

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Friday, July 24, 2026, 9:00 a.m.

Cornhusker Hotel
333 South 13th Street
Yankee Hill Meeting Room
Lincoln, NE
and Virtual Conferencing

Members of the public may also attend and participate virtually by using the following Zoom link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/82874553661?pwd=f6MnSXJ0X0PNKHdzM27H9svkPCRDbI.1>

To join by phone (Audio Only) Dial 1-720-707-2699 or 1-253-205-0468

Meeting ID: 828 7455 3661

Passcode: 676557

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, Chair of the Board of Commissioners, called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. The meeting began with introductions.

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

Staff present: Carlos Serván, Executive Director; Erin Brandyberry, Deputy Director-Services; Tammie Dunn, Deputy Director-Finance; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist; Cindi Walz, VR Program Specialist; Jessica Bartenbach, Center Supervisor; Sarah Peters, Travel Instructor; Ted Haubrich, Shop Instructor; Sania Kellogg, Braille Instructor; Mark Coleman, Client Resource Counselor; Hannah Dakan, Home Management Instructor; Amy Buresh, VR Counselor; Kaytlyn Hilligas, VR Counselor; Denise Torcicollo, Orientation Counselor; Jordon Herman, Technology Specialist; Shane Buresh, Orientation Counselor; Charles Andersen, Technology Manager; Nancy Coffman, Communications Instructor.

Others present: Jayden Mehuron, Robert Hurtado, Kafilatou Maroufou, Billy Thompson, Jay Van Winkle, Ty Schaefer, Jessica Beecham, Thomas Breyman, Andrew Tiedgen, Addison Johnson, Luke Vaca, Austin Pano, Jamie Richey, Jeremy Richey, Kimberly Rocha, Sandra Wright.

A copy of the Nebraska Open Meetings Act was available in both print and Braille formats. The Notice of the Meeting was published in the Lincoln Journal Star, the State Government Calendar, NCBVI Website, NFB Newsline® and Radio Talking Book. The Notice was also sent to ACBN, NFBN, and the NCBVI listservs.

Approval of the May 9, 2026, Public Meeting Minutes

Commissioner Livingston moved to approve the Minutes of the May 9, 2026, Commission Meeting. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Nayes:

Abstained:

Motion Carried

Report from the Commissioners

Commissioner Heyen

Commissioner Heyen continues to represent the blind community through daily professional work as General Manager of the Country Inn & Suites on North 27th Street in Lincoln. In May, Commissioner Heyen attended a regional conference, representing the blind community during an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) session and connecting with attendees from other states who have blind children.

Commissioner Rocha

Commissioner Rocha serves as the blind operator at the U.S. STRATCOM Cafeteria at Offutt Air Force Base, overseeing both front- and back-of-house operations while interacting regularly with patrons. In addition to attending quarterly meetings and training sessions for the Nebraska Business Enterprise Committee, Commissioner Rocha provided peer support to a staff member's spouse who is experiencing vision loss. This outreach included sharing practical independent-living techniques, assistive technology recommendations, and information regarding the resources available through the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) and local consumer groups.

Commissioner Livingston

Commissioner Livingston participated virtually in the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) National Convention in Austin, Texas, which brought together over 2,500 in-person attendees and more than 600 virtual participants via Zoom. Participation included the Resolutions Committee meeting, the Board meeting, general sessions, and the annual banquet, where President Riccobono delivered a memorable address comparing the work of the blind community to elements of music. Commissioner Livingston also maintains active service roles as Treasurer of the NFB of Nebraska, Secretary of the Lincoln Chapter, and Treasurer of the NFB of Nebraska Senior Division.

Commissioner Schonlau

Commissioner Schonlau expressed appreciation to the Board of Commissioners for accommodating virtual participation via Zoom while continuing to recover from spinal surgery performed on May 11. Commissioner Schonlau remains fully engaged in the meeting today, with a particular focus on attending the afternoon WAGES banquet and program which is always a highlight for her.

Commissioner Mentink

Since our last meeting, Linda has attended two NFBN Senior Division meetings, serving as Secretary, one NFB of Kansas Blind Christians Group meeting, and the NFB convention in Austin

TX. Her convention duties included working at the Independence Market, taking care of the banquet ticket exchange, chairing the annual NFB Blind Christians Group meeting, and facilitating Devotions before the three morning general sessions.

Friends met this past Tuesday, July 21. There was no one there from the Commission, so they did not get any updates. It was noted that NCBVI was removed from their Articles of Incorporation in 2013. Friends continues to work on getting grants and will meet with a representative of a possible organization on Wednesday, August 19.

Friends will again pay for snacks for the September State Staff meeting. Friends is still looking for three board members. Friends thanks Kathy Stephens for her faithfulness in setting up and hosting their quarterly meetings.

Report from the Executive Director

I. Administration

Meetings and Activities

NCSAB Monthly Meetings

On June 16–17, the NCSAB Executive Committee met in person for a strategic planning session to establish priorities through June 2027. Key topics included:

- The transition of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and its potential impact on state agencies for the blind.
- Randolph-Sheppard priorities, including continued advocacy for blind vendor priority at military facilities.
- Strategies to advocate for increased funding for the Older Individuals Who Are Blind (OIB) program.
- A proposed increase in NCSAB membership dues to address rising operational costs due to inflation.
- Training priorities for the NCSAB Fall Conference in Dallas, Texas.
- The need to identify a new vendor to manage registration for future national conferences.

During the first week of June, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) proposed revisions to 2 CFR Part 200 (Uniform Guidance), which governs federal grants and cooperative agreements. Intended to align policies across federal agencies, incorporate executive orders, and enhance oversight, these 2026 revisions are significantly more comprehensive than previous updates. If adopted, the regulations will take effect on October 1, 2027.

One major proposed change would require state agencies to request approval at least one year in advance before sending staff or consumers to training events and conferences—such as

consumer conventions, CSAVR, and NCSAB events—with no guarantee of approval and an increased paperwork burden.

Comments were due July 15, 2026. NCSAB submitted formal feedback highlighting beneficial provisions, requesting clarifications, and raising concerns about restrictions that could create severe operational challenges for state agencies and partner organizations.

On June 17, the U.S. Department of Education issued the long-awaited Interagency Agreement (IAA) with HHS, formally outlining the administrative transfer of OSERS to HHS. While the agreement transfers operational functions, Congressional authority over appropriations remains unchanged, meaning Congress retains control over program funding.

Olmstead Advisory Committee

The committee discussed major concerns regarding the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) new interpretation of state obligations under the *Olmstead* decision. The DOJ's current position is that states are not mandated to ensure individuals with severe disabilities receive services in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs, raising concerns about community integration.

Additionally, HHS expressed concern regarding OMB's proposed Uniform Guidance revisions. The Director of Behavioral Health presented an update on current services, focusing on home health care supports. While service demand continues to grow, state funding has remained flat, and inflation has driven up care costs. The committee also highlighted severe recruitment and retention challenges caused by behavioral health professionals leaving state employment for higher-paying positions.

Finally, the committee reviewed DOJ audit findings, noting the need for clearer definitions regarding the public guardian's role, addressing instances where home care providers billed hours without proper documentation, and improving explanations of the appeals and exceptions process.

WIOA Nebraska Partners Council

The meeting focused primarily on a presentation regarding recent Medicaid policy changes. Agency directors reiterated concerns about the proposed OMB Uniform Guidance revisions, specifically noting that converting flexible guidance into binding regulations will reduce state flexibility while increasing compliance burdens.

StarTran Operations Report

Staff are working to refine bus stop address accuracy for better Google Maps integration and are updating routes to improve community coverage.

Regarding the Multi-Modal Transportation Center (MMTC), land acquisition is complete. The groundbreaking is set for July 29, with construction running from mid-August through projected completion in February 2028. NCBVI will pursue opportunities to place a blind vendor at this new location in alignment with our mission to expand employment opportunities.

StarTran currently employs 95 bus drivers, with 8 in training, and completed its annual staff safety training in early June.

Other Activities

- **State Auditor Attestation Review:** The Nebraska State Auditor's Office conducted an in-depth attestation review covering agency activities for calendar year 2025. The exit conference occurred on June 23 with Commissioner Cheryl Livingston in attendance, and NCBVI submitted its official response on June 30. Auditors found no major deficiencies or misuse of funds. Recommendations were provided to strengthen internal processes, many of which NCBVI had already begun proactively implementing prior to the audit.
- **Media & Presentations:** On May 13, I was interviewed by former RSA Commissioner Janet LaBrek for the *Visionary Voices Exchange* podcast, highlighting NCBVI's WAGES summer youth program and innovative transition-age services.
- **National Conventions & Research:** In early July, I attended the NFB National Convention. The event featured a wide range of programming, including advocacy presentations, accessible technology exhibits, AI workshops, meetings for various professional groups, and the presidential report. NFB adopted a resolution urging the U.S. Department of Education to uphold federal law and preserve the independence of public vocational rehabilitation systems. On July 16, I met with Ph.D. researchers proposing a partnership on a longitudinal study evaluating mental health and depression prevention among blind and low-vision teenagers (grant proposal due September 20). This potential collaboration would offer our consumers valuable access to specialized mental health supports.

Business Office Highlights — Tammie Dunn

During this period, the Business Office focused heavily on addressing audit-related requests and reviewing operational documentation. Staff collaborated across agency leadership, program teams, State Accounting, Shared Services, and state partners to evaluate expenditure, revenue, payroll, contract, travel, fixed asset, and grant workflows.

The team continues to evaluate grant balances, carryover funds, match requirements, and expenditure projections. Looking ahead, the Business Office will focus on finalizing audit responses, updating procedures, and establishing clearer guidance for staff. Financially, the agency remains in a strong position; with carryover funds and the receipt of \$234,187 in Social Security reimbursement funds, the proposed 5% budget reductions will have minimal to no impact on our direct programs and advocacy activities.

Technology Highlights — Charles Anderson

Technology priorities centered on digital accessibility, staff training on emerging assistive tech, and infrastructure upgrades:

- Hosted bi-weekly virtual training sessions for NCBVI staff.
- Conducted individual consumer technology assessments on tools like Pocket AI for note-taking, the talking caliper, and the CloverBook magnification system.
- Facilitated agency-wide demonstrations of the HumanWare BrailleNote Evolve in coordination with NanoPac.

- Provided ongoing tech support for JAWS, Adobe Pro, Google Workspace, and Microsoft Teams.

Completed & Ongoing Projects

- **Web Accessibility:** Collaborated with Tyler Technologies and the OCIO Digital Accessibility Team to remediate website accessibility issues, successfully replacing non-compliant image carousels with accessible image tiles.
- **Document Accessibility:** Finalized procurement and began deployment of CivicPlus DocAccess to ensure ongoing PDF compliance.
- **Infrastructure:** Finalized installation of a 1GB fiber internet circuit via Allo Communications at the N 11th Street training apartments, supporting student coursework and cloud-based assistive devices.
- **Operations:** Managed agency Google Workspace licensing through Daston Corporation, went live with the Knowledge Interpreter AI policy tool, and renewed the agency's Aira subscription (July 2026–June 2027).
- **Exploratory Tech:** Evaluated smart glasses by gathering consumer feedback from the AGIGA EchoVision Pioneers program and researching Meta Ray-Ban capabilities.

Operations Support — Kathy Stephens

- Coordinated with Surplus Property to transfer or list unused Nebraska Business Enterprise (NBE) assets on GovDeals.
- Managing the annual year-end E1 technology inventory, on track for submission to the DAS Materiel Division by August 31.
- Arranged staff and client travel, registration, and event accommodations, including ongoing lodging management at Tru by Hilton in Lincoln.
- Coordinated with Risk Management to facilitate repairs on state vehicles damaged in recent accidents and hailstorms.
- Administered agency-wide Zoom scheduling and setup for internal and external meetings.

Human Resources

Staff Updates

Suzzette Casillas retired in June. Vanessa Bolln joined the front desk/business office as an Accountant I on July 13, bringing 27 years of professional experience from Allstate. Jordan Herman joined the North Platte District on July 20 as a Technology Specialist and is currently undergoing Center training.

In Omaha, VR Counselor Saman Zeb resigned to relocate to South Dakota; the position is actively advertised. In Lincoln, Kaitlyn Hilligas will be departing at the end of September. HR is navigating the required approval steps to post the vacancy in accordance with the Governor's hiring restriction memo.

Staff Training & Professional Development

- **Agency Training:** On May 12, all staff completed Knowledge Interpreter Training and participated in the Agency Forum via Zoom.
- **IT & Assistive Tech:** Charles Andersen attended public-sector IT leadership and data security sessions, a White House AI Executive Order webinar, and a Sensory Readable software demonstration. He continues providing tech instruction across the agency. Charli Saltzman completed four Android courses (via BITS/AT) and an AI literacy webinar.
- **Professional Certifications & Seminars:**
 - Mark Coleman completed his course work for the graduate certificate program at Louisiana Tech University. He is on schedule to complete the internship phase of the program in November and to obtain his NOMC certification by year's end.
 - Denise Torcicollo, Sarah Peters, Ted Haubrich, and Hannah Dakan attended the Tactile Art Teach-In at NFB Headquarters in Baltimore. This was sponsored by the NFB, the American Action Fund for Blind Children and Adults, and the Tactile Coalition. During this conference, they connected with fellow industry professionals.
 - Grace completed training on Structured Discovery O&M history, Bridges Out of Poverty, College/Career Readiness, Tactile O&M for DeafBlind adults, and AI in education.
 - Amber completed training on AI literacy, workforce development, Level All, and Helen Keller services.
 - Pam Rademacher and Gracie Swim attended "Navigating Dementia Care." Gracie also completed three Workday EAP courses and an IPPAART Long COVID employment webinar.
 - Some staff also attended the NFB National Convention and the annual O&M Conference in early July.

II. Field Services

During the third week of May, field staff helped facilitate the successful Silver Summit, hosting over 100 participants. Summer programming has been active, with WAGES running from June 7 to July 24 and Project Independent occurring the second week of July.

Field staff continue to build strategic community and business partnerships across all districts to expand employment and transition pathways:

Field Stakeholder Partnerships by District

Lincoln District

- **Community Leadership:** Pam Rademacher serves actively on the Greater Lincoln Workforce Development Board, while Kaytlyn Hilligas attends monthly EmployLNK Employer Spotlights.

- **Outreach & Networking:** Staff participated in the Spanish Networking Group (Fremont), United Way Food Security Meeting (Columbus), Growing Community Connection (Sioux City area), Center for Survivors meeting (Columbus), Macy Health Fair, and SAMHSA Training at the Norfolk Public Library.
- **School & Transition Support:** Participated in the ESU #8 Job Expo planning, ESU #1 Transition Agency Fair, Perkins Advisory Committee, CFP Collaborative Meeting, and Fremont High School Mock Interview Fair.
- **Direct Client Advocacy:** Partnered with Casa Property Management to secure accessible housing for a relocating consumer and maintained ongoing employer networking for competitive placements.

Omaha District

- Collaborating with Mississippi VR to support an out-of-state apprenticeship for an Omaha consumer.
- Partnering locally with Madonna Rehabilitation Center, Madonna Ability Alliance, Dynamic Workforce, and the Omaha, Millard, and Papillion-La Vista School Districts.
- Alex is coordinating Madonna Mobility Training for occupational therapists working with visually impaired patients.
- Craig is leading the Madonna Ability Alliance Summer Work Program to create supported work-based learning opportunities.
- Collaborating with Metro Moby Transit to ensure mobile transit applications are fully accessible.

North Platte District

- Connected with healthcare employers at the UNMC CareFair, Central Community College Job Fair, and Kearney Disability Pride Agency Fair.
- Hosted information tables at the Scottsbluff Public Library and Equus Workforce Solutions, and delivered educational presentations at The Village Retirement Community and Sandhills Care Center.
- Partnered with Henderson's IGA in Valentine for on-the-job training, attended the AgrAbility Council meeting, and supported the NFBN BELL Academy.
- Presented on transition pathways in partnership with Nebraska VR, the Nebraska Department of Education, and local ESU Transition Coordinators.

Client Statistics

Active Clients Served (End of Period)

- OIB (Older Individuals Who Are Blind): 496
- IL (Independent Living, under 55): 79

- VR (Vocational Rehabilitation): 499

Successful Consumer Employment Closures

Consumers achieved successful employment outcomes across a wide array of fields, including:

- Accountant / Auditor
- Combined Food Preparation & Serving Worker
- Computer Programmer
- Construction Laborer
- Counter Attendant
- Educational / Guidance / Vocational Counselor
- Farmer / Rancher
- Gaming Change Person / Booth Cashier
- Graphic Designer
- Janitor / Cleaner
- Legal Support Worker
- Mental Health Counselor (2)
- Physical Therapist Assistant
- Production Worker
- Receptionist & Information Clerk
- Recreation Worker
- Registered Nurse
- Rehabilitation Counselor
- Retail Salesperson
- Sales Representative
- Software QA Analyst
- Stock Clerk / Order Filler
- Teaching Assistant
- Transportation / Storage / Distribution Manager

II. Nebraska Center for the Blind

The Center currently serves six VR consumers, including one participating via Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), alongside our new Technology Specialist trainee from North Platte. With an additional Pre-ETS student starting July 27 following WAGES, active enrollment will reach eight next week.

Recent Milestones & Activities

- A VR consumer graduated on May 15, 2026, and is currently working with the WAGES program.
- A Pre-ETS student re-entered training on May 26 after a temporary pause for college coursework.
- Sara Reuss brought three students from the UNL O&M program to the Center on July 22 for a Structured Discovery immersive experience under sleepshades, including cane travel and meal preparation. Jeff met with the group to discuss instruction philosophy following Merry-Noel's retirement.
- The Center hosted five facility tours (including Jennifer Charleston from BeTactile), seven WAGES student tours, and two 3-day immersive stays.
- Ongoing programming continued smoothly, including drops, mini-meals, commencement events, daily living techniques, and weekly philosophy seminars. The NFB contract was renewed to provide monthly virtual vocational seminars and semi-annual in-person workshops.
- Students participated in community integration activities, including evaluating a vacant rental apartment using nonvisual inspection and reader techniques, visiting Talking Book & Braille Services and the Lincoln City Library, viewing an audio-described movie, hiking the MoPac Trail, visiting Pioneers Park, hosting a picnic at Mahoney Park, and attending the July 24 Board of Commissioners meeting.

IV. Nebraska Business Enterprise (NBE)

Federal Facilities

- **USSTRATCOM:** Remodeling is nearing completion (late July/early August 2026), with a grand reopening planned for mid-September that is expected to generate media coverage. Final equipment is installed or en route. The Sushi, Foda, and newly installed salad bar programs continue to perform well. NBE met with STRATCOM management regarding machine repositioning and potentially opening a second micro-market on the lower levels.
- **USCIS (Lincoln):** The facility consolidation project remains ongoing; the final move-in date is to be determined.
- **Ashland National Guard Base:** The Commission and staff have finalized award documentation. On July 14, the NBE team completed key and equipment turnover for the Dining Facility (DFAC) to officially begin site takeover.

State Facilities

- The Nebraska Youth Correctional Facility in Omaha was closed and vacated. One vending unit was relocated to the Omaha State Office Building to replace an aging unit beyond economical repair, while the remaining two units were placed into temporary storage for future placement.

Licensed Vendors & Operations

- **Asset Refresh:** NBE refurbished the pool table (new felt, bumpers, and balls) at the State Patrol Law Enforcement Training Center in Grand Island.
- **Vendor Count:** The active vendor count stands at 15 (corrected from a previous count of 16 that inadvertently included an independent contractor).
- **Complaints:** Minor post-turnover vendor complaints at the USCIS Lincoln sites were resolved directly with the operator.
- **Repair Training Initiative:** NBE is launching a equipment repair training course via NAMA, funded through unassigned statewide vending revenues. The Blind Licensee Committee approved funding for up to four participants; to date, three candidates were interviewed and two were selected to begin training to enhance operational self-sufficiency.

Public Comment Period

Mark Coleman – Mark reported that he completed his course work for the graduate certificate program at Louisiana Tech University. He is on schedule to complete the internship phase of the program in November and to obtain his NOMC certification by year's end.

Break: A break was taken at 9:59 a.m. The meeting resumed at 9:14 a.m.

Focus Topic: Focus Topic: Transition Services

Throughout the year, the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) continued to provide a variety of transition programs designed to prepare students who are blind or visually impaired for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. These immersive experiences allow students to build confidence, develop practical skills, and explore career interests while increasing their independence.

Fall Winnerfest 2025: 3D Printing Camp

Nineteen students participated in a 2½-day, STEM-focused Winnerfest led by Dr. Thomas Madura and Dr. Carol Christian. The camp immersed students in the rapidly growing field of 3D printing through a combination of classroom instruction and extensive hands-on learning.

Students assembled and calibrated 3D printers, learned how to locate and download 3D models, prepared models for printing using slicing software, and designed their own projects using Tinkercad and OpenSCAD. They also learned to troubleshoot common printing challenges before creating and printing their own custom 3D models. To further expose students to STEM careers and advanced manufacturing, participants toured the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Innovation Campus Rapid Prototyping Lab.

To encourage continued learning beyond the event, students completed an essay describing what they learned during the training and how access to a 3D printer would support their future educational or career goals. Based on these essays, students had the opportunity to earn one of the 3D printers used during the camp. JB&K provided overnight supervision and organized evening activities at The Leadership Center in Aurora, creating additional opportunities for social interaction, teamwork, and relationship building.

Advocacy in Action: Washington, D.C.

Advocacy in Action was designed to provide students with a unique opportunity to develop leadership and self-advocacy skills through firsthand exposure to the legislative process in Washington, D.C. The program was structured to introduce students to how public policy impacts individuals who are blind or visually impaired, while teaching them how effective advocacy can influence positive change. Students were scheduled to learn about blindness-related legislation, meet with members of Congress and their staff, explore the nation's history and government, and connect with blind leaders serving as mentors and role models.

Although extensive planning had been completed, an unprecedented snow and ice storm created unsafe travel conditions, resulting in the cancellation of the trip. While disappointing for students and staff, the safety of the participants and JB&K personnel remained the highest priority.

Spring Winnerfest 2026: Nutrition Science Camp

Seventeen NCBVI students participated in the Spring Winnerfest held at The Graduate Hotel in Lincoln. Led by Dr. Cary Supalo, Peter Walters, and Charis Glatthar of Independence Science, students engaged in multiple days of accessible, hands-on laboratory activities focused on nutrition science. Students actively conducted experiments and explored scientific principles using accessible techniques and equipment, demonstrating that individuals who are blind or visually impaired can successfully participate in STEM education when instruction and materials are designed universally.

The weekend also emphasized independent living and social skills. Students stayed overnight in a hotel setting, managed daily routines, shared meals, participated in recreational evening activities, and interacted with peers and staff. These experiences provided valuable opportunities to build confidence, independence, and self-advocacy while strengthening statewide peer relationships.

Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) 2026

Seven students participated in STEP, a week-long program designed to provide training and support to potential future WAGES participants. Students learned essential independence skills, including cleaning personal and common areas, staying organized, using assistive technology, preparing simple snacks, dressing appropriately for the workplace, and working at a job site. The program is designed both for younger students who may attend WAGES in the future, as well as for new and returning WAGES participants who benefit from an increased focus on independent living skills.

Work And Gain Experience in the Summer (WAGES) 2026

A combined total of 25 students participated in the STEP and WAGES transition programs coordinated by JB&K staff. Many STEP participants transitioned directly into WAGES—a six-week summer work-based learning immersion program that places students in paid, full-time employment experiences throughout the Lincoln community.

While living on the University of Nebraska–Lincoln campus, participants experienced many aspects of college life, including navigating campus, dining in campus facilities, and participating in enrichment activities. Throughout the program, students regularly applied orientation and mobility skills, assistive technology, and alternative techniques to complete everyday tasks both on campus and in the workplace.

Students gained valuable work experience at a diverse group of local businesses and organizations, including:

- Nebraska Commission on Latino-Americans
- Easterday Recreation Center
- Hy-Vee
- Nebraska State Capitol
- Willa Cather Dining Complex
- Habitat for Humanity ReStore
- IHOP
- Canine Design
- Havelock Manor
- Lincoln Pet Parlor
- Lancaster County Records Office

Outside of work, students strengthened their independent living and social skills through structured evening and weekend activities. Experiences such as tandem biking, navigating downtown Lincoln using public transportation, painting, exercising, swimming, and playing goalball encouraged teamwork, problem-solving, and community engagement.

In addition to WAGES, students attended the National Federation of the Blind National Convention in Austin, Texas. The convention provided opportunities to network with blind individuals from across the country, attend educational workshops and career seminars, explore the latest adaptive technology, and learn from successful blind professionals. The experience reinforced the belief that blindness is not a barrier to achieving personal, educational, or career goals.

Nebraska Science Access (NSA) 2026

NCBVI continues to expand STEM opportunities for students through the development of the Nebraska Science Access (NSA) program, scheduled for this October. This collaborative initiative will bring together Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVIs), students, families, and University of Nebraska–Lincoln faculty to increase access to science education.

The program will feature one day dedicated exclusively to TVIs, followed by two days focused on students and their families. In collaboration with UNL professors, the program aims to foster lasting partnerships among educators, families, higher education institutions, and NCBVI.

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

In addition to statewide transition programs, NCBVI staff provide individualized Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to students in communities across Nebraska throughout the year. These services are tailored to each student's interests, strengths, needs, and transition goals to help them prepare for post-secondary education, employment, and greater independence.

Staff work closely with students, families, schools, employers, and community partners to create meaningful local transition experiences. Depending on the individual student, these opportunities include:

- Developing work-based learning experiences with local employers.
- Arranging college or training program tours.
- Facilitating informational interviews with working professionals.
- Exploring career paths and strengthening workplace readiness.
- Building self-advocacy skills and connecting students with community resources.

Building strong relationships with schools and community partners remains a cornerstone of this work. Through these partnerships, NCBVI staff identify opportunities within students' home communities, allowing them to explore possibilities, develop skills, and make informed decisions about their futures.

Together, NCBVI's statewide transition programs and individualized Pre-ETS services provide students with a comprehensive safety net of opportunities to gain experience, build confidence, and successfully transition from high school to adulthood.

Erin Brandyberry reported that for the presentation today, we have a range of students who have been participants in the programs throughout the year to share their experiences. So I would like to hand it over to Jessica Beecham, who will be introducing the students as they share their experiences.

Jessica Beecham's Report on Student Programs

Jessica Beecham presented an update to the Board of Commissioners on two essential Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) initiatives: Winterfest and the Work and Gain Experience in the Summer (WAGES) program. These initiatives give students who are blind or visually impaired immersive opportunities to dig deep into job development, independent living, and confidence-building skills. During the presentation, several participating students shared their firsthand experiences, illustrating the real-world impact these programs have on their personal growth and future goals.

The Winterfest program takes place twice a year, offering hands-on programming focused on accessible STEM learning. The fall session featured an accessible 3D design and printing workshop organized in collaboration with instructors Thomas Madura, a California professor, and Carol Christensen, a physicist at NASA. Students learned to design models using accessible software, and seven participants earned 3D printers through an essay contest to continue printing at home. The spring session focused on food science and micro-biology—such as making yogurt and sauerkraut—while utilizing accessible LabQuest sensors and equipment. When asked by Commissioner Rocha if they had been exposed to these technologies in their local schools, students shared that while basic equipment was occasionally available, Winterfest provided their first opportunity to learn truly accessible techniques.

The presentation then transitioned to the WAGES program, where students discussed their summer work placements and community experiences. Student participants Addie Johnson, Austin Pano, Andrew Tiedgen, Thomas Breyan and Luke Vaca detailed their diverse job sites, which ranged from working at the Habitat ReStore to pet care at K9 Design. Beyond gaining job-specific skills like time management and customer communication, the students emphasized learning

critical daily living skills, including laundry, navigating public transit, managing shared living spaces with roommates, and organizing personal belongings. Challenging group activities—such as ropes courses, improv classes, and community scavenger hunts—helped participants step out of their comfort zones and build lasting confidence.

A key strength of both programs is the presence of strong blind adult role models. Out of twenty-two staff members, eight were blind, providing students with daily opportunities to learn self-advocacy and observe successful blind adults in action. In response to a final question from Commissioner Livingston regarding their primary takeaways from the year, the student panel overwhelmingly cited increased confidence, greater independence, improved problem-solving abilities, and a reduced fear of trying new things. Jessica Beecham concluded the presentation by thanking the Board for their continued support of these transformative youth programs.

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or issues

Three informal complaints were recently brought to the agency's attention, all stemming primarily from miscommunication:

- **1. Funding Request for Consumer Convention:** A client requested agency funding to attend the National Convention for Consumer Organizations. Because the agency had previously funded this individual's attendance, the request was denied. Agency policy aims to introduce blind individuals to the benefits of consumer organizations, but it is not intended to provide ongoing event funding. (Note: A review of historical records indicates a similar policy discussion took place 12 to 15 years ago.)
- **2. Counselor Reassignment:** A client requested a new counselor. A reassignment had already been made, but the client had not yet been notified. The client has since been informed, resolving the issue.
- **3. Timely Services:** A client raised a concern regarding the timeliness of services, which was also addressed and resolved as a miscommunication.

Director Serván noted that all three issues were resolved. Regarding the convention funding request, the Client Assistance Program (CAP) representative noted that she supports the agency's decision. However, the client requested details on how to appeal the policy in the future. We provided that information, though it remains to be seen whether the client will formally challenge the policy."

NFB Newsline Update – by Jamie Richey

As we celebrate America's 250th birthday, it's amazing to reflect on how much has changed over the last two and a half centuries. In much the same way, NFB-NEWSLINE® has continued to evolve over its 27-year history. Today, with telephone access, the web, email, In Your Pocket, and mobile apps, the news is quite literally at your fingertips.

Because the Board of Commissioners meeting is being held in late July, this quarterly report covers only the months of May and June.

Our national NFB-NEWSLINE® team, led by Jack Mendez, continues working hard behind the scenes to modernize the service. Recent app updates have brought major improvements to accessibility, article formatting, VoiceOver navigation, iPad support, performance, and security.

Version 4 of the iOS app also introduced Travel Mode, enhanced reading features, and access to hundreds of additional magazines. The team has also begun hosting monthly coordinator Zoom meetings, providing valuable training, updates, and opportunities for coordinators across the country to share ideas and best practices. Several NFB-NEWSLINE® informational sessions were also offered during National Convention. Unfortunately, due to other convention responsibilities, I was unable to attend those sessions.

Nebraska continues to maintain a steady subscriber base, serving approximately 2,180 readers during both May and June. While subscriptions remained stable, usage also remained strong. During these two months, subscribers logged nearly 15,000 call minutes, accessed content more than 6,200 times, and generated nearly 10,000 online sessions through the web and mobile app. Nebraska newspapers remained the most frequently accessed content, followed by national newspapers, TV listings, Breaking News Online, and local weather information.

As fireworks light up the sky celebrating 250 years of our nation's history, NFB-NEWSLINE® continues to shine by providing timely, accessible information whenever and wherever our subscribers need it. The future is bright, and I look forward to sharing more exciting updates in the months ahead.

New Business

Officer Elections

Chair Brent Heyen reported that every year at this time, the Board conducts officer elections. The positions on the Board are Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and Executive Secretary.

The topic began with the board officers describing their respective roles to provide clarity and context for board members, potential future officers, and the public.

Brent, serving as Chair, explained that his position requires leading and facilitating all meetings, maintaining ongoing communication with Executive Director Carlos Serván to provide guidance as needed, and representing the Commission in official capacities. These duties include testifying before legislative bodies such as the Appropriations Committee and delivering public addresses, such as during the 50th Anniversary of the Orientation Center. Brent then announced a long-standing board tradition: officers entering their final full year as a commissioned board member step aside from leadership to mentor incoming officers. Because he is entering his final year, Brent noted he is ineligible to continue as Chair.

Cheryl Livingston then outlined her duties as Vice Chair, which primarily involve supporting the Chairperson across all official functions. This includes stepping in to run meetings when the Chair is absent and representing the Commission at key hearings—such as those regarding agency budget cuts—when the Chair cannot attend. Cheryl noted her ongoing collaboration with Carlos and her availability to present testimony or appear at official proceedings whenever requested. Additionally, Cheryl works alongside staff member Kathy Stephens to review, verify, and approve the meeting agenda prior to distribution to ensure it accurately reflects the board's intended business, and she reads the agenda aloud at each meeting to establish the order of business.

Linda Mentink described her responsibilities as Executive Secretary. Her primary task is compiling and maintaining the official "Motions for Meetings" document, which tracks every motion made and

passed during board sessions. Once completed, this document is distributed to Kathy Stephens, the Chair, and the Vice Chair. The board clarified that while all members share the collective responsibility of ensuring the minutes accurately reflect who made each motion, managing and verifying these records forms a core part of the Executive Secretary's role.

Commissioner Rocha moved to elect Commissioner Livingston as Chairperson.

Commissioner Livingston accepted the nomination.

There were no additional nominations. Commissioner Mentink moved that nominations cease, and Commissioner Livingston be elected by acclamation. Commissioner Schonlau seconded the motion.

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

Commissioner Schonlau moved to elect Commissioner Rocha as Vice Chairperson. Commissioner Rocha accepted the nomination.

There were no additional nominations. Commissioner Livingston moved that nominations cease, and Commissioner Rocha be elected by acclamation. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Commissioner Mentink moved to elect Commissioner Schonlau as Executive Secretary.

Commissioner Schonlau declined the nomination, recommending that Commissioner Mentink remain in the position.

Commissioner Livingston moved to elect Commissioner Mentink as Executive Secretary.

Commissioner Mentink accepted the nomination.

There were no additional nominations. Commissioner Livingston moved that nominations cease, and Commissioner Mentink be elected by acclamation. Commissioner Schonlau seconded the motion.

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

NCBVI Staff Survey

The board discussed the implementation of a staff survey intended to gather employee input regarding agency performance under Executive Director Carlos Serván's leadership. This feedback will assist the board in evaluating his performance and establishing effective SMART goals.

Commissioner Livingston raised a question regarding accessibility, asking if testing was being conducted to guarantee that the survey software is fully usable for blind staff members. Director Serván confirmed that he requested accessibility testing with the Department of Personnel.

Although the survey is still being finalized, Sara Watson will serve as the staff contact and designate two to three blind employees to test the system beforehand to ensure full accessibility and ease of use.

In response to questions regarding the timeline, Carlos explained that the state survey is scheduled for distribution in October. Responses will be gathered through the end of the year, with a third-party private vendor hired by the state compiling and analyzing the data to present results by late January or February. Carlos also clarified that state personnel guidelines prohibit running a separate internal survey alongside the state-issued one. Creating a custom survey would have required establishing a pre-approved system to guarantee data confidentiality and structured reporting, which the agency did not have in place.

Following the discussion, Commissioner Livingston moved that the Commission utilize the State of Nebraska staff survey distributed in October as part of Carlos's annual evaluation once the final results are compiled. Commissioner Schonlau seconded the motion.

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

Public Comment Period.

There was no public comment.

Final Announcements

The next NCBVI Commission Board meeting is scheduled for November 7, 2026, in Omaha. The Focus Topic will be USSTRATCOM Cafeteria.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:02 a.m.

If you have an item that you would like to have placed on the agenda of the November 7, 2026 Commission Board meeting, please email it to the NCBVI Commission Board at ncbvi.commission-board@nebraska.gov.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist
NCBVI

Brent Heyen, Chair
NCBVI Board of Commissioners