

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Saturday, May 09, 2026, 9:30 a.m.
Lexington Public Library, Benthank Maragritz Meeting Room, 907 N Washington Street,
Lexington, 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 9:31 a.m. Central time. 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; Linda Mentink, Executive Secretary, Columbus; Miguel Rocha, Bellevue.

Commissioners absent: Patti Schonlau, Designee of the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska, Bellevue. Patti was absent due to personal reasons.

Staff present: Carlos Serván, Executive Director; Erin Brandyberry, Deputy Director of Services; Tammie Dunn, Deputy Director of Finance; Cristal Dimas, North Platte District Supervisor; Jason Baker, VR Counselor; Kimberly Scherbarth, VR Counselor; Amber Stephens, VR Counselor; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist.

Public present: Jamie Richey, President of NFB of Nebraska; Ashley Pano, parent of consumer; Austin Pano, consumer; and Lilian Velasquez-Lopez, consumer.

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 the February 7, 2026, public meeting minutes.

Commissioner Livingston moved to approve the Minutes of the February 7, 2026, Commission Meeting as posted on the NCBVI website. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Report from the Commissioners

Brent Heyen -

Commissioner Heyen reported a highly productive quarter, announcing that on March 1st, he was officially promoted to General Manager of the Country Inn & Suites on North 27th Street in Lincoln. He offered an apology to his fellow commissioners regarding the delay of a requested one-page report following his attendance at the state ACB convention, stating he would submit the document shortly. Commissioner Heyen shared that the convention was a very educational experience.

Having attended several NFB conventions in the past, he noted it was insightful to engage with the ACB and observed that the relationship between the two organizations has evolved positively, with a shared willingness to work toward common goals.

Furthermore, Commissioner Heyen recently returned from a Choice Hotels International conference in Las Vegas. He reported that he represented the blind community, noting that he did not observe any other attendees with visible indicators of blindness, such as a white cane. Commissioner Heyen participated in sessions regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). He was able to provide a unique perspective to industry members who rarely hear directly from individuals with blindness or low vision, and his contributions were well received. Commissioner Heyen concluded by stating that the experience was invaluable to his professional development as a new General Manager.

Commissioner Heyen shared that at the conference in Las Vegas, attendees participated in a beach-themed social event. During the event, he spoke with an exhibitor in the marketplace who is legally blind and has a son who is blind in one eye. The exhibitor discussed her family's plans to relocate due to personal circumstances. Commissioner Heyen encouraged her to consider Nebraska because of the state's strong services for individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

Commissioner Heyen noted that the conversation provided an opportunity to advocate for services for blind and visually impaired individuals. He described the interaction as a positive experience.

Miguel Rocha -

Commissioner Rocha provided an update on his work as the blind operator at the USSTRATCOM Cafeteria. He informed the board that the facility is currently undergoing significant renovations, and the first phase of construction has recently opened to the public. He highlighted the introduction of a new pizza option and noted that fresh food deliveries and sushi remain popular with guests. Commissioner Rocha expressed that the project is progressing well and he looks forward to the completion of future construction phases.

Cheryl Livingston -

Commissioner Livingston, reporting as the designee of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska, shared that the state convention held in Kearney was a great success with over 100 registered attendees, including members, staff, and clients of the Commission. She expressed gratitude for the Commission's support for the event. Serving as state treasurer, Commissioner Livingston noted she was heavily involved in the convention's logistics.

She detailed several key presentations, including a keynote by Anil Lewis, Director of Strategic Initiatives for the NFB, who spoke on his personal history and journey as a Federationist. Peggy Chong, known as the "Blind History Lady," presented research on blind Nebraskans who have made significant contributions to the state. Additionally, Aaron Golub, a motivational speaker and the first legally blind athlete to play division one college football, presented via Zoom regarding his experiences working with coaches to compete in the sport. Commissioner Livingston also reported interest in forming a state guide dog division and a parents' group for blind parents and parents of blind children.

Regarding advocacy, Commissioner Livingston reported that several resolutions were passed. One resolution addressed a situation where Lincoln Animal Control gave inaccessible instructions to a low-vision resident regarding a pest issue; the resolution encourages the city to work more

closely with the blind community on realistic expectations. A second resolution advocated for the inclusion of blind individuals in the Homestead Exemption Act. Commissioner Livingston noted a third resolution was passed but would provide details once the final minutes were reviewed. She concluded by stating she continues her work as state treasurer and Lincoln chapter secretary, with the next chapter meeting scheduled for the following weekend.

Linda Mentink –

Since our last meeting, Commissioner Mentink has attended NFBN Board of Directors and Senior Division meetings as Secretary, NFBN Historians and Constitution Committee meetings, and the NFBN State Convention. She continues to work with a committee for the Faith Inclusion Network to create a multi-faith toolkit for clergy and congregations to help them know how to include blind/low vision people in their ministries. She also continues to be a positive blind role model to those with whom she interacts and with the music students she teaches at Bible Baptist Christian School. Speaking of Bible Baptist Christian School, she worked a little with the third graders on Braille, giving each a slate and stylus and a Braille alphabet card. Three out of the six wrote her a little note, to which she responded in Braille.

Friends of NCBVI held its 2026 second quarterly meeting this past Tuesday. They are still working on getting grants. Lori Burns will be writing their Board Member job descriptions and rewriting their Bylaws to comply with the required standards for a supportive organization such as theirs. They are still looking for three people to serve on the board.

Report from the Executive Director

I. Administration

Meetings and Activities:

National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) Monthly Meetings: Uncertainty regarding where RSA will ultimately be housed remains. We understand that the Interagency Agreement (IAA) is close to being finalized; however, no official information has been provided regarding RSA's future placement. For more than a year, discussions have centered on whether RSA would move to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the U.S. Department of Labor. At this point, K-12 programs have already been moved to the Department of Labor. There were also discussions about moving the Office of Special Education to DHHS, but the National Association of Administrators of Special Education strongly urged the U.S. Department of Education to keep Special Education aligned with K-12 programs. After learning this, directors of vocational rehabilitation agencies urged the Department of Education to keep RSA wherever the Office of Special Education is ultimately placed. As of today, there has been no further update on this issue.

The NCSAB Spring Conference was held April 1-3 in Washington, D.C. During the conference, RSA provided data updates but did not comment on the possibility of moving to another federal department. One point emphasized by RSA was that agencies for the blind continue to outperform combined agencies in employment outcomes. Additional training topics included AI for consumers and agencies, STEM initiatives for Pre-ETS, Older Individuals Who Are Blind (OIB) services, technology, Randolph-Sheppard updates, and presentations from the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, among others. Special emphasis was placed on the

recent waiver granted to the U.S. Army by the U.S. Department of Education, allowing the Army not to apply the Randolph-Sheppard priority.

We also learned that during the last week of April, the State of California filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Education challenging the waiver issued to the U.S. Army.

Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC): Discussions focused on student behavioral issues, early intervention services, and legislative updates on Nebraska bills that could affect special education. An update on the status of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education was provided. Several programs have already been transferred to other federal entities through six Interagency Agreements now in effect. In addition, a dozen administrative grants have been reassigned, and some K–12 programs have reportedly been moved to the U.S. Department of Labor. In certain cases, there is currently no assigned staff to process or release funds, creating challenges for schools.

The original proposal was to move Special Education programs to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and RSA programs to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). Special Education directors across the country continue advocating for Special Education to remain aligned with K–12 education programs.

Nebraska continues to face significant disproportional concerns, particularly in rural areas. As a result, the state is expected to receive approximately \$300,000 less in FY 2026 funding. Additionally, both nationally and within Nebraska, there has been an increase in due process complaints related to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

At the April meeting, much of the discussion focused on recent federal findings indicating that Nebraska has historically and consistently been out of compliance in using Title C funds to pay for certain Title B services. This is despite the fact that the federal government had previously approved these payment methods and plans for many years. Nebraska Special Education officials are consulting with the Governor's Office and plan to appeal the findings.

StarTran: At the February meeting, students from the Center advocated for improved transit services, specifically requesting that the downtown trolley stop when blind pedestrians are waiting at designated stops. As a result of this advocacy, the issue was addressed and resolved by the March meeting.

It was also reported that artificial intelligence is now being used for Para-Transit scheduling, resulting in faster and more efficient service. Additional updates included improvements to rider safety, staffing levels for drivers, and several route adjustments.

At the April meeting, they addressed several operational concerns. In response to complaints from bus riders, they discussed delays in bus routes, noting that schedule frequency sometimes changes due to bus maintenance. They are exploring ways to better notify riders when schedule changes occur.

They also provided updates on safety initiatives. Construction of the new multimodal transportation center is scheduled to begin in July, and progress was reported on improvements to eighteen bus stops. In addition, StarTran announced that it is now fully staffed with drivers and shared information from its triennial review.

Finally, it was reported that the branding for Para-Transit vans will match that of the regular buses. During the annual safety inspection, reviews noted significant improvement compared to last year.

Olmstead Advisory Committee: Reports from committees were provided, including discussions on the need for greater engagement. Strategies for achieving the plan's goals were discussed. In addition, LB 737 passed, requiring annual progress reports instead of reports every five years. The council also discussed the possibility of amending the advisory board bylaws. Finally, members listened to a presentation regarding supported employment best practices based on research and evidence-based models.

WIOA Board: The Board discussed the Combined State Plan and emphasized that all partner agencies must complete their respective sections by the June deadline. The Board also discussed and voted to advance recommendations to the Secretary of Labor for grant awards to fourteen Nebraska nonprofit organizations.

Boards and Commissions: In March, we received a presentation from Scott Danigole with the Accountability and Disclosure Commission, who provided an update and refresher on conflicts of interest, regulations regarding political activity by state employees, and lobbying and registration laws.

In April, we received a presentation from the Nebraska Attorney General, Mike Hilgers, regarding the services the office provides to state agencies, emphasizing its role in representing and protecting the interests of the State of Nebraska.

Other Activities: In February, I testified before the Appropriations Committee to advocate for maintaining our full budget level, including the Katherine B. Robinson fund for blind children. By the end of the Legislative Session, the Unicameral voted to preserve our full funding. As a result, we will be able to continue supporting the Support Service Provider (SSP) project in Omaha.

On February 17–19, I attended the advisory board meeting for the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision as a board member representing the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind. Other board members represented organizations such as the American Council of the Blind, National Federation of the Blind, American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller National Center, Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired, and the American Printing House for the Blind. During the meeting, we reviewed the seven grants currently managed by the Mississippi State University NRTC.

On March 16, I toured the cafeteria facility at Camp Ashland alongside our teaming partner, Jessica Beecham, and Blackstone Inc.

On March 20, I participated in a podcast interview with the Lincoln Commission on Human Rights, where I discussed the full range of services provided by NCBVI.

On April 21, I delivered the keynote address at a citizenship ceremony held at Homestead National Historical Park. A federal judge was present, along with staff representatives from Deb Fischer, Pete Ricketts, and Adrian Smith.

We also successfully completed and submitted, following negotiations with RSA, our section of the Combined State Plan as required under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

I gave a presentation regarding our services during the second weekend of April at the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska and during the first weekend of May at the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska state conventions.

Business Office Highlights – Tammie Dunn

Over the past three months, the Business Office has maintained a strong focus on financial oversight, compliance, and operational support to ensure alignment with state and federal requirements. Key activities have included enhanced budget monitoring and forecasting to manage increased federal drawdowns, continued oversight of accounts payable, accounts receivable, and payroll certification processes, and the preparation of internal and external financial reporting. The Business Office has also strengthened procurement and contract review procedures to promote compliance with applicable statutes and regulations, while working collaboratively with program areas to improve the timeliness, accuracy, and completeness of supporting documentation.

From a financial standpoint, the agency remains in a stable position with consistent utilization trends. The Vocational Rehabilitation Basic Support Grant totals approximately \$4.2 million, with \$2.1 million remaining, and is on pace for full utilization within the federal grant period. Pre-Employment Transition Services funding totals approximately \$0.6 million, with \$0.2 million remaining, while Supported Employment funding of approximately \$0.03 million is nearing full expenditure. The Older Individuals who are Blind program totals approximately \$0.2 million, with \$0.1 million remaining. General Fund appropriations total approximately \$3.2 million, with \$1.4 million remaining, supporting payroll, match requirements, and operational expenditures. Trust funds, including PILBO, remain largely available through the end of the calendar year.

The Business Office is currently supporting an ongoing attestation (in-depth state audit) covering the period of January 1 through December 31, 2025. The scope of this engagement includes a review of client expenditures, financial and administrative processes such as payroll and personnel documentation, procurement and contracting activities, accounts payable and receivable functions, fixed asset management and surplus processes, vehicle usage documentation, program income and reconciliation practices, and the overall internal control structure. The engagement also evaluates the completeness and consistency of supporting documentation and adherence to established policies and regulatory requirements.

In support of this engagement, the Business Office has coordinated the collection and submission of documentation across all requested areas.

Technology Highlights – Charles Anderson

We are modernizing our assistive technology inventory, streamlining internal policies for new AI tools, and optimizing our software licensing strategies. Key achievements include the successful deployment and training of AI Pocket notetakers, the implementation of a new resource research platform, and financial exploration of our consumer software licensing models.

- **Presentations Given & Internal Training:**
 - **Increasing Accessibility in the Workplace (Office Professional Conference):** Co-presented with Nancy Coffman at the Office Professional Conference sponsored by

Southeast Community College in Lincoln, NE. The presentation focused on strategies and tools for enhancing workplace accessibility.

- **Pocket AI Notetakers Training (March 18, 2026):** Conducted a dedicated training session during the State Staff Meeting. This presentation covered the operational basics of the newly procured Pocket AI recorders and navigational techniques, and directed staff to the HeyPocket help site for ongoing support and video tutorials.
- **Projects Completed & Progressed:**
 - Completed the implementation of the Knowledge Interpreter platform from Outlook Insight. This system is now fully operational and ready to facilitate staff onboarding beginning in May.
 - **AI Notetaker Policy (Completed):** Developed, finalized, and distributed the Workplace Policy for the Use of AI Notetakers. This policy ensures that the agency's new AI recording devices are used securely and in compliance with state workplace standards.
 - Began the process of auditing the agency's website in conjunction with Ablr to ensure compliance with Title II accessibility requirements.
 - Participated as an active Pioneer/Beta Tester for EchoVision AI glasses (Agiga). Tested new companion app releases (Android v1.3.5 & iOS v1.0.5) and evaluated the "Brief" vs "Verbose" reading mode verbosity to determine the product's viability for our blind and visually impaired consumers.
- **Purchases Completed & Explored:**
 - Initiated a review of our consumer software licensing strategy with Vispero (JAWS, ZoomText, Fusion). We analyzed our 2025 purchasing data to evaluate moving from standalone licenses to Vispero's new VR Portal. This exploration aims to uncover significant cost savings and improve license management for the agency.
 - Completed an initial meeting with Outlook Insight along with Josh Golden and Lizzie Heidenreich to view their new data platform for the NBE program.
 - Finalized the procurement and receipt of pocket audio recording devices for state staff, immediately followed by the internal deployment and training pipeline.
- **Industry Engagement:**
 - Remained actively engaged with industry leaders, notably evaluating upcoming Assistive Technology (AT) hardware releases (EchoVision) and reviewing newly published resources for the visually impaired community.
 - Attended the Spring Assistive Technology Partnership of Nebraska (ATP) Advisory Council Meeting, serving as the official representative for NCBVI.

Kathy Stephens

- Completed registration and hotel reservations for staff and consumers to attend the ACBN and NFBN State Conventions in Omaha and Kearney. Also made arrangements for the Spring NCSAB in D.C. and the CSUN conference in California.
- Attended an Independent Agency meeting with Carlos Serván on April 7.
- Ongoing work with staff to ensure maintenance is up to date for NCBVI state-leased vehicles.
- Ongoing work with staff to surplus unusable vending machines.

Human Resources

Staff Updates:

- Kristal Platte, Omaha District VR counselor, completed center training on February 6 and began fieldwork the second week of February.
- Denise Torticollo, Lincoln District Orientation counselor, completed training the last week of February and is now working in the field.
- The North Platte Technology Specialist position remains vacant at this time. We have been actively working to recruit and fill this position.

Training Opportunities: All staff attended, via Zoom, training on “Questions About Vision Loss” provided by Mississippi State University (MSU).

State Staff Meeting March 17-19: David Denotaris provided a workshop to counselors on building trusting relationships with clients and business and other job placement strategies. He also provided training to all staff on maintaining a good working environment and a positive attitude.

The Nebraska Association of Public Employees (NAPE) provided training about the services they provide to union-covered employees. We also received training from the Director of Employee Relations on team members' rights and responsibilities, as well as the disciplinary purpose and process. Angie provided magnification training for counselors via Teams.

Staff also took other training opportunities, such as:

- Attended Fire Prevention.
- Gracie Swim is pursuing certifications in Family Strengthening and Support and the Biopsychological Integrated Model for Long COVID.
- Amy Buresh completed webinars on Artificial Intelligence and Microsoft tools.
- Grace completed Fire Prevention Marshal training hosted by NCDHH.
- Staff completed Pocket AI notetaker training and BlindShell training.
- Technology staff attended the ATIA in Florida and the CSUN conference in Anaheim, California, being exposed to the latest advancements in the assistive technology sector.

II. Field Services

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

Staff actively:

- Deliver presentations on NCBVI services to several businesses, public schools, and other community partners.
- Hold their GATE district program in each district.
- Participate in IEP meetings.
- Identify work-based learning experiences.
- Promote and provide technical assistance on workplace accessibility.

Field Staff Partnerships and Community Engagement

Lincoln District:

- Presentation at Monarch House.
- Tabatha and the Lions Club in Columbus provided an in-service for psychology students at Union College on respectful interaction and services for the blind.

- Hosted an exhibit table at the State Capitol during Deaf and Hard of Hearing Awareness Day.
- Attended EmployLNK meetings.
- Hosted booths at the ESU 5 Family Engagement Night, LPS Special Education Night, and the UNL Civil Rights Conference.
- Participation in United Way Food Security meetings, ESU Job Expos, Transition Agency Fairs, and multiple IEP/MDT meetings across various cities including Fremont, Norfolk, and Columbus.

Omaha District:

- Participated in a podcast with Outlook Enterprises discussing guide dog ownership.
- Engaged with "Holiday Bright Lights" to develop job opportunities.
- Attended the Talent Across Generations Job & Career Fair at Omaha North High School and South High School.
- Networked with the Blue Barn Box Office to explore volunteer and job opportunities.
- Attended the Empowerment Fair at Embassy Suites.
- Provided business services to Mustang Electric to support a current consumer's employment.
- Project SEARCH.

North Platte District:

- Attended a Community Conversation at ESU 10 focused on Pre-ETS.
- Met with Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) at ESU 10.
- Attended IEP meetings in Overton and Kearney.
- Participated and assisted in the transition skills showcase with Kearney's transition students in the 18-21 program.
- Participated in the Transition Agency Fair at Grand Island Senior High School.
- Continued involvement with Employ GI and connected with the Career Pathways Institute in Grand Island.
- Toured Mid-Plains Community College and explored additional opportunities for consumers.
- Presented on NCBVI services to a peer support group in Hastings.
- Continued involvement with Employ GI and Project SEARCH.
- Strengthened connections with community partners, including NE-VR, Wood River Public Schools, Kearney Eye Institute, Good Samaritan Society, Primrose, and the Kearney VIPS Group.
- Participated in the Medicaid Work Requirements workforce partner meeting.
- Attended a SkillsUSA tour in Grand Island to further connect with students and educators.
- Collaborated with the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing to support consumers in the panhandle.
- Connected with Eye2Eye to expand peer support opportunities for older blind consumers.
- Participated in a Disability in the Workplace panel at UNK.
- Conducted outreach with two employers in the Valentine area to promote On-the-Job Training opportunities and business services.
- Attended the Greater Nebraska Workforce Board Meeting in Columbus.

Projects:

- Worked with panhandle consumers to provide information and resources for establishing a vision support group in Scottsbluff.

- Angie has also been heavily involved in planning the Silver Summit, including coordinating presenters, instructors, and speakers.

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

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

- OIB (Older Individuals who are Blind): 444
- IL (Independent Living) clients under 55: 72
- VR (Vocational Rehabilitation): 460

Successful Consumer Closures in the Following Occupations:

- Combined Food Preparation and Serving Worker,
- Computer Programmer,
- Construction Laborer,
- Gaming Change Person/Booth Cashier,
- Graphic Designer,
- Janitor/Cleaner,
- Legal Support Worker,
- Physical Therapist Assistant,
- Production Worker,
- Receptionists and Information Clerk,
- Recreation Worker,
- Registered Nurse (2),
- Rehabilitation Counselor,
- Retail Salesperson,
- Sales Representative,
- Stock Clerk/Order Filler,
- Teaching Assistant, and
- Transportation/Storage/Distribution Manager

III. Nebraska Center for the Blind

We have six VR consumers attending training.

Since the February meeting:

- Four consumers toured.
- Four consumers attended three-day stays.
- Three Pre-ETS consumers are expected to start training in June.

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

Community-based activities included:

- Budget hearing at the State Capital.
- StarTran advisory meeting where multiple students spoke.
- Chili cook-off and buffet practice.
- Mall travel to practice indoor navigation.

- American Council of the Blind of Nebraska convention in Omaha.
- Tour of the Kearney Archway.
- National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska convention in Kearney.

IV. Nebraska Business Enterprise (NBE)

Federal Buildings: USSTRATCOM: This is still a work in progress and is going well. Previously, it was everyone's intention to have the upgrade/remodel completed by late March or early April, but due to construction complications, we are now looking at hosting an official grand opening sometime in September. The cafeteria has also begun serving sushi and is now hosting two rotating Fooda contractors each week to help provide more variety to the employees within the facility.

We are expecting the arrival and installation of the salad bar during the week of May 11. Our other vendor in USSTRATCOM is also doing well, and we are in the midst of negotiating the removal of several vending machines within the facility. The reason for this is that most of those machines have become underutilized since the introduction of the vendor's micro-market.

National Guard Ashland Camp: We submitted our proposal for the solicitation on April 14 and are currently waiting on Camp Ashland to finalize the award in June.

USCIS – Lincoln: The project to combine two existing USCIS facilities in Lincoln into one location is still ongoing. The new date of occupancy is scheduled for June 30, 2026. The new location will utilize a micro-market concept.

NBE currently has 16 licensed vendors who are actively servicing routes. One licensed vendor has retired, and several other individuals have expressed interest in the NBE program.

There have been no major complaints from any sites, but there were several complaints from vendors regarding machine repairs. NBE and the Blind Licensee Committee are working on solutions to help reduce the wait time for repairs.

State Buildings: There are no new updates with the state buildings at this time. The cafeteria in the State Office Building was put up for bid and NBE had one vendor interested, but upon investigating the site, they decided not to pursue it. The site had unrealistic low pricing and a questionable kitchen setup that might not meet health codes.

Public Comment

Ashley Pano –

Ashley shared that she and her son, Austin, are from Lexington. Austin is a consumer of NCBVI services, Austin and his mom expressed their deep support and gratitude for the Commission's impact.

Following open-heart surgery, Austin experienced strokes that resulted in residual effects, including vision loss. The Commission has been a major source of support, providing essential guidance that has profoundly affected their lives.

This was an entirely new experience for the family, as they had no prior history with vision loss. NCBVI helped them navigate new ways to access education and the environment. Their dedicated counselor provided home visits and attended IEP meetings; in fact, Austin's entire IEP team expressed gratitude for the Commission's expertise.

These services have helped the family tremendously, and Austin has already benefited from participating in programs like WAGES. Ashley noted that NCBVI has given them hope for the future.

Lillian Velasquez-Lopez -

Lillian stated that she is grateful for the opportunity to attend the NCBVI Board of Commissioners meeting. She is also thankful for the support NCBVI has provided throughout her high school career. While living with low vision presents challenges, Lillian appreciates the resources she has received to help her navigate daily life. She noted that because many people do not understand the daily struggles of low vision, having that support system is vital. Above all, Lillian believes the most important thing is to believe in yourself.

Commissioner Heyen thanked the consumers for their comments and offered words of encouragement to Lillian. "We have all been there," he said, noting that every board member is blind or low vision. He emphasized that the adversity one faces defines who they become. He told Lillian he is sure she will be an amazing person and reaffirmed that NCBVI is happy to support her.

NFB-Newsline® Nebraska - Jamie K. Richey

Spring has arrived across Nebraska, and just like the wildflowers beginning to bloom across our prairies, NFB-Newsline® continues to grow, spread, and connect blind Nebraskans to the information they need every single day. Bees and butterflies may travel from flower to flower gathering what they need, and NFB-Newsline® subscribers do much the same as they move from newspapers to magazines, TV listings to weather alerts, gathering news and information from Nebraska, across the country, and around the world. NFB-Newsline® helps keep people informed, independent, and connected no matter where life has planted them.

Recently, I ran into a subscriber outside a doctor's office, and we started talking about NFB-Newsline®. He told me he originally came from New Jersey and still enjoys keeping up with the news back home as well as surrounding states. Thanks to NFB-Newsline®, he can stay connected without needing newspapers delivered through the mail, depending on someone else to read them aloud, or struggling to read print on a CCTV. Stories like this remind us why NFB-Newsline® is so important. It gives blind people direct, independent access to information in ways that were once difficult or impossible.

This quarter, Nebraska NFB-Newsline® served 2,180 subscribers statewide. While we did not add any new subscribers this quarter, our existing subscribers remained very active. February saw 431 telephone calls totaling 5,839 reading minutes with an average call length of 13.55 minutes. March brought 348 calls totaling 5,254 minutes with the average call length increasing to 15.10 minutes. Then in April, subscribers logged 420 calls and an impressive 7,736 reading minutes with the longest average call length of the quarter at 18.42 minutes. That tells me subscribers are not just quickly buzzing through headlines. They are really spending time exploring the content they enjoy.

Online usage also stayed strong throughout the quarter. Subscribers accessed NFB-Newsline® Online 5,180 times in February, 3,751 times in March, and 2,393 times in April. The NFB-Newsline® mobile app continued attracting users as well, with 432 mobile sessions in February, 637 in March, and 561 in April. Automatic In Your Pocket downloads delivered hundreds of publications directly to subscribers' devices every month, while email delivery services remained steady throughout the quarter.

When we look at the most popular content categories, Nebraska newspapers once again led the way like a field full of bright prairie wildflowers, averaging well over 4,000 accesses each month. National newspapers remained strong as well, with subscribers clearly enjoying the ability to gather information from across the country. TV listings, magazines, and breaking news online also continued seeing consistent use. One category that really caught my attention this quarter was Nebraska Local Channels, which jumped from just 10 accesses in February to 54 in April. It is always interesting to watch how subscriber interests shift and grow over time, much like the changing blooms across a Nebraska spring landscape.

As we look ahead, one thing that stood out for me this quarter is that we did not add any new subscribers. While our current users remain active and engaged, it also reminds me that there are still many blind Nebraskans who may not yet know everything NFB-Newsline® has to offer. Continued outreach and education will help this service continue to bloom and reach even more people across our state.

With several new staff members now at the Commission for the Blind, this may be a great opportunity to provide a presentation at either a district or statewide staff meeting to make sure everyone has the information and tools needed to fully explain NFB-Newsline® to their clients. The more people who understand what NFB-Newsline® offers, the more blind Nebraskans we can help connect with this incredible service.

Thank you for supporting NFB-Newsline®. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me anytime.

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or issues
No CAP complaints or issues were reported.

Break

A break was taken at 10:27 a.m.
The meeting resumed at 10:44 a.m.

New Business

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

Commissioner Rocha 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 Livingston seconded the motion.

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

11:10 a.m. – Discuss and act on the approval of employee in-state and 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 Livingston 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, 2027.

Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Discussion on how to move forward with Staff Survey

During the discussion, Commissioner Brent Heyen asked the board for comments regarding the proposed staff survey and explained that he had contacted State Personnel to discuss how such a survey should be used. He stated that the primary concern raised by State Personnel was the purpose of the survey. Commissioner Heyen noted that one proposal had been to use the survey directly as part of the Executive Director's evaluation; however, because only a small number of staff members work directly with the Executive Director on a regular basis, maintaining anonymity could be difficult. He also suggested that another possible use for the survey would be to gather employee feedback regarding the agency's direction and priorities for the coming year.

Commissioner Cheryl Livingston stated that surveys had been conducted in years past and noted that she had been employed by the agency at the time the previous survey was administered. Although she did not recall many details due to the amount of time that had passed, she stated that the survey could provide insight into whether employees felt the agency was moving in the right direction, whether problems were being addressed, and whether there were positive practices the agency should continue. Commissioner Livingston further explained that employee feedback could indirectly reflect on the Executive Director's performance because concerns raised by employees would typically move through supervisory channels and, depending on the issue, could eventually involve the director. She also noted that she had reviewed the prior survey and believed it provided a reasonable assessment of employee perspectives. However, she stated that if the board wishes to focus more specifically on the Executive Director's relationships with supervisors,

a different type of survey might be needed. She agreed with Commissioner Heyen that maintaining anonymity in a small agency would be difficult.

Commissioner Linda Mentink stated that when she first joined the commission board more than four years ago, she felt the evaluation process was somewhat one-sided because it relied primarily on the Executive Director's self-evaluation. She clarified that this concern did not reflect dissatisfaction with agency performance, but rather a desire to ensure the board also received broader feedback. Commissioner Mentink acknowledged that Executive Director Carlos Servan's self-evaluation included not only his own work, but also information about the agency's operations and accomplishments. She stated that the purpose of the proposed survey, in her view, was to confirm that agency conditions were consistent with what was being reported. Commissioner Mentink further stated that she believed all staff members, not only supervisors and directors, should have the opportunity to provide feedback if they wish to do so. She emphasized that participation would not be mandatory, but that employees should have a means to communicate concerns or comments to the board. Commissioner Mentink then asked Director Carlos Servan to explain how evaluations were conducted for agency staff members.

Director Carlos Servan explained that the agency's evaluation procedures were regulated by State Personnel. He stated that evaluations are conducted in two primary areas: SMART goals and self-evaluations. Director Servan noted that the current process for his own evaluation had originated under his predecessor, Dr. Van Zandt, after consultation with State Personnel, and that the previous board had approved the same approach. He explained that, in recent years, State Personnel had added SMART goals as a required component of evaluations and generally recommended between two and four goals, although the number could vary depending on the employee. Director Servan stated that employees complete self-evaluations and that supervisors work with them to address any areas of disagreement or improvement.

Director Servan further explained that a similar process could potentially be applied to his evaluation, with SMART goals developed based on survey feedback from staff members and board members. He stated that areas identified as priorities by both the board and him could become agreed-upon goals for the following evaluation period. He also explained that when SMART goals were first introduced for agency staff, there were initially no prior-year goals available for comparison because the process was new.

Director Servan stated that if the board wishes to move forward with surveys, the board will first need to determine the survey questions. He noted that approval of the survey questions would need to occur during a future meeting or a specially called meeting. He encouraged the board to continue consulting with State Personnel because all written state-related processes are reviewed by legal counsel to ensure compliance and to protect both the state and appointed board members. Director Servan explained that once surveys were completed, the results could help guide the development of SMART goals for his next evaluation cycle.

Commissioner Miguel Rocha asked whether RSA provided required goals or standards for the agency.

Director Servan responded that RSA requires performance expectations to be included within the Combined State Plan and that those expectations are negotiated with RSA. He explained that annual reports are now submitted each year and that quarterly data reports are also available to monitor agency performance. Director Servan added that State Personnel had previously

encouraged state employees to complete a statewide survey focused on morale, respectful treatment, and workplace improvement. He stated that Sara Watson had adapted those survey questions for use within the agency and that the board could review both those questions and prior survey questions to determine which approach to use.

Director Servan concluded by emphasizing that the board should first determine the purpose and goals of the survey and ensure that all survey questions aligned with those objectives.

Commissioner Brent Heyen then asked whether the board wished to formally incorporate SMART goals into Director Servan's evaluation. Commissioner Miguel Rocha made a motion to include SMART goals as part of the evaluation process. Commissioner Linda Mentink seconded the motion. A roll call vote was conducted.

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

Commissioner Heyen then asked whether the board wished to use a staff survey to help form those SMART goals. He stated that he would like the board to review Sarah Watson's survey before making a final decision. Commissioner Cheryl Livingston made a motion to use a survey to help develop SMART goals for Director Servan's evaluation. After discussion, Commissioner Livingston amended her motion to state that the board would review Sarah Watson's survey prior to deciding whether to use it. Commissioner Linda Mentink seconded the amended motion.

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

Commissioner Heyen stated that the board would contact Sarah Watson to obtain the survey materials and review them prior to the next meeting. He also recommended that the board continue consulting with State Personnel to ensure all survey procedures complied with applicable legal and personnel requirements.

Vote to enter Executive Session
Executive Session to conduct the Executive Director Annual Evaluation

Commissioner Livingston moved to go into Executive Session at 11:03 a.m. to conduct the annual evaluation of the Executive Director.

Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

Roll call: Ayes: Rocha, Mentink, Heyen, Livingston
Naves:
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 11:40 a.m.

Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Act on the retention of the Executive Director and his Salary

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

Commissioner Livingston seconded the motion.

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

Commissioner Livingston moved to give the Executive Director a 2.25% cost of living increase and an additional 1% performance increase effective May 11, 2026.

Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

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

Final Announcements

The next meeting of the NCBVI Board of Commissioners will be on Friday, July 24 in Lincoln at a hotel in conjunction with the WAGES banquet. The Focus Topic will be Transition.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:43 a.m.

If you have an item that you would like to have placed on the agenda of the July 24, 2026 Commission Board meeting, please email it to the NCBVI Commission Board at ncbvi.commission-board@nebraska.gov.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist

Brent Heyen, Commission Chair