

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Friday, August 1, 9:00 a.m.

Cornhusker Hotel
333 South 13th Street
Yankee Hill Meeting Room
Lincoln, NE
Minutes

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

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

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

Commissioners absent: Brent Heyen, Chairperson, Lincoln.

Staff present: Carlos Serván, Executive Director; Erin Brandyberry, Deputy Director-Services; Tammie Dunn, Deputy Director-Finance; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist, Amber Stephens, VR Counselor; Amy Buresh, VR Counselor; Cindi Walz, VR Program Specialist; Kaytlyn Hilligas, VR Counselor; Pam Rademacher, Lincoln District Supervisor; Jessica Bartenbach, Center Supervisor; Sarah Vrana, Travel Instructor; Ted Haubrich, Shop Instructor; Sania Kellogg, Braille Instructor; Mark Coleman, Client Resource Counselor, Hannah Dakan, Home Management Instructor.

Others present: Brooklyn Brayman Reeves, Lucy Rothfuss, Alleigh Holmberg, Jessica Beecham, Kirsten Rothfuss, Jason Rothfuss, Kyla Otero, Sandra Eadie, Welsihner Albert, Marc Buckminster, Ty Schaefer, Billie Markham, Harley Sharpe, Doug Peterson.

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 3, 2025, Public Meeting Minutes

Commissioner Schonlau moved to approve the Minutes of the May 3, 2025, Commission Meeting. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion.

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

Commissioner Rocha

Miguel reported that during the past quarter, he attended the NFB At-Large Chapter meetings, the NFB National Convention in New Orleans, and the NFB Quarterly Board meeting. He also noted that he is currently seeking employment.

Commissioner Livingston

Cheryl reported that she serves as the designee of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN). She continues to serve as Treasurer of the NFBN affiliate. She is also a member and the Secretary of the Lincoln Chapter, and she resides in Lincoln. Additionally, she is the Treasurer of the NFBN Senior Division. Cheryl attended the NFB National Convention virtually.

She noted one of the highlights of the convention: the development of a project called the *Museum of the Blind People's Movement*, which will be housed in Baltimore. This museum will showcase the history of the organized blind movement from its beginnings in 1940 to the present. There was also significant discussion about the potential disbanding of the U.S. Department of Education and its possible impact on rehabilitation services. NFBN is closely monitoring the situation and stands ready to take action if needed to secure necessary funding for blind individuals.

Commissioner Schonlau

Patti reported that she attended the Silver Summit in Kearney, noting that Commissioner Livingston was also present. As the newest commissioner on the NCBVI Board, having joined in May 2024, she was unable to register for last year's event. Patti remarked that the program was excellent.

She also reported attending all meetings of the Omaha Council of the Blind (OCB), which is affiliated with the American Council of the Blind. She currently serves as President of OCB. Patti is active in her community through her involvement with the Lions Club. In June, she attended a retreat where she connected with the new Board. She will serve as the Global Membership Team Leader of Lions District 38-O in Nebraska. Later in June, she traveled to Las Vegas for a three-day training summit. The summit was invitation-only, with 500 people in attendance, and all expenses covered by Lions International.

Patti observed that only two blind individuals, including herself, were in attendance—despite the organization's longstanding commitment to serving the blind, a mission influenced by Helen Keller's partnership with the Lions. She noted that the Lions' international portal is currently not accessible to people who are totally blind. She found it striking that an organization dedicated to serving blind people prioritizes other issues over accessibility. Patti expressed that, despite these challenges, she is proud to represent the Lions as a blind person and made a point to speak during every opportunity at the summit.

Patti also mentioned speaking to students at the Center, encouraging them to be advocates for themselves and for all blind and visually impaired individuals as they navigate the world.

Commissioner Mentink

Since the last meeting, she has attended one NFBN Board of Directors meeting, two Alumni Association of the Wisconsin School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (AAWSBVI) Board meetings, the AAWSBVI reunion, two NFBN Senior Division meetings, the 2025 NFB National Convention, and one Friends of the Commission meeting. She holds leadership roles in all of these organizations, which, while demanding, she finds deeply rewarding.

The Friends of the Commission is still working to secure grants to fund items the NCBVI cannot cover, such as t-shirts for Project Independence. The group is also seeking additional members to serve on the board.

Report from the Executive Director

I. Administration

Meetings and Activities:

Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC)

The Council discussed the uncertainty surrounding recent and upcoming changes at the federal level, particularly within the U.S. Department of Education. Anticipated budget cuts were expected to affect Special Education programs. However, I received news yesterday stating that the Senate Appropriations Committee was putting funds back into the departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services. Reports were provided on the progress being made to improve performance, as Nebraska is currently ranked 46th in the nation.

NCSAB Monthly Meetings

Planning is underway for the Fall NCSAB Conference, which will take place in San Diego. An Executive Committee face-to-face meeting was held on June 25, which I was unable to attend due to personal reasons. Nonetheless, key discussions occurred regarding the impact of the federal budget.

Although Client Assistance Program (CAP) funding was cut, the program remains federally mandated. We also learned on July 31 that the Senate Appropriations Committee also put funding back into CAP.

The incoming RSA Commissioner has indicated that, due to reduced staffing, RSA will adopt greater flexibility in several areas, including monitoring. RSA is requesting input from state agencies on which areas would most benefit from this flexibility to better serve clients.

Additionally, NCSAB's policy consultant shared the following updates:

- It remains unclear whether the Secretary of Education will relocate RSA to a different department.
- Blind vendors continue to seek a revised interpretation of "equipment" versus "tools."

On July 15, 2025, the U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Labor (DOL) announced a new workforce development partnership aimed at integrating federal education and workforce systems. Under this partnership, DOL will take a larger role in administering Title II adult education and family literacy programs (WIOA), as well as Carl D. Perkins-funded career and technical education (CTE) programs. These efforts will be managed in collaboration with ED staff, with overall leadership and oversight retained by ED.

StarTran Monthly Meetings

A proposed route change was approved following input from neighbors and the advisory board.

Progress continues on the development of the Multi-Modal Transportation Center. I sent letters to City Council members requesting their support in prioritizing blind vendors for the vending

opportunities at the upcoming Center, scheduled for construction in 2026. I personally spoke with one City Council member, and the President of the Lincoln chapter of the National Federation of the Blind met with another. Both expressed their support. We began this advocacy process early and will continue our follow-up efforts starting in September 2025.

Olmstead Advisory Committee

The updated State Plan was approved by the Board and is currently pending the Governor's signature. Major revisions include:

- Extending the plan's review cycle from every three years to every five years
- Increasing community participation
- Requiring more realistic and measurable goals

Conferences and Presentations

I attended both the American Council of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind national conventions. Notable topics included: new features in Monarch braille displays, advancements in AI for JAWS and other assistive software, and an update from the Director of the Talking Book and Braille Library, who reported that their budget remained intact.

I gave keynote addresses at the Silver Summit Conference, the College Workshop, and the Employment Conference.

On July 10, 2025, I gave a presentation at the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department's All-Staff Meeting on improving healthcare services for blind individuals.

Other NCBVI News:

- We now have two 3D tactile and audio U.S. maps—one large map at the Center and a smaller version in the administration office. In addition, we collaborated to create a 3D tactile and audio version of the Pershing Mural, hosted at the Nebraska History Museum. The *Lincoln Journal Star* published a positive article on this project. We've received excellent feedback from blind consumers.
- Nebraska Public Media is filming a video for NCBVI focused on the Center. This 25–30 minute video is expected to be completed by the end of September. NCBVI will own the video, and it will be posted on our website and YouTube channel.
- We continue to distribute Public Service Announcements (PSAs) to inform the public about our services.
- We learned from the Governor's Office that no additional funds were provided to offset health insurance premium increases. As a result, all state agencies must cover the additional costs. NCBVI will be responsible for an additional \$192,000 during the 2025–2026 state fiscal year. It was noted that further cuts are expected for next year.

Business Office Highlights – Tammie Dunn

The NCBVI General Fund Appropriation for State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2026 has been approved at \$3,152,899, reflecting an increase of \$364,807 designated for salaries and benefits. The agency is currently projecting an increase of \$318,675 in salary and benefit expenses, leaving limited capacity for additional operational spending.

In addition, our federal grants will return to Federal Fiscal Year 2024 funding levels. We will continue to closely monitor budgets and expenditures to ensure alignment with consumer needs

and available resources. With final appropriations now approved for the new biennium, the Business Office is working to finalize the SFY2026 agency budget and meet all related deadlines.

The Business Office is restructuring some responsibilities to ensure proper separation of duties and establish necessary redundancy to support continuity and internal controls in payroll operations. As part of this transition, Katie Mihulka, Accountant I, will serve as the secondary payroll processor. Brandy Harper, Accountant II, is responsible for certifying all payroll batches, and I will be training to become the second certifier.

Sara Watson, HR Generalist/Specialist, has officially assumed all payroll responsibilities previously managed by Shared Services.

We are implementing a revised process for documenting the final disposition of fixed assets valued over \$5,000 that are assigned to consumers. In alignment with State of Nebraska and federal regulations, a formal disposition form is now required under the following conditions:

- Upon closure of the consumer's case with NCBVI
- Once the assistive technology has fully depreciated after five years
- When the equipment is deemed obsolete or no longer of reasonable use to the vocational rehabilitation program

Progress continues in improving the tracking and management of the client supply inventory. Our goals are to enhance visibility, reduce waste, and ensure that necessary items are consistently available to support client needs across the agency.

Beginning this month, we will launch a financial literacy initiative as part of our regular Supervisors' meetings. This ongoing effort is designed to build greater understanding of key financial concepts and promote informed decision-making across the agency.

With renovations complete and furniture installed, we are moving forward with the new lounge space for Center students. A few punch list items remain—such as installing vending machines and removing old lockers—but students are already utilizing the renovated space.

Technology Highlights – Charles Andersen

- Purchased a new iPad and Apple Pencil for Saman Zeb.
- Updated iPads and Apple Pencils for Kaytlyn Hilligas and Kathy Navrkal.
- Ordered Meta smart glasses for use by blind/low vision staff and field staff working with blind/low vision consumers. These will serve both as work tools and demo devices.
- Initiated exploration and comparison of volume licensing options for premium AI tools to support staff productivity and innovation.
- Began evaluating the Plaud AI Notetaker for potential use in client services and staff support.
- Assisted with the inventory process to ensure all Monarch devices are accurately listed as fixed assets.

Kathy Stephens

- Completed registration and hotel arrangements for staff and clients attending the ACB and NFB national conventions.

- Coordinating with State Surplus Property to arrange the removal of outdated technology and furniture from the Lincoln office.
- Working on the year-end inventory for NCBVI technology assets listed in E1. The final inventory report is due to the DAS Materiel Division by August 31.
- Participated in several meetings with the Executive Director at USSTRATCOM.
- Continuing to work with staff to ensure maintenance is up to date for NCBVI state-leased vehicles.

Human Resources

Staff Updates

- Hugh Phan, Technology Manager, resigned as of June 13.
- Charles Andersen was hired as Technology Manager effective June 30, filling the position vacated by Hugh Phan.
- Charli Saltzman was hired as the new Lincoln District Technology Specialist and will begin these duties on August 11. Charli is currently an OC Counselor in the Lincoln office.
- Interviews are underway for the Lincoln Technology Specialist position previously held by Charles Andersen.
- Candace Dollar, formerly a VR Counselor from Omaha, will begin her new duties as an Orientation Counselor supporting the Center and the NBE on August 11. She will be supervised by Jessica.
- Tammy Brummer began working as an Accountant I on July 14 at the front desk. She joins us from Werner Enterprises, bringing over 30 years of experience in customer service, office coordination, and logistics management.
- Eric Buckwalter left the agency on June 30. We tried to reclassify this position to a higher level due to growing responsibilities in the NBE program. However, State Personnel reclassified this position to a different, yet similar position.
- Jeff Altman retired on June 30 after 30 years with NCBVI. We extend our sincere thanks to Jeff for his many years of excellent training and for helping uphold the strong national reputation of our agency.
- All areas are now fully staffed, with the exception of three vacancies: the position formerly held by Eric Buckwalter, the VR position in Omaha vacated by Candace, and the Lincoln Technology position.

Training Opportunities:

- In early May, Pam Rademacher and Tammie Dunn attended their second session of the National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI).
- Several staff attended the NFB national convention in early July.
- Several staff continue to receive AI training with Julie Abe.
- Some staff participated in webinars on various topics, including mental health, Pre-ETS, working with seniors, and employment.
- Cristal attended the Capacity Building Institute in Charlotte, North Carolina, and participated in the *Puentes de Salud* Workshop.
- Josh Golden completed and passed the JAWS Trained Professional Certification.

II. Field Services

- Several staff participated in the Silver Summit for senior blind individuals in May, providing presentations and training. The conference was once again a success, with 128

participants. Special recognition goes to Angie Hoff for her leadership, dedication, and teamwork.

- Several staff coordinated and presented at the College Workshop in June, held in partnership with the NFB of Nebraska.
- Also in June, we hosted an Employment Conference in collaboration with Buna Dahal.
- A new program, *Step to WAGES*—a one-week initiative—was introduced this year to help younger or less-experienced students become familiar with nonvisual techniques. It was held the week prior to the WAGES program.
- The WAGES program had 23 participants this year.
- *Project Independence* was held in July at Camp Calvin Crest. The focus this year was on building a variety of structures using LEGOs.
- Both Omaha and Lincoln districts hosted their GATE programs.
- We are collaborating with Thomas Madura and Carol Christian on a future STEM camp focused on astronomy and 3D printing. Plans are underway to host a 3D printer workshop during Fall Winnerfest, with the full STEM camp tentatively scheduled for next summer in Lincoln, utilizing the Planetarium and the UNL campus.

Field staff across the state continue to build and strengthen strategic partnerships with stakeholders. These relationships allow us to enhance our services and expand opportunities for our consumers.

Lincoln District:

- Participates in the Lincoln Workforce Development Board and attends monthly meetings at the American Job Center.
- Hosted a booth at the Nebraska Civil Rights Conference at Innovation Campus.
- Gave a presentation at Prairie Village in Columbus to residents and staff.
- Met with a veterans group in Beatrice.
- Met with Auburn High School staff and administration to provide education on low vision.
- Collaborated with Nebraska VR to determine best practices for serving Deaf-Blind students.
- Attended the Lay Advocacy Professionals Luncheon hosted by Disability Rights Nebraska, the monthly EmployLNK meeting, and the EmployLNK Steering Committee.
- Consulted with the Area Agency on Aging, ATP, and I Can Connect to help consumers access services.
- Participated in multiple networking events, including the Family Collaboration Meeting, Spanish Networking Group, Food Security Meeting with United Way, the Growing Community Connection event in Sioux City, the Early Childhood Springtacular at Norfolk Public Schools, and the Building Courageous Families meeting at the Winnebago Tribe Community.
- Engaged in employer outreach and visited Wayne State College and Concordia University to speak with Career Centers and Disability Offices about NCBVI services.
- Hosted a booth on July 26 to commemorate the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Omaha District:

- Networked with Douglas County Human Resources to offer a variety of business services that may lead to employment opportunities.
- Developed a new partnership with Northend Teleservices, resulting in a job placement for an NCBVI consumer.
- Continued collaboration with Vancro to provide services to the Deaf-Blind community through the SSP program.

- Mickie Saltzman is preparing targeted training sessions for Teachers of the Visually Impaired.
- Delivered Disability Awareness training to the Omaha Housing Authority.
- Led a Disability Awareness session for Hurrdat Sports Communication.
- Provided Job Readiness training for Pre-ETS students in the WAGES program.

North Platte District:

- Connected with the Lexington YMCA, Morton Elementary, and the City of Gibbon to explore potential Work-Based Learning Experiences (WBLE).
- Participated in the Chadron Veterans Stand Down and Hiring Event.
- Networked with Nebraska Appleseed.
- Established partnerships with Primrose Nursing Home and Assisted Living, as well as Stone Hearth Estates.
- Participated in the Primrose Community Fair for seniors.
- Co-hosted a Pre-ETS summer camp in collaboration with Teachers of the Visually Impaired in Western Nebraska. This event successfully introduced NCBVI services to families new to the agency.
- Participated in the City of Gering's "Safe Streets and Roads for All" initiative.

Client Statistics

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

- OIB (Older Individuals who are Blind): 616
- IL (Independent Living) clients under 55: 87
- VR (Vocational Rehabilitation): 495

Successful Consumer Closures in the Following Occupations:

- Bill and Account Collectors
- Business Operations Specialist
- Childcare Worker (3)
- Computer Network Support Specialist
- Computer Occupations, Other
- Customer Service Representative (3)
- Fabric and Apparel Patternmaker
- Farmer/Rancher
- Fashion Designer
- Fitness Instructor/Trainer (2)
- Interviewer
- Janitor/Cleaner
- Management Analyst
- Market Research Analyst
- Nursing Assistant
- Randolph-Sheppard Operator
- Receptionist/Information Clerk
- Registered Nurse
- Security Guard
- Social Science Research Assistant
- Teacher/Instructor – Secondary Education

III. Nebraska Center for the Blind

As of July 14, nine individuals are attending training at the Center. This includes four VR consumers, one Pre-ETS consumer, three OIB consumers, and one staff trainee. One VR consumer is currently on a temporary medical leave of absence but is expected to return within a month.

Since the last meeting, three consumers have graduated from the Center, and two have begun training. During this quarter, five consumers toured the Center, and two participated in three-day stays.

The Center continued to offer drops, mini meals, commencement meals, techniques of daily living instruction, weekly philosophical seminars, and monthly virtual vocational seminars.

Activities this quarter included a self-defense lesson at Lincoln Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, tours of the Talking Book and Braille Services and Bennett Martin Library, travel and escalator practice at Gateway Mall, attendance at Jazz in June, and rock climbing at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln indoor climbing wall.

Nikki Jackson and Anil Lewis from the National Federation of the Blind led a two-day, in-person workshop focused on employment.

IV. Nebraska Business Enterprise (NBE)

Federal Building:

At USSTRATCOM, I have been meeting with several potential teaming partners as alternatives to WGS for managing the cafeteria. We also continue to collaborate with USSTRATCOM on the ongoing cafeteria upgrade/remodel. Once complete, the renovated space will feature both hot and cold food bars.

The project to consolidate two existing USCIS facilities in Lincoln into a single location has been delayed. Originally scheduled for completion in February/March 2025, the new projected occupancy date is now Fall 2025.

We are currently working on finalizing a contract with the National Guard in Ashland, with the goal of beginning service in January 2026. We will also have a teaming partner in place to manage this site.

State Buildings:

The vendor who operated the Lincoln State Office Building cafeteria and vending machines for the past 14 years has exited the program. A current licensed vendor has been assigned to manage the vending machines. The cafeteria is currently being operated under a short-term emergency placement by the State Building Division. NBE is actively exploring long-term solutions to ensure continued cafeteria service.

- NBE currently has 15 licensed vendors actively servicing routes.
- One individual is currently in training.
- One vendor recently exited the program.
- Several others have expressed interest in joining the NBE program.

NBE is organizing a Vendor Training Retreat, scheduled for August 15–16 in Grand Island, Nebraska.

Highlights of the retreat will include:

- Presentations by Terry Smith, representative of the National Association of Blind Merchants, and Scott Eggen, President of Randolph-Sheppard Vendors of America
- A variety of additional training sessions designed to support vendor growth and development

Additionally, NBE is currently mentoring one WAGES student, who is gaining valuable experience across multiple aspects of the Randolph-Sheppard Program.

Commissioner Rocha asked for clarification regarding the route that Carlos referred to in his report. Director Serván explained that Carlos was referring to the StarTran bus routes.

Commissioner Rocha also inquired about the statement regarding the \$5,000 requirement. He asked whether this would impact NCBVI's budget for providing tools to clients.

Director Serván clarified that when NCBVI purchases an item—such as a notetaker—for a client, and the cost exceeds \$5,000, the item must be assigned as state property. These items are then transferred to the client when the case is closed or when the item no longer holds value.

This became an issue when NCBVI purchased Monarchs for clients. Initially, the Monarchs were assigned directly to clients based on previous guidance. However, Tammie later learned that under the new procedure, such items must be treated as state property in compliance with state law. As a result, Monarchs—and any items exceeding \$5,000—must first be assigned as state property and later reassigned to the client. This new process does not affect NCBVI's ability to provide necessary tools to clients.

Commissioner Schonlau asked whether there is a ceiling on the amount of funding that can be allocated to a client.

Director Serván responded that there is no ceiling. According to the Rehabilitation Act, NCBVI is required to spend what is necessary to help blind consumers achieve their vocational goals. While there is no spending cap, all purchases must be reasonable, necessary, allowable, and allocable.

Public Comment Period

There was no public comment.

Break: A break was taken at 9:50 a.m. The meeting resumed at 10:05 a.m.

Focus Topic: Focus Topic: Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS).

Provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to Blind Youth in Nebraska

Prepared by Erin Brandyberry in collaboration with NCBVI staff

The Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) is committed to empowering blind and visually impaired youth across the state by preparing them for competitive integrated employment. Through the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program, NCBVI implements

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) in accordance with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). These services are designed to help students with disabilities make informed decisions about their future and develop the skills necessary for employment and independence.

Eligible Consumers for Pre-Employment Transition Services

Pre-ETS are provided to students with disabilities who are between the ages of 14 and 21 and enrolled in a secondary, post-secondary, or other recognized education program. At NCBVI, this includes youth who are blind or visually impaired, including those with additional disabilities. Services may be provided to both consumers with open VR cases and students identified as potentially eligible.

Core Pre-ETS Activities

NCBVI delivers the five required Pre-ETS as outlined by WIOA:

1. Job Exploration Counseling

Youth are introduced to career pathways through one-on-one counseling, group sessions, and job exploration assessments. Counselors provide tools to help students understand their interests, strengths, and vocational options.

Examples include:

- Career assessments
- Informational interviews with employers
- Employer site tours
- Career exploration videos

2. Work-Based Learning Experiences

Students participate in paid and unpaid work opportunities such as internships, job shadowing, on-the-job trainings (OJTs), and volunteer placements. These experiences are developed in partnership with businesses, schools, and community organizations.

Examples include:

- Hands-on work experiences at community employers such as Morton Elementary, Railside Diner, Early Adventures Learning Daycare, Clevenger's Gas Station, Stone Hearth Estates Assisted Living Center, and Dawson Motor Company

3. Transition/Post-Secondary Opportunities Counseling

NCBVI staff help students explore colleges, vocational training programs, and other avenues of post-secondary education. Assistance includes campus visits, coordination with disability support services, and support with financial aid applications.

Examples include:

- College tours and meetings with disability coordinators
- Connecting students with other agencies (e.g., DD, Easter Seals, Social Security)
- Budget planning for housing and college
- FAFSA and scholarship completion
- Researching programs aligned with vocational goals
- ACT accommodations coordination

4. Workplace Readiness Training

These trainings cover soft skills, communication, professionalism, time management, and independent living skills such as transportation, money management, and self-advocacy. Instruction is delivered through group activities, individual sessions, and immersive programs.

Examples include:

- Personal data sheet and resume development
- Typing and job readiness training
- Personal hygiene and assistive technology use
- Transportation training (public transit, cane travel)
- Cooking and daily living skills

5. Instruction in Self-Advocacy

Students learn about their rights and responsibilities, how to request accommodations, and effective communication strategies with employers and educators. Programs often include mentoring and leadership development.

Examples include:

- Independent communication with service providers (e.g., obtaining a library card)
- Self-advocacy in IEP meetings and workplace settings
- Disability education and empowerment

Alternate Delivery Methods

School Collaboration

Over the past year, NCBVI staff have actively supported Pre-ETS within Lincoln Public Schools (LPS). Key activities included:

- Participation in Independence Academy and Project SEARCH informational nights
- Hosting a resource table at LPS Transition Night
- Assisting students during Project SEARCH Interview and Skills Night
- Presenting at the LPS Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVI) meeting to clarify NCBVI services and address misconceptions (e.g., that Center training is mandatory)

NCBVI also provides training and consultation to school staff, particularly TVIs, focusing on assistive and accessible technologies. This collaboration enhances support in the classroom and bridges the gap between educational and vocational services.

Nebraska Center for the Education of Children Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired (NCECBVI)

NCBVI provides consistent and individualized Pre-ETS to students at NCECBVI. Services include vocational counseling, daily living skills, and assistive technology training. Regular visits ensure ongoing support, especially for students outside the Lincoln district. Most students participate in NCBVI-sponsored events such as Winnerfest and WAGES.

Nebraska Center for the Blind

High school graduates under age 22 who are accepted into a post-secondary institution may use Pre-ETS funds to attend training at the Nebraska Center for the Blind. Attending the Center between high school graduation and college entry helps students strengthen nonvisual and independent living skills.

In FY2025, three Pre-ETS consumers and four additional VR consumers participated in Center training. Training includes classes in Cane Travel, Technology, Braille, Home Management, Shop, Philosophy, and Vocational Seminars. Students commute via city bus and live in studio apartments, independently managing cooking, cleaning, laundry, and grocery shopping. Monthly virtual seminars and semi-annual workshops address job exploration, workplace readiness, interviewing, soft skills, reasonable accommodations, and college readiness.

Highlights and Outcomes

Pre-ETS is not a short-term intervention—it's a developmental process that helps students grow the mindset and skills needed for adult life. Our impact is best seen in long-term outcomes.

- **146 active Pre-ETS cases** currently open
- **67 successful case closures** (transition-age applicants, since 2017)
- **Expanded partnerships** with employers and community providers for broader job placements

Program Year 2024 Service Summary

- Instruction in Self-Advocacy: **56 students**
- Job Exploration Counseling: **28 students**
- Transition/Post-Secondary Counseling: **35 students**
- Work-Based Learning Experiences: **34 students**
- Workplace Readiness Training: **28 students**

Estimated Pre-ETS Expenditures (Program Year 2024)

- Instruction in Self-Advocacy: **\$116,000**
- Job Exploration Counseling: **\$36,000**
- Maintenance (Pre-ETS programming): **\$324,000**
- Rehab Tech Devices and Services: **\$5,000**
- Transition/Post-Secondary Counseling: **\$32,000**
- Transportation: **\$33,000**
- Work-Based Learning Experiences: **\$114,000**
- Workplace Readiness Training: **\$132,000**

Conclusion

NCBVI remains dedicated to providing high-quality Pre-Employment Transition Services that equip blind youth with the tools to succeed in the workforce and lead independent lives. Through individualized support, collaborative partnerships, and innovative service delivery, we help students build confidence, gain experience, and take meaningful steps toward employment and independence.

The following Pre-ETS stories were submitted in writing by consumers and shared.

From a Young Gentleman in High School:

Advocacy in Action in DC

To whom it may concern,

NCBVI has given me the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C., for the Washington Seminar earlier this year. I was able to speak with my representative, Adrian Smith, and show him the voice that we have.

I also had the opportunity to participate in work-based learning and was employed by the local grocery store.

From a Young Student in High School:

NBE On-the-Job Training and Employment

Having a vending machine program as part of the state agency is an excellent way to gain work experience early on. I really enjoy what I do, and it's a great opportunity to have while being employed. I manage four vending machines at a work site, and the work becomes simple once you get the hang of it. Plus, the support and training I receive from a staff member are well-delivered and offer helpful tips and advice so I can work efficiently. Learning to identify different items by touch and organizing drinks and snack bags in a certain order has been valuable—skills I picked up through training. I truly appreciate the items and resources the state provides to help get a vending machine business off the ground, while still allowing vendors to maintain control over their machines and products.

Diabetic Training

I was able to learn how to give myself insulin shots for the first time, all thanks to a contractor the state works with. I never imagined I'd be able to draw up insulin with a syringe and administer it on my own. Being able to take more control of my diabetic care is empowering, and I love that I can now be more self-sufficient in my healthcare journey. Working with another blind individual has also been amazing, as I've picked up useful tips they use every day that I can apply in my own life. I've learned to use simple but effective tools, like bump dots, and tactile methods such as placing a finger between two outlet holes to plug something in, or using a butter knife to feel for pots and pans on the stove. These have all been incredibly helpful. I truly value the support I receive from the different people and services that contribute to my growth and independence as a visually impaired individual.

From a Deafblind Individual (HJ):

The Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired services are so good because they really do help people who are blind and visually impaired discover the power within themselves. They help the blind and visually impaired find jobs and achieve their goals. Clients get the help they need, and because of that, they are able to reach their goals and feel like they're just like everyone else. It's so awesome how the services give us power, strength, and confidence no matter what life throws at us. We see a light at the end of any challenge we may face.

Thanks to these awesome services, I now feel like I'm not just "a blind person" anymore. I'm confident, brave, and strong. I can do more than I ever thought I was capable of.

I would like to thank you for being my counselor. I'm always willing to be a speaker in the future if needed—please keep me posted.

From a Male Student Preparing for College:

WINNERFEST

I am glad that I attended WINNERFEST because it helped me learn about different topics, such as money and travel. The program made an impact on me by teaching new things at each session.

WAGES

I am glad that I was able to attend the WAGES program three years in a row. The program gave me work experience at different jobs each summer and helped me learn about other jobs students can do during breaks. I liked participating in activities such as rock climbing, axe throwing, camping, the farmers market, and goalball. I'm thankful I attended those programs.

Center Training

I'm thankful for my Center training. It has helped me learn life skills and how to live independently. I enjoyed visiting Homestead National Historical Park, where I learned about history and what school was like in the 1800s. I also participated in Lincoln Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, which taught me basic self-defense. I liked the bowling activity too—it was interesting learning to bowl under sleep shades, even though I'm completely blind. It was cool to do it with other blind students.

Emmit's Story

Candace Dollar requested membership in the U.S. Chapter of the International Society of Augmentative & Alternative Communication (ISAAC). This membership provided Candace with specialized training to work with her Pre-Employment Transition Students who need supported employment services. Candace used this training to develop comprehensive plans for each consumer needing this type of service.

From the Grandmother (Guardian) of High School Student (MK):

How the Commission has helped Mileigh is truly wonderful. They provided her with books to read in Braille—she really loves to read. They also gave her a Monarch device. When she received it, she couldn't put it down. She kept saying, "WOW!" For the first time in her 17 years, she could **see** with her hands what we see with our eyes. Thank you all for the amazing tools she can now use.

From a Student (ZH):

Hello Commissioners,

I am excited and glad to tell you all about my experiences with the Project Independence program and my involvement in it. NCBVI is the reason for my success in school and work, and it will continue to be the driving force behind my college education and future employment. I'm happy to give back to you all in any way possible.

I attended Project Independence as a kid for several years. It was my first introduction to the larger blind community. Before then, I had no idea there were other people who were blind. Project Independence was where I made my first blind friends, learned basic home management skills, and discovered that there are many things in life you can enjoy with little or no sight. I would recommend PI to any blind or low vision child.

This summer, I had the opportunity to see the program from a new angle as I was hired as night staff. It was my first year working at the program, and we had a wonderful group of kids. My nights were uneventful in terms of behavior, but I enjoyed getting to know the other staff—many of whom had taught me in the past. I stuck around outside of my shift to observe the daytime activities, and it gave me a whole new perspective.

I saw blind children making friends, helping each other, and having a good time. I saw their faces light up and their voices grow excited while exploring new technology or learning nonvisual techniques that may change their lives forever. I was extremely glad to be a part of it.

What you have in Project Independence is a **community**. A community of wonderful staff who run the program seamlessly and give these kids a chance to experience what their lives could be like as independent blind people. The next generation of blind Nebraskans is in your hands, and I believe PI is the perfect place to start nurturing them toward independence. It has come full circle for me, and I am proud to be giving back to the program that once started my journey. Thank you for this amazing opportunity—I look forward to working with you in the future.

From Young Female Student (L. Lex):

I moved here from another country, and working with my VR counselor at NCBVI has really helped me adjust and prepare for my future. Through the transition services, I've been learning new skills that will help me after high school. My counselor has helped me practice self-advocacy by encouraging me to speak up for myself, communicate my needs, and take the lead in situations—like getting my own library card.

I've also been able to try out different work experiences, which have taught me what it's like to have a job and given me real-world skills. My counselor talks with me about my career goals and helps me connect with resources, such as college programs and other services.

Coming from another country, having this kind of support has made a big difference. NCBVI's transition services are helping me gain independence and prepare for work and life after high school.

From a Parent About Son (Pre-ETS):

I am writing to express my sincere gratitude for the invaluable services and support that the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired has provided to my son.

His caseworker has shown dedication and compassion since meeting him shortly after he became visually impaired following strokes related to open-heart surgery. In addition to making regular

home visits, she helps him explore how to access his visual abilities, learn new adaptive skills, utilize assistive technology, and navigate both new and familiar environments.

The Commission has also given him social opportunities to connect with other visually impaired peers, allowing him to feel seen, supported, and part of a larger community. The WAGES and WINNERFEST programs have equipped him—and others—with tools to start thinking about the future with hope and purpose, helping them connect their skills to potential career paths.

Thank you for being part of a program that demonstrates an ongoing commitment to empowering visually impaired youth. The personalized attention, encouragement, and resources provided through NCBVI have helped lay a strong foundation for my son's independence and success by giving him hope for the future

Jessica Beecham's Report on Student Programs

Jessica Beecham assisted in moderating the student session.

She began by thanking everyone for the opportunity to be present, stating that it is a true privilege to serve as a contractor with NCBVI. She emphasized that while the students' stories highlight the amazing work being done, it truly takes a village to bring these programs together. She expressed appreciation for the support of the Commission Board, the dedicated counselors, and the NCBVI leadership team and administrators who help coordinate the programs. Jessica noted that Carlos Serván leads with an attitude of "yes" and a heart grounded in the belief: *I want what's best for blind people in Nebraska*. All of these efforts culminate in programs that are a true honor to lead.

Jessica reported that there were 24 students in the WAGES program this year—the largest number since they began coordinating the program.

She also shared that JB & K Services has had the privilege of working with the WAGES program for the past four years. In addition, the organization has been involved with several Winnerfest programs and the Advocacy in Action program.

Jessica noted that the WAGES program alone required a combined 5,000 hours of staff time this year. While many students are able to participate without needing much support, others benefit from having a job coach to successfully navigate to work and perform their duties each day. NCBVI supports the inclusion of job coaches for students who need that extra level of assistance. This year, there were five job coaches. Additionally, the program included four evening staff members, two overnight staff, and four weekend staff.

It takes a large, dedicated team to ensure that students can fully participate in the WAGES program—not only in a safe environment but also in one that challenges them to grow and gain independence. One of the biggest challenges in coordinating WAGES is finding the right balance between promoting maximum independence and maintaining safety. Jessica expressed appreciation for NCBVI's strong support, which makes it possible to achieve both goals.

She also highlighted that across all their programs, they strive to hire as many blind staff members as possible. This ensures students have genuine, structured discovery-based experiences. The goal is to help students build problem-solving skills and become more confident in navigating life independently.

Jessica concluded by stating that NCBVI's programs truly help students grow, feel confident, and believe that they can accomplish anything they set their minds to. Challenge activities are intentionally incorporated into all the programs to help students build that confidence

Students were present to speak about each of these programs.

Lucy Rothfuss

Lucy shared that this was her first time attending the WAGES program and that she felt very blessed to be a part of it. WAGES is a six-week summer program that offers job experience along with evening activities. She described it as a great experience where she learned a lot. Her job helped her practice speaking up and stepping out of her comfort zone. She also participated in fun activities such as rock climbing. Lucy said that attending the WAGES program was an incredible opportunity for her.

Jason Rothfuss

Jason explained that he and his wife homeschool their six children, three of whom are adopted, including Lucy. Lucy came home with them from China about ten years ago. Because they homeschool, they did not have access to IEPs or other professional resources. Jason noted that Lucy is a good student who works hard. As she grew older, they began exploring vocational options and discovered NCBVI earlier this year. He said the level of care and resources available through NCBVI was a wonderful surprise. They are very grateful for the WAGES program and the opportunity to send Lucy to Lincoln to attend. Jason shared that they had not been away from her for more than two nights in the past ten years. After speaking with Jessica, he was amazed by the level of care and love provided. He concluded by saying this has been a great experience all around and thanked the Commission for giving Lucy this opportunity.

Alleigh Holmberg

Alleigh reported that she attended the Advocacy in Action program, which took place alongside the National Federation of the Blind National Seminar. She shared that they had the opportunity to speak with state representatives about bills and initiatives they were encouraging them to support. Alleigh personally presented on the Accessible Technologies Act, which aims to make websites more accessible for screen readers, among other improvements. She said it was a valuable experience to attend both the board and presentation meetings. The group also explored museums, monuments, and local restaurants. Alleigh noted that riding the subway for the first time was a great learning experience. Advocacy in Action was highlighted as a powerful self-advocacy program.

Brooklynn Brayman Reeves

Brooklynn shared that participating in the Winnerfest and WAGES programs has helped her grow in independence and learn to advocate for herself. At Winnerfest, they engaged in both professional and fun activities, including art and science. They also learned about managing money and navigating the stock market. In her first year of WAGES, Brooklynn was terrified of flying, but by the following year, she had overcome that fear. She proudly shared that she will soon

be flying solo to Florida to visit a friend she met through these programs and will be staying in a hotel by herself—an experience that reflects her personal growth.

Jessica Beecham expressed her gratitude to NCBVI for being a state agency that truly leads in providing exemplary services for blind youth. She shared her appreciation for the opportunity JB & K Services has had to be a part of that important work.

Commissioner Livingston commended JB & K Services for the outstanding work they do in organizing the WAGES program and other NCBVI initiatives.

Commissioner Rocha thanked the students for sharing their stories. She said it is encouraging to hear that they enjoy the programs and that NCBVI's services are benefiting them.

Commissioner Schonlau stated that her understanding has been deepened by the programs highlighted today. She encouraged NCBVI to continue offering these programs, calling them amazing. Commissioner Schonlau also turned her comments to Jason, acknowledging that being a parent is different from being a young person learning to navigate life. She shared that although her children are not visually impaired, her own father had difficulty letting her go to college—and sometimes it's okay to cry. She encouraged Jason to hang in there and affirmed that he is doing a great job.

Commissioner Mentink shared that she is originally from Wisconsin and moved to Nebraska 21 years ago. She noted that, unlike Nebraska, Wisconsin did not have similar programs for blind youth. She expressed how encouraging it is to be involved with NCBVI and how much she has learned since joining the Commission Board. Commissioner Mentink said she appreciates that NCBVI reaches out to homeschoolers, noting that she currently teaches music at Bible Baptist Church in Columbus, which is considered a homeschool setting. She also recently met a blind student attending a Catholic school and emphasized the importance of NCBVI serving *all* students, not just those in public schools.

Commissioner Livingston closed by thanking everyone for sharing their stories and thoughts.

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or issues

There were no CAP complaints or issues.

NFB Newsline Update – by Jamie Richey

Summer is sizzling and so is NFB-Newsline®! I had the pleasure of attending the 85th Annual National Convention of the National Federation of the Blind in New Orleans this July, and it was wonderful to connect in person with the amazing Newsline team from Baltimore. These annual check-ins are always full of updates, ideas, and forward-thinking conversations about expanding and enhancing the service.

One of the most exciting announcements at convention was the official release of the NFB-Newsline® Android app! That's right—whether you're team Apple or team Android, NFB-Newsline® now fits in your pocket. With this new launch, more users than ever can access the news, information, and entertainment they rely on while soaking up the sunshine or enjoying a lazy

afternoon by the pool.

With more than 600 publications and counting, NFB-Newsline® continues to grow. There's always something new being added—from local interest pieces to international headlines, from breaking news to lifestyle features. Just like a summer garden, the platform is constantly blooming with fresh content.

This spring and early summer, I had the opportunity to share Newsline with a wide range of audiences. In May, I presented at the Silver Summit – Older Blind Conference, helping participants discover the many ways Newsline can support independence and connection. In June, I spoke with WAGES participants about the unique ways Nebraskans are using Newsline every day. One of the most meaningful moments of the quarter came when one of my national scholarship mentees shared that she uses NFB-Newsline® daily to complete her coursework for a master's degree in human services. Stories like hers are a beautiful reminder of the impact this service can have!

We began the second quarter of 2025 with 2,174 subscribers in April, and slowly but steadily grew to 2,176 subscribers by June. April brought in 4 new users, May welcomed 5 more, and June added 1 new subscription—proof that even as folks begin vacation plans and summer cookouts, they're still finding value in NFB-Newsline®.

In terms of telephone usage, April saw 510 phone calls with an average length of about 16.4 minutes, resulting in over 17,900 total call minutes. May saw a jump to 611 calls, though the average length dipped slightly to just over 12 minutes, pushing the total minutes up to 25,300—our highest for the quarter. In June, we logged 628 calls, averaging just over 15 minutes each, for a monthly total of 9,461 minutes. Local calls made up between 17 and 47 percent, depending on the month.

Online access remained strong throughout the quarter. April users launched over 6,000 web sessions and accessed content nearly 25,000 times, while “In Your Pocket” deliveries topped 4,000—perfect for those road trips, porch swings, and long drives to weekend getaways. May brought a wave of activity with 32,499 online accesses, including 3,369 web sessions and 638 sessions through the mobile app. Email and pocket-format deliveries continued to be popular. In June, activity dipped slightly with 6,003 online accesses, but “In Your Pocket” usage remained strong at 2,495 deliveries—a handy companion for those lazy summer days.

When we break down content engagement, Nebraska-specific publications continue to lead the way. Users viewed over 4,200 Nebraska newspaper articles in April, followed by 3,416 in May, and 3,543 in June. National newspapers, breaking news updates, and TV listings were also well-used, with smaller but steady numbers in categories like international news, local emergency alerts, magazines, and custom 'My Newspaper' feeds.

On average, users accessed content every 6.15 minutes in April, 6.57 minutes in May, and 8.29 minutes in June—a sign that people are diving deep into the material they find most useful and relevant, even as the temperature rises and summer distractions abound.

If you have any questions or would like additional details, I'd be happy to provide more information. Until then, enjoy the sunshine, stay cool, and have a wonderful rest of your Nebraska summer!

New Business

Officer Elections

Vice Chair Livingston reported that every year at this time, the Board conducts officer elections. The positions on the Board are Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and Executive Secretary. Vice Chair Livingston noted that the commissioners only make decisions related to NCBVI when they are together at a Commission Board meeting.

The Chair oversees the proceedings of the meetings, and they work closely with the Vice Chair to put the Commission meeting agendas together. The Chair also works closely with the executive director who keeps him informed on everything he needs to know to make sure that NCBVI is headed in the right direction.

The Vice Chair works with the Chair to put together an agenda for the Commission meetings. Cheryl noted that the administrative specialist has been assisting with putting the agenda together. After a draft agenda is completed, they reach out to the other commissioners, the executive director, and the administrative specialist to get their input. The Vice Chair is also responsible for facilitating the Commission meetings if the Chair is not available. It was noted that when putting together the agenda, many of the agenda items are a repeat from the year before since there are certain issues that must be dealt with on a yearly basis.

The main duty of the Executive Secretary is to take notes and record the motions at each meeting. The commissioners have an ongoing document which shows all the motions made at each meeting. This document must be updated after each meeting. The document is then sent to the Chair, the Vice Chair and the Administrative Specialist. It is the duty of all commissioners to stay informed on the activities of NCBVI.

Commissioner Rocha moved to elect Commissioner Heyen as Chairperson.

Commissioner Heyen accepted the nomination via email.

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

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

Commissioner Mentink moved to elect Commissioner Livingston as Vice Chairperson.

Commissioner Livingston accepted the nomination.

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

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

Commissioner Schonlau moved to elect Commissioner Mentink as Executive Secretary. Commissioner Mentink accepted the nomination. There were no additional nominations. Commissioner Schonlau moved that nominations cease, and Commissioner Mentink be elected by acclamation. Commissioner Rocha seconded the motion.

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

Public Comment Period.

There was no public comment.

Executive Session – Personnel Issue

Vote to enter Executive Session
Executive Session to discuss a personnel issue.

Commissioner Mentink moved to go into Executive Session at 11:03 a.m. to discuss a personnel issue.

Commissioner Schonlau seconded the motion.

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

Commissioner Mentink moved to come out of Executive Session at 11:13 a.m. Commissioner Schonlau seconded the motion.

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

Final Announcements

The next NCBVI Commission Board meeting is scheduled for November 8, 2025, in Omaha. The Focus Topic will be Job Placement.

NCBVI Wages banquet and program will be held following the meeting at the Cornhusker hotel. All NCBVI Commission Board Members are invited to attend.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:14 a.m.

If you have an item that you would like to have placed on the agenda of the November 8, 2025 Commission Board meeting, please email it to the NCBVI Commission Board at ncbvi.commission-board@nebraska.gov.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist
NCBVI

Cheryl Livingston, Vice Chair
NCBVI Board of Commissioners