state employees returning to work in office mid-year also contributed to additional sales revenue from locations in state buildings.

Interest in the NBE program grew in the last year as well. Five new individuals joined the program and have already started operating vending services. Currently, 17 individuals are part of the NBE program and provide vending/micro market services in 59 different locations. NBE also has 19 locations currently being serviced by subcontractors and is always looking for individuals eligible for the program to take on these sites.

Currently, 2025 looks to be a slower year for program growth than 2024. This will allow NBE staff to focus on vendor development, with a strong emphasis placed on helping those in the program refine and improve their business management practices.

At least one large project is in the works with the USCIS locations in the Lincoln area. Currently, USCIS has two office locations in the Lincoln area. These two locations will be combined into a single location in the fall of 2025. NBE will be working with the vendor assigned to this facility to install a micro market service concept.

The NBE program continues to be a vital part of NCBVI. In addition to providing the opportunity for visually impaired individuals to own and operate their own businesses, it keeps the provision of these services local to small, independent Nebraska businesses. Vendor-run businesses also contributed approximately \$108,570.98 to state and local sales taxes, in addition to the income taxes paid by vendors on their earnings. NCBVI and their NBE staff are committed to growing the program and working with and supporting those who are part of the NBE program to build highly profitable small businesses and provide needed services to their customers.

NFB-NEWSLINE® FOR THE BLIND

NFB-Newsline® was established in Nebraska twenty-five years ago with the help of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska, and it continues to grow. This program is a nationwide audio and braille information system that allows individuals who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind, or are otherwise print-disabled to access local and national newspapers, emergency alerts, job listings, and a variety of other publications and magazines. Currently, there are over 600 print publications available on NFB-Newsline®. Included are four Nebraska-based newspapers, 408 other state newspapers, 14 national papers, 23 international papers, four Spanish publications, 55 breaking news online publications, and 83 magazines, all of which are accessible by touch-tone telephone, computer, Amazon Alexa, digital talking book players, or Apple devices. Also available are local weather alerts, weekly store circulars, TV listings, and job listings. The system enables those who cannot read conventional print to access all content offered on NFB-Newsline® while traveling throughout the United States.

Subscribers using NFB-Newsline® can first choose a paper or magazine, and then select a category within the paper, such as national, state, or local news, sports, area events, and editorial opinions. The first story in that category will be read. The subscriber has the option to skip to the next story or column, and can also spell a word, move forward or backward by paragraphs or sentences, and/or search for a subject throughout the paper by a chosen word. Articles can even be emailed to subscribers with a single keystroke. Listener options also include the ability to adjust the volume, change the voice, slow down or speed up the rate of speech, or change the pitch. Braille readers can connect a braille display to their computer or smartphone to access Newsline without audio, providing fast, on-the-go news anytime, anywhere.

The iOS mobile app and Amazon Alexa skill are the most popular forms of accessing NFB-Newsline® today. NFB-Newsline® recognizes this and is constantly developing new ways to stay up to date with this fast-paced world.

Anyone who cannot read conventional newsprint qualifies for NFB-Newsline®. NFB-Newsline® contributes to a more literate blind population by providing better access to daily

newspapers and magazines, enabling individuals to understand and master the printed word. Because of NFB-Newsline®, blind and low-vision job seekers are better able to compete for available jobs through greater access to local newspapers. Blind and low-vision children are given a limited access subscription that allows them to access age-appropriate materials, affording them the opportunity to conduct their own research and complete their homework independently. Many seniors experiencing vision loss can resume reading local newspapers and stay actively connected with community affairs.

In Nebraska, the number of subscribers continues to grow, with 2,220 users of NFB-Newsline® currently across the state. NFB-Newsline® is available to qualified readers free of charge, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in all 93 counties. NFB-Newsline® makes it possible for hundreds of blind and print-disabled Nebraskans to address the compelling need for information, thus affording them the opportunity to become more independent and productive members of society.

INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES

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

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

The National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN) and the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska (ACBN) are two consumer organizations for the blind in the state. These organizations provide important opportunities for blind people to network with and learn from each other, offering the peer encouragement and support needed for success. Long after the vocational rehabilitation experience is over, these consumer organizations continue to provide that extra support. When a person becomes blind or grows up blind, it is crucial to associate with other blind people to gain a proper understanding of the capabilities of blind

individuals. Through this association with positive blind role models provided by consumer organizations of the blind, people struggling with vision loss can make a more positive overall adjustment to blindness and develop self-confidence.

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

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

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

Lastly, NCBVI is a core partner of WIOA, meaning it is closely linked to the workforce development system, which helps all job seekers achieve their employment goals.