

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Saturday, May 03, 2025, 9:00 a.m.
Hampton Inn & Suites, Board Meeting Room
301 US-26, Scottsbluff, Nebraska

Minutes

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

Brent Heyen, Chairperson of the Board of Commissioners, called the meeting to order at 8:48 a.m. M.T. The meeting began with introductions.

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

Staff present: Carlos Serván, Executive Director; Erin Brandyberry, Deputy Director of Services; Tammie Dunn, Deputy Director of Finance; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist.

Public present: No one from the public was in attendance.

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 List Serve.

Approval of February 8, 2025, Public Meeting Minutes

Commissioner Schonlau moved to approve the Minutes of the February 8, 2025, Commission Meeting as posted on the NCBVI website. Commissioner Livingston seconded the motion.

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

Report from the Commissioners

Brent Heyen – Over the past three months, Brent has demonstrated the capabilities of a blind individual in the workplace through his role at the Fairfield Inn and Suites in Southeast Lincoln. He reported that he frequently works at the front desk, where he remains highly present and accessible.

Brent also shared that he testified at the Appropriations Committee hearing at the State Capitol to advocate for the SSP Program and other funding initiatives for the upcoming year.

Miguel Rocha – Miguel reported that during the past quarter, he attended the NFB At-Large Chapter meetings, the NFB State Convention, and participated in a 3D Museum tour. He also noted that he is currently seeking employment.

Cheryl Livingston – Cheryl reported that she has remained active in the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN). She currently serves as Secretary of the Lincoln Chapter and was elected Treasurer of the Senior Division during the State Convention held at the end of March. Cheryl attended the NFB State Convention in Omaha and noted that she has been attending these conventions since around 1975, having missed only one over the years. She shared that the 2025 NFB State Convention was very successful and well attended, with approximately 140 registrations. Cheryl expressed appreciation to NCBVI for sending clients to the convention so they could experience what the NFBN is all about.

Cheryl also reported that she is a friend of State Senator Margo Juarez, who represents District 5 in Papillion. Senator Juarez has shown interest in learning more about the SSP legislation, LB 87. Cheryl stated that she, or another representative from the NFBN, plans to reach out to the senator to explore the possibility of her sponsoring the bill. Cheryl also mentioned that she will share Senator Juarez's contact information with NCBVI Director Carlos Serván.

Additionally, Cheryl discussed a lawsuit involving 17 states, including Nebraska—**Texas v. Kennedy**. The case challenges the constitutionality of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The NFBN has sent a letter to both the Governor and the Attorney General urging them to withdraw Nebraska from the lawsuit, emphasizing that repealing Section 504 would be highly detrimental to rehabilitation services. Cheryl emphasized the importance of consumers staying informed and engaged regarding this legal challenge.

Linda Mentink - Since our last meeting, Linda has attended one Alumni Association of the Wisconsin School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Board of Directors meeting, of which she is President; two National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN) Senior Division meetings, of which she is Secretary; two NFBN Historians Committee meetings; the NFBN State Convention, and a Friends of the Commission meeting, of which she is Vice President. She also met with a blind music student and her mother in Columbus, which was very enjoyable! She also continues to teach music at Bible Baptist Christian School and to sing in the Church choir.

Friends of the Commission met Tuesday, April 22. The meeting mostly consisted of discussions of finances, assisted by Tammie Dunn, with whom the board's treasurer, Lori Burns, is working very closely. Friends is still in need of up to four members. Current members are: President Robert Newman, Vice President Linda Mentink, Secretary Nancy Flearl, Treasurer Lori Burns, Jan Brandt, and Karen Lemmon.

Patti Schonlau – Patti reported that she has attended all meetings of the Omaha Council of the Blind (OCB), which is affiliated with the American Council of the Blind. She currently serves as President of OCB. Patti is also actively involved in her community through her work with the Lions Club. As a Zone Chair, she travels to six different locations and engages in numerous activities. She frequently works with her guide dog, Luna, who is from The Seeing Eye. Patti shared that these experiences have been both meaningful and enjoyable. She is especially excited about an upcoming opportunity: from June 27–29, Lions International will sponsor her trip to Las Vegas for a membership conference, as she will be taking on a leadership role in membership efforts across Nebraska.

Patti also reported that she virtually attended the NCBVI State Staff Meeting in March. She expressed appreciation for the opportunity to listen in and get acquainted with many members of the NCBVI staff. She particularly enjoyed hearing Director Carlos Serván interact with the team, noting the strong and positive relationship he has with staff members.

In addition, Patti virtually attended the NBE special meeting. She emphasized her interest in continuing to seek out opportunities like this to better understand the inner workings of NCBVI.

9:30 a.m. – Report from the Executive Director

I. Administration

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

Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC)

The Council continued developing strategies to improve special education services across Nebraska. There was also discussion about uncertainty surrounding recent and upcoming changes at the federal level, particularly within the U.S. Department of Education.

NCSAB Monthly Meetings

We finalized the agenda for the spring conference. Other discussions included the anticipated retirement of several senior RSA staff and uncertainty regarding the future placement of RSA within the federal government. During a Zoom meeting with our policy consultant, she provided key updates, including:

- It remains unclear whether the Secretary of Education will move RSA to a different department.
- CSAVR is recommending that RSA be transferred to the Department of Labor while maintaining the RSA Commissioner as a presidential appointee.
- NCSAB's position remains to keep RSA under the Department of Education—unless Congress eliminates the Department altogether.

On May 1, the Trump administration released a skeletal, high-level version of the President's FY 2026 budget. Very little detail was posted on the White House website.

The Department of Education section includes proposals to cut billions of dollars from a variety of programs and eliminate many others. While the budget proposes consolidating multiple IDEA funding streams into one flexible grant, there is no mention of vocational rehabilitation.

Although it is likely that the full budget, when delivered to Congress, will include a recommendation to eliminate the Department of Education, it is notable that the language in this document seems to assume the department will continue to exist and oversee education programs. For example, the budget proposes consolidating certain programs to reduce the number overseen by the department and to decrease the staff required to administer them.

We likely won't know more until next week or later, when more detailed budget documents are released.

I attended the NCSAB Spring Conference in Bethesda, Maryland. Key topics included:

- RSA statistical reporting, which showed that agencies for the blind consistently outperform general agencies.
- An RSA update advising agencies to continue regular operations unless otherwise directed in writing.
- Technology-focused presentations on autonomous vehicles and artificial intelligence for agency use.
- An RSA session on contracting vocational rehabilitation (VR) services with third-party providers.

StarTran Monthly Meetings

Progress continues on the Multi-Modal Center, which was originally approved during President Trump's first term. StarTran also conducted system-wide staff safety training and submitted a design plan to improve 75 of the 805 bus stops. They continue to face challenges related to individuals experiencing homelessness sleeping at bus stops. There is a bus propose rout change.

I met with the Director of Transportation, Elizabeth Elliot, on February 13 to discuss the next steps for having blind vendors operate at the new Multi-Modal Center. She stated that, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation Regional Office, NCBVI does not qualify to manage vending machines at the Multi-Modal Center. However, when I followed up with the Regional Office directly, they clarified that the city or county has discretion in designating vending management, as the city will own the property.

A designee from the Attorney General's Office believes NCBVI does qualify to manage vending services at the new center, provided it receives City Council approval in accordance with state law. A letter was sent to the Mayor of Lincoln on April 15, and we plan to begin approaching City Council members to secure their support.

Olmstead Advisory and Committee Meetings

I participated in the Employment Committee meeting, where we began discussions on new five-year goals. During the Advisory Committee meeting, we also discussed onboarding and training for new members. Each committee presented reports, and it was agreed that all sections will establish new goals for the 2026–2031 period.

State Conventions – ACB and NFB

I attended both the American Council of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind state conventions. At each, I presented on the 25th anniversary of NCBVI, emphasizing our consumer-driven approach and strong partnerships with both organizations. I also shared insights on current federal developments and their potential impact on RSA and our services.

I provided testimony to the Appropriations Committee, advocating for the establishment of a permanent Support Service Provider (SSP) program and requesting increased funding due to recent wage increases for several staff members. Commission Chair Heyen also testified at this hearing.

On February 28, I presented at the statewide Minority Health and Disparities Conference at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. My presentation, titled “Elements of Advocacy,” focused on strategies for educating state legislators and the Governor's Office about the value of our services.

I attended an Independent Agency meeting on March 11. The State Chief Data Officer did a presentation on AI policy in state offices and gave updates on new initiatives. Key presenters were Dr. Matthew McCarville, Nebraska's Chief Information Officer, Noah Finlan, OCIO Deputy Director, and Prabhaker (Vijany) Vijayrangam, State Chief Data Officer.

I also attended an Independent Agency meeting on April 8. Sean Davis from the Department of Administrative Services was the presenter. The primary issue discussed was the upcoming July 1 changes:

- For merit compensation increases, the process will be similar to previous years. Contract changes to NAPE will also take effect.
- There will be a 2.25% market adjustment to wages, in addition to performance-based increases. For this year, NAPE employees who received at least a satisfactory rating on their 2024 performance evaluations will move up one step on the wage chart. In 2026, the merit increase will be 1%.
- The market adjustment is intended to bring Nebraska wages in line with current market rates, making it easier to hire and retain qualified employees.

Additional points:

- Changes to the Classified System Personnel Rules and Regulations will align with the upcoming NAPE contract changes.
- The governor's budget committee has accounted for the financial impact of these wage changes. Agency finances should not be negatively affected.
- A new multilingual pay differential of \$1.75 per hour will begin July 1 for public servants designated as multilingual. Agencies have discretion to determine if a position qualifies.
- Starting in July, public servants will be eligible for 6 weeks of paid maternity leave, concurrent with FMLA. This leave applies only to mothers due to its focus on physical recovery from childbirth.
- Sean reviewed the executive return-to-work order. Agencies will continue quarterly reporting related to in-office work expectations.
- The 90-day vacancy rule was briefly discussed, with the State Budget Office continuing timely reviews of open positions.

We held 3-D and audio art exhibits in five Nebraska museums, accompanied by public service announcements (PSAs) to educate the broader public about the importance of making art accessible to individuals who are blind. During the last week of March, we organized a tour for 55 blind participants from across the state to visit three of these museums. Many participants were deeply moved—some even brought to tears—as they described the profound impact of experiencing accessible exhibits for the first time.

As a result of this innovative initiative, I was honored to be invited to give a presentation on May 8 at the American Alliance of Museums' national conference.

Additional Events and Participation

- I attended the 150th anniversary celebration of the Nebraska Center for the Education of Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired (NCECBVI), alongside Amy Buresh, Shane Buresh, and Charles Anderson.
- Kaytlyn attended the Nebraska Transition Training at Innovation Campus, the Lincoln Circle for Diversity and Inclusion monthly meeting in March, and a training titled "How to Apply for AD and DD Waiver" through ESU 6.
- Hugh Phan, Josh, Mickie Saltsman, and Charles Anderson attended the annual CSUN Conference in March to learn about the latest technology updates.

Business Office

Federal Reports: All required federal reports were submitted on time this quarter. We are pleased to report full compliance with submission deadlines:

- RSA-17: Submitted for Q4 of FFY2024 and the final report for FFY2023.
- SF-425: Final reports for FY2023 and annual reports for FY2024, including the Supported Employment and Older Individuals who are Blind programs.
- RSA-15: Submitted by NBE with Business Office support for expenditures and revenue entry.

The Business Office participated in ongoing meetings concerning both state and federal budget planning. These meetings supported informed decision-making, aligned spending with programmatic priorities, and prepared us for the upcoming fiscal year. NCBVI received the rest of our federal grants for Basic Support and OIB. For Basic Support, we received a cost of living increase for the past fiscal year and for this fiscal year. This amounted to over \$400,000 in total.

The new student lounge at the Nebraska Center for the Blind is complete, and we are currently awaiting delivery of some furniture from Cornhusker Industries. This updated space provides students with a more welcoming and modern environment.

We continue to improve the tracking and management of client supply inventory.

Technology Area

- Obtained new hardware and accessibility licenses for Sania Kellogg.
- Replaced an iPad for Charli Saltzman.
- Ordered new laptops for staff and incoming hires.
- Ordered new PCs for the Center's technology training room.
- Completed the annual renewal of Adobe Pro licenses for staff.

Kathy Stephens

- Completed registration and hotel arrangements for staff and clients attending the ACBN and NFBN State Conventions in March.
- Finalized registrations, flight bookings, and hotel accommodations for staff attending the NCSAB Spring Conference in Bethesda, the CSUN Conference in San Diego, and NRLI Cohort #2 in San Diego.
- Attended an Independent Agency meeting with Carlos Serván on March 11.
- Continued working with staff to ensure state-leased NCBVI vehicles are properly maintained.
- Scheduled Zoom meetings for staff and external partners, including Friends of NCBVI.
- Provided information to auditors, as requested, regarding the agency's leased state vehicles.

II. Human Resources

Staff Updates

- In the North Platte District, Amber Stephens was hired as a VR Counselor and began Center training on April 14.

- Sania Kellogg was hired as a Braille Instructor at the Center and completed Center training on April 30.
- Vanessa Kunz resigned as of April 15. Recruitment for her replacement is underway.
- All areas are now fully staffed, with the exception of the vacancy created by Vanessa Kunz's departure.

Training Opportunities

- Tammie Dunn, Pam Rademacher, and Hugh Phan began their first training with the National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI); their second training session is scheduled for May 5–9.
- Pam completed leadership training through the State of Nebraska.
- The statewide staff meeting was held March 4–6 in Lexington. Mayor John Fagot gave the keynote presentation. Commissioner Livingston presented an award certificate from the Commission Board in recognition of Mayor Fagot's leadership. A former client of NCBVI, he shared his journey of becoming blind and how the agency supported him in becoming Mayor of Lexington.
- Angie attended the OIB-TAC Conference in Arlington, VA.
- Charli continued AI training with Jeff Bishop, following her participation in the ACB AI training.
- Josh Golden participated in the Structured Discovery Professional Education Training series.
- Center staff participated in a five-part virtual training series by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB) focused on working with consumers who have multiple disabilities, including neuropathy, wheelchair use, and deaf-blindness.
- Grace completed a six-week IEP training titled *Inclusive Education Lay Advocacy*, presented by Disability Rights Nebraska.
- Several staff members attended both the ACBN and NFBN conventions in March.
- Tammie Dunn, Cristal Dimas, Pam Rademacher, and Tim Jefferson attended the Spring NCSAB National Conference in Bethesda, Maryland.
- Candice Dollar attended a full-day training course focused on the Perkins CVI Protocol and best practices in supporting individuals with Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI).
- Craig Kneifl attended a virtual Stargardt's conference in February to gain deeper insight into this eye condition.
- Candice Dollar also participated in additional CVI Protocol training at NCECBVI in February 2025, following the last Commissioners' meeting.

III. Field Services

Winnerfest was held April 10–12, with a focus on music. The event featured blind professionals from the national music industry who served as role models and shared their career experiences with participants.

Cane Walk-In was held on April 22 in Lincoln, in partnership with Mary Noel Chamberlain, a vision teacher from Omaha and part of the ESU. The event focused on introducing students and Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) to the benefits of using sleepshades. A total of 26 volunteers, 11 students, and 6 parents participated.

The Lincoln District continues to run the GATES program, which remains well-attended and effective.

Field staff across the state continue to build and strengthen strategic partnerships with stakeholders. These collaborative relationships help the agency stay attuned to the evolving needs of businesses, educators of blind students, and the broader community. Simultaneously, these stakeholders develop a deeper understanding of our mission and the capabilities of our clients, fostering new opportunities for training, employment, and service enhancements.

Lincoln District:

- Presented at Madison House in Norfolk.
- Delivered a presentation about NCBVI services to staff and residents at Country House in Lincoln.
- Presented to Kinship Point residents and staff in Seward, Nebraska.
- Participated twice in the EmployLNK Steering Team.
- Began a Milestones agreement with Wahoo APACE.
- Attended the Independence Academy and Project SEARCH Informational Meeting Night.
- Collaborated with Nebraska VR and Disability Rights Nebraska to improve the presentation of transition materials for PRE-ETS.
- Hosted an information table at LPS Transition Night.
- Attended the March EmployLNK Monthly Meeting.
- Assisted with the Project SEARCH Interview and Skills Night.
- Hosted a table at the ESU 6 Community Agency Fair in Milford.
- Attended the Growing Community Connections event in South Sioux City.
- Participated in the Spanish Networking Group Meeting in Fremont, NE.
- Attended a Food Security meeting hosted by United Way in Columbus, NE.
- Participated in the Norfolk Family Coalition in Norfolk, NE.
- Attended a STEM meeting at CHS in Columbus, NE.
- Met with the Disability Office and Career Center at Wayne State College.
- Attended the Multimodal Transportation Action Plan session in Norfolk, NE.
- Attended The WELL Open House in Columbus, NE.
- Participated in the Early Childhood Spectacular at NPS Family Night.
- Met with Alvin W. Parker at Winnebago Tribe VR Services.
- Consulted with the Nebraska District Court to explore ways to enhance the accessibility of their documentation system for clients.
- Met with the Lincoln Public Schools TVI team to strengthen collaboration and increase awareness of our services.
- Visited the Lincoln AJC to review accessibility settings on a public computer used by clients in preparation for an upcoming visit.

Omaha District:

- Career Navigators from Dynamic visited the State office building and assisted 10 NCBVI clients in applying for their program.
- Continued collaboration with North Point Treatment Center to create an On-the-Job Training (OJT) opportunity for one of NCBVI's clients. North Point has also requested another Disability Awareness training for its staff in July 2025.
- Partnering with Omaha Metro Transportation to create an OJT for a client, an opportunity that arose from a previous networking event in 2024 with Metro and NCBVI.
- Attended a Family and Child Enhancement Program (FCEP) event hosted by the Munroe-Meyer Institute.
- Participated in a wellness fair hosted by the Omaha Housing Authority.

- Engaged in networking efforts with the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce to strengthen NCBVI's presence within the Omaha business community.
- Collaborated with Dynamic Workforce to increase job opportunities and OJTs for both adult and pre-ETS clients.
- The district supervisor met with Pam Peterson, the STEM Director at Metro Community College's Community and Workforce Education program, to initiate a program that provides credentials leading to job opportunities for NCBVI clients.
- Participated in a collaborative project to develop a communication and employment plan for youth with complex needs.
- Delivered a presentation at the Munroe-Meyer Institute in April.
- Participated in the CVI Workshop at Westside High School in April.

North Platte District:

- Attended Employ GI and participated in Project SEARCH in both Grand Island and Kearney.
- Served as a panelist for the University of Nebraska-Kearney's Disabilities in the Workplace panel.
- Connected with Hy-Vee regarding potential employment opportunities.
- Established connections with the following schools: Grand Island Central Catholic, Central Valley High School, Lexington, Alma, Gothenburg, Kearney, and Wood River Middle School.
- Attended IEP meetings in Gibbon and Kearney.
- Delivered a presentation to Excel Development Group in Alliance, which manages senior housing. Several visually impaired residents attended.
- Connected with Snell's Services and KLM Enterprises to explore potential OJT opportunities.
- Met with Family Fresh and Goodwill employers to discuss employment options.
- Engaged with the Department of Labor office in Grand Island and was invited to participate in their monthly EmployGI employer networking meeting.
- Connected with schools in Overton and Lexington.
- Collaborated with an employer to explore the use of Meta glasses as an assistive tool for clients.
- The planning committee for Silver Summit has developed the registration process, contacted speakers, identified ambassadors/volunteers, coordinated hotel arrangements, and begun outlining session topics.
- Hosted a Teams meeting for staff to review the Silver Summit registration process and discuss new practices.
- Angie initiated the first OIB counselors Teams meeting, which will occur quarterly to facilitate case discussions, training, and support.
- Working with OIB consumers to create visually impaired support groups.

Client Statistics:

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

- OIB (Older Individuals who are Blind) clients: 552
- IL (Independent Living) clients under 55: 79
- VR (Vocational Rehabilitation) clients: 446

Consumers Who Closed Successfully in Various Occupations:

- Business Operations Specialist

- Childcare Worker (2)
- Computer Occupations/Other
- Customer Service Representative (3)
- Fabric and Apparel Patternmaker
- Farmer/Rancher
- Fashion Designer
- Fitness Instructor/Trainer (2)
- Janitor/Cleaner
- Management Analyst
- Market Research Analyst
- Nursing Assistant
- Randolph Sheppard Operator
- Receptionist/Information Clerk
- Registered Nurse
- Teacher/Instructor - Secondary Education

III. Training Center

We currently have eleven individuals attending training: four VR consumers, three Pre-ETS consumers, two OIB consumers, and two staff trainees. We plan to graduate at least three students during the next quarter.

This quarter, we hosted one consumer tour, accompanied by their TVI/O&M. Additionally, there were three three-day stays. Tours were also provided to reporters from Nebraska Public Media, staff from the Lincoln-Lancaster County Department of Health, and approximately 35 individuals from Golden Plains Christian School in Madrid, NE. This group consisted of 7th and 8th grade students, along with some of their teachers and parents.

Throughout the quarter, we continued offering various services, including drops, mini meals, commencement meals, techniques of daily living, weekly seminars, and monthly vocational seminars. Activities this quarter included attending a hearing at the Capitol regarding the Support Service Provider (SSP) program, a four-hour workshop on artificial intelligence, and participation in both the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska state convention and the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska state convention. Additionally, students visited three museums and took a trip to the Homestead National Historic Park. For the Home Management class, students also participated in grilling activities.

The Center also hosted the second annual Nebraska Cane Walk, attended by children, their parents, and TVIs from across the state. Volunteers from each NCBVI district provided support during the event.

Jeff Altman has returned to work after a couple of months off. He has announced that he will retire after 30 years with NCBVI, with his last day being June 30. Sarah did an excellent job teaching Travel in Jeff's absence and will continue as the lead instructor, with Jeff providing mentorship and support for the remainder of his tenure with NCBVI.

V. Nebraska Business Enterprise

Vending Site Update

- Offutt AFB: Deterrence Diner / Micro Market: NBE continues to work with USSTRATCOM on the upgrade and remodel of the cafeteria area. Once completed, the area will feature both a hot and cold food bar.
- USCIS – Lincoln: The project to consolidate two existing USCIS facilities in Lincoln into one location has been delayed. Originally scheduled for completion in February/March 2025, the projected occupancy date is now Fall 2025. NBE currently services both existing USCIS facilities and is coordinating with GSA on the new location.

NBE currently has 16 individuals actively servicing routes. One individual is in training, and several others have expressed interest in the program.

NBE is currently working on renewing our contract for vending at the NSOB.

Vending Site Complaints: NBE has received several complaints over the past quarter regarding understocked vending machines and micro markets. NBE staff continues to work with vendors to identify the causes of these service issues and to develop support plans that will help vendors manage their sites more effectively.

Commissioner Heyen asked Director Serván to report on NCBVI's budget appropriation. Director Serván began by noting that NCBVI Deputy Director of Finance, Tammie Dunn, sent an email on May 1 regarding the federal budget. In this message, Tammie shared positive news for NCBVI's budget for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2025. As of April 21, 2025, NCBVI is no longer operating under a continuing resolution and has received full funding for its Independent Living Services for Older Individuals (OIB) and Basic Support grants—both exceeding anticipated amounts.

In addition, a significant development has positively impacted Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) appropriations. In an unusual calculation, the FFY 2025 VR base includes both the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) for FY 2025 and the previously omitted FY 2024 COLA. This adjustment results in a substantial increase of \$422,714 for the VR Basic Support grant for the remainder of FFY 2025, further strengthening NCBVI's financial position across all programs.

Looking ahead to the State Fiscal Year, which begins July 1, 2025, NCBVI plans to strategically leverage its current federal funding surplus by utilizing general funds for both Independent Living and OIB programs. This approach ensures sustainability and maximizes resources for client services. NCBVI remains in a strong financial position and is well-equipped to support its mission throughout the fiscal year.

Director Serván also reported that the Appropriations Committee's recommendation to the legislative floor is not final, as the Governor has the authority to issue a veto. The committee's recommendation reflects NCBVI's request to receive additional budget allocations to support staff wage increases—an amount totaling approximately \$270,000. However, no increases were included for the SSP Program.

Commissioner Heyen asked whether NCBVI could use any of the additional funding to support the SSP Program. Director Serván confirmed that NCBVI will allocate some of the surplus to maintain

the SSP Pilot Program and expand the number of hours available to serve individuals who are deafblind in the Omaha area. He noted, however, that expansion beyond Omaha is not currently planned due to sustainability concerns. Director Serván stated that he intends to pursue additional funding for the SSP Program again next year.

Commissioner Rocha asked whether NCBVI has any partnerships in place to support SSP funding. Director Serván responded that Friends of the Commission is contributing funds, noting that last year Friends provided \$10,000 to NCBVI.

Commissioner Schonlau inquired about the level of vision and hearing loss required for someone who is deafblind to qualify for SSP services. Director Serván explained that the individual must have a *profound* visual and hearing impairment. Deputy Director of Services, Erin Brandyberry, added that, since this is a *pilot program*, the agency intentionally avoided placing strict eligibility criteria in order to better assess the actual need for services. She noted that if the SSP Program is expanded statewide, eligibility guidelines may need to be evaluated.

Commissioner Mentink commented that she is the only member of the Friends of the Commission on the Board who is not involved in the grant writing process. However, she believes the SSP Program is one of the driving reasons the group is seeking additional grant funding.

Director Serván concluded by emphasizing that while the Executive Director's Report reflects positively on his leadership, it is truly an agency-wide effort. He expressed appreciation to Tammie Dunn and Erin Brandyberry for their help in guiding the agency, and thanked Kathy Stephens for keeping him on his toes when details are overlooked.

Public Comment

Commissioner Livingston announced that during the NFBN State Convention, the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN) presented the Richard Parker Memorial Award—an honor they occasionally bestow. This award, named after the first president of the NFB of Nebraska, recognizes individuals who have demonstrated outstanding contributions to the Federation. This year, the award was presented to Jeff Altman in recognition of both his dedicated service to the Federation and his exceptional work as a travel instructor at the Center. Commissioner Livingston noted that the award had not been given since 2014.

Newsline® Update - Jamie K. Richey

As Nebraska shakes off the chill of winter and early blossoms dot the landscape, our NFB-Newsline program is in full bloom as well. Just like honeybees buzzing from flower to flower, our subscribers are actively engaging with the service in exciting and meaningful ways. With new voices, new features, and strong usage across the board, this quarter has been one of fresh growth and renewed energy.

NFB-Newsline remains a trusted source of accessible information for blind and print-disabled Nebraskans. Whether accessed by telephone, smartphone, tablet, or computer, this service empowers users to stay connected to local and national news, emergency alerts, magazines, and more — all from the comfort of home.

This quarterly report covers usage statistics from January through March 2025.

January 2025

- 2,171 subscribers, including 4 new additions.
- Total call minutes: 10,927.
- Online accesses: 5,772.
- Content accesses: 5,363 (average frequency: 8.32 minutes).
- 646 telephone calls (average: 16.92 minutes, 48.94% local).
- Online usage: 2,170 web sessions, 565 mobile sessions, 2,567 In Your Pocket deliveries, 470 email deliveries.
- Content: 3,351 Nebraska Newspapers, 36 local channels, 116 weather and emergency alerts, 612 national newspapers, 217 international newspapers, 231 breaking news articles, 46 magazines, 256 TV listings.

February 2025

- 2,172 subscribers, with 2 new users.
- Total call minutes: 9,998.
- Online accesses: 10,093.
- Content accesses: 6,445 (average frequency: 6.26 minutes).
- 636 telephone calls (average: 15.72 minutes, 40.86% local).
- Online usage: 5,248 web sessions, 565 mobile sessions, 3,858 In Your Pocket deliveries, 422 email deliveries.
- Content: 3,901 Nebraska Newspapers, 21 local channels, 106 weather alerts, 576 national newspapers, 208 international newspapers, 623 breaking news stories, 80 magazines, 329 TV listings.

March 2025

- 2,172 subscribers, no new additions.
- Total call minutes: 9,520.
- Online accesses: 13,689.
- Content accesses: 8,061 (average frequency: 5.54 minutes).
- 653 telephone calls (average: 14.58 minutes, 32.82% local).
- Online usage: 7,188 web sessions, 679 mobile sessions, 5,360 In Your Pocket deliveries, 462 email deliveries.
- Content: 4,224 Nebraska Newspapers, 17 local channels, 135 weather alerts, 637 national newspapers, 291 international newspapers, 886 breaking news articles, 82 magazines, 344 TV listings.

This spring, the NFB-Newsline team has been hard at work pollinating the service with exciting improvements. After a period of downtime in March, The Wall Street Journal and Barron's have returned with updated formatting. Some sections, such as editorials, have now been merged with the opinion category, providing a more streamlined reading experience. Other business publications remain available, giving users plenty of options to explore.

In addition to content updates, we are abuzz with development activity! Subscribers can now enjoy a fresh bouquet of new voices on the Amazon Alexa skill. Beloved voices Kate and Paul have returned, and they're joined by two bright newcomers — Sophie and Mark — adding clarity and charm to every article and announcement.

And that's not all. Testing is underway for a revamped touch-tone phone system featuring these same high-quality voices. Volunteers are being invited to help shape the future of NFB-Newsline phone access. At the same time, Android users have a chance to participate in early testing of the brand-new Android app — an exciting expansion of the service that complements the long-standing availability of the iPhone version.

Like springtime rains that nourish the earth, these innovations are feeding growth and making NFB-Newsline stronger and more vibrant than ever.

As always, thank you for your continued support. If you have any questions or feedback, I'd love to hear from you. Until next time, may your days be filled with sunshine, blossoms, and the sweet hum of possibility.

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or issues

There were no CAP complaints or issues this past quarter.

New Business

Discuss and act on the approval of The Executive Directors time certification.

Commissioner Livingston moved to continue with the current method being used for the Director to submit his Personnel Activity Report to the Board of Commissioners. The Director submits his Personnel Activity Report via email to the entire Board for their review. It is an automatic approval unless a question or concern is raised by a Commission Board member. This is the procedure that was recommended by State Personnel.

Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Discuss and act on the approval of employee in-state and out-of-state travel
staff for out-of-state travel.

Supervisors manage in-state travel by getting itineraries from staff and reviewing them on an on-going basis. However, staff is not required to check with their supervisor every morning to get an okay for in-state travel as this would not be manageable. Discussion was held with Administrative Services to determine how the agency could comply with the law regarding in-state travel. Administrative Services recommended that each year the Board of Commissioners would have a motion to pre-approve travel that is related to the purpose of the staff person's position.

Commissioner Mentink moved that the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired Board of Commissioners approve all employee in-state business travel and/or out-of-state business travel within 60 miles of the border of Nebraska in any adjoining state, which relates directly to the provision of services to a client, i.e. employer visit, medical appointment, service referral, employment interview, etc. All other out-of-state business travel is approved if granted

approval by the Executive Director of the agency. This motion is in effect until the next meeting of the Board of Commissioners after April 1, 2026.

Commissioner Rocha seconded the motion.

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

Nayes:

Motion Carried

Vote to enter Executive Session

Executive Session to conduct the Executive Director Annual Evaluation

Commissioner Livingston moved to go into Executive Session at 9:49 a.m. to conduct the annual evaluation of the Executive Director.

Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Nayes:

Motion Carried

(Ref. Open Meeting Act; 84-1410. Closed session; (d) Evaluation of the job performance of a person when necessary to prevent needless injury to the reputation of a person and if such person has not requested a public meeting.)

Vote to leave Executive Session

Commissioner Livingston moved to come out of Executive Session at 11:24 a.m.

Commissioner Rocha seconded the motion.

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

Nayes:

Motion Carried

Act on the retention of the Executive Director and his Salary

Commissioner Livingston moved to retain Carlos Serván as the Executive Director of NCBVI.

Commissioner Schonlau seconded the motion.

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

Nayes:

Motion Carried

Commissioner Schonlau moved to give the Executive Director a 12% increase effective May 5, 2025.

Commissioner Livingston seconded the motion.

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

Nayes:
Motion Carried

Final Announcements

The next meeting of the NCBVI Board of Commissioners will be on Friday, August 1, 2025, in Lincoln at a hotel in conjunction with the WAGES banquet. The Focus Topic will be Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS).

Commissioner Rocha requested NCBVI support to attend the NFB National Convention in New Orleans.

Commissioner Livingston moved to support Commissioner Rocha's request to attend the NFB National Convention. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Chair Heyen noted that he will be unavailable to attend the August 1, 2025 Commission meeting and asked the other commissioners whether they would prefer to reschedule. After discussion, the commissioners agreed to keep the meeting date as scheduled.

Director Serván thanked the Commission Board for their confidence in him to serve as Executive Director for NCBVI.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist

Brent Heyen, Commission Chair