

**NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED  
ANNUAL CALENDAR REPORT FOR 2002**

**I  
INTRODUCTION**

The Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (The Commission) is the State rehabilitation agency that provides a variety of services enabling blind people to become fully participating, contributing members of society. Blind people lead normal lives, work in a wide range of jobs, have families, raise children, and participate in community activities. The real challenge is to elevate the expectations of the capability of the blind, by educating blind people about their own potential, and to educate society about the ability of the blind to contribute to their communities. The following programs and services provide the means by which blind persons can regain a productive role in society:

- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Technology
- Independent Living-Older Blind
- Transition
- Deaf-Blind
- Business Enterprise
- Digital Voice Newspaper Delivery System (NFB-NEWSLINE®)

The Commission uses surveys to quantify client satisfaction and to seek input for improvement. These three surveys are completed at different times. The Orientation Center Survey is completed three months after training at the Orientation Center is completed. The Rehabilitation Track Survey and the Independent Living Survey are completed six months after case closure.

On September 30, 2002, the Commission completed the second year of the Helen Keller National Center Grant and the second year of the Transition Grant. The Older Individuals Who Are Blind Grant became formula-funded by Congress in December 1999. In-Service Training Grant a “Quality Award” ended its second of five years; which enabled the Commission to enhance and maximize the professional strength of the staff to serve our consumers. Social Security Reimbursement has become another source of funds, and as of September 30, 2002, 100% of the applications for reimbursement have been accepted. During our second Federal Fiscal Year, the Commission was able to obtain its full federal-funding match. The “Friends of the Commission” a 501(c)(3) nonprofit group has been established in order to obtain matching funds from local sources.

## II FINANCIAL REPORT

• Basic Support:	
A. Operations (Most of which are spent on direct services)	\$ 2,559,381
B. Aid	\$ 456,792
• Older Blind Program	\$ 225,000
• Independent Living Program	\$ 32,734
• Supported Employment	\$ 30,000
• Transition	\$ 275,000
• Deaf-Blind	\$ 40,000
• In-Service Training Quality Grant	\$ 57,955
• Social Security Reimbursement	\$ 311,871

## III VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION (VR) PROGRAM

The Vocational Rehabilitation program has a goal of assisting blind individuals in becoming fully integrated productive members of society. In rehabilitating such individuals, the Commission provides training and placement in quality jobs that are appropriate to each individual's capabilities, abilities, potentials, and informed choice. Some of the services that may be provided are: training in the skills of blindness, vocational education, counseling and guidance, job training, job development, and assistive technology services. During fiscal year 2002, 709 Nebraskans received vocational rehabilitation services and 53 consumers were successfully employed in a variety of jobs. Fourteen individuals were successfully closed as Homemakers, which allows them full participation in their homes, eliminating the need to rely on the nursing-home system. The Commission performed satisfactorily according to the mandated Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) standards and indicators.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for The Commission, work diligently with employers to educate them about the potential of the blind by providing power-point presentations informing them of reasonable accommodations that will not lower their expectations of productivity. Consumers were placed in a variety of jobs, such as Engineers, Assembly Workers, Lawyers, Clerical Workers, Telephone Operator, Administrators, Human Services Professionals, Teachers, Farmers, Case Workers, Counselors, and Small Business Owners, among others.

Staff development continues as an important facet of improving the quality of services to our consumers. The entire staff continues to receive training on job development and job placement, enabling them to provide better services to our consumers. The Commission emphasizes quality competitive employment; not just the first available job, but full-time jobs that will provide consumers good wages, benefits and the potential for upward mobility. Consequently, no longer will need to receive social security benefits or welfare.

Counseling and guidance is available to families who want to better understand blindness and to support family members who are blind or visually impaired in their pursuit of personal and vocational goals. Furthermore, the Commission promotes a positive understanding of blindness and the abilities of people who are blind to the general public. We have the fundamental belief that with proper training and opportunity, blind people can be fully integrated in the social-economic mainstream. This is done through educational programs designed to reach employers, educators, health care professionals, human services agencies, and other individuals and organizations that come into contact with individuals who are blind.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services also include career exploration, interest testing, and vocational planning. Assistance with tuition, books, adaptive technology, and readers is available to those pursuing vocational training. When an individual is ready for employment, job placement and follow-up services are provided. Our counselors are constantly working with employers to encourage hiring of qualified blind job seekers.

‘Round Tuit: This three-day summer program provides blind and visually impaired job seekers practical information and guidance regarding what it takes to get and keep a job. Consumers learn to write resumes, interview skills, disability disclosure, civil right issues, social security work incentives, work ethics, ADA information, etc.

#### **IV TRANSITION PROGRAM**

The Transition Program is a special project funded by a federal grant through RSA. Employment experiences are too often not available for blind and visually impaired students and young adults as they grow up. The Transition program is focused on creating and supporting those opportunities across the state. Three Transition Counselors and one Transition Coordinator work with students ages 14 to 26 years old. They work to develop positive relationships with schools, families, and employers in their communities. Work opportunities and other special programs for transition students are designed to provide real life work experiences, job skills, and a work history, all of which contribute significantly to eventual success in the workplace as adults.

The WAGES (Work And Gain Experience in the Summer) program provided work experience for ten Nebraska students this past summer here in Lincoln, with four other students working in similar settings in their own communities. During the first week of the program, students get intensive cane travel instruction in order to get familiar with the campus area, where they are housed, and they are then able to get to and from work independently each day. Throughout the program, students build their self-esteem by participating in weekly seminars involving discussions regarding blindness issues, and are exposed to adult blind role models who held competitive jobs and can answer many questions for the students. Transition staff are in constant contact with employers during the duration of the program in order to insure the success of our students in the work

place. The staff also works to educate employers, encouraging them to raise their expectations of individuals who are blind.

The Transition students performed a variety of jobs with Capital Humane Society, Lincoln Children's Museum, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Child Care, Area Office on Aging, City of Lincoln-Calvert Recreation Center, Food Bank of Lincoln, Down Town YMCA, County Records Management, State Office Building Cafeteria, Down Town Senior Center, Leon Ross (Horse Trainer), YWCA, Chadron Veterinary Clinic, the Talking Book and Braille Library, and the Commission for the Blind. This program was a partnership with Lincoln Action Program, which paid most of the salaries for the ten students working in Lincoln. In addition, 20 other transition age consumers were placed in part-time jobs in their own communities.

"Keys to College Success", and "Winnerfest" are two other special programs designed to provide transition students with the skills and information they need to participate fully in the academic experience and in the employment search. The college workshop was done in collaboration with the Nebraska Association of Blind Students. During the session, students engaged in discussion on how to manage readers, deal with science courses, expectation from society, scholarships, effective ways to take independent notes, social skills, and workplace behavior among others. Project Independence (PI) is another program designed for younger children, ages 6 to 13, and is an excellent opportunity for blind and visually impaired youngsters to observe blind adults in their work environments, using alternative skills, and demonstrating success in the workplace. During PI, the parents were involved in seminars in which issues regarding blindness are addressed. In 2002, there were 10 children at Project Independence, 32 at College Prep, and 35 students participated in the two Winnerfest sessions.

The Changing Times a Transition newsletter is published four times a year, and provides information, resources, and interesting articles on transition and opportunities available across the state.

The Nebraska Transition Team for Students who are Blind, Deaf-Blind or Visually Impaired is a collaborative effort among the Commission, Department of Education, school districts, the Nebraska Center for Education of Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired and other entities. The primary purpose is to share information with each other, advise and seek to improve relations and services, and promote an understanding of the issues and critical needs of the students involved in the education and transition process.

The Transition staff is actively participating in the Youth Council of the Workforce Investment System in Omaha, Lincoln-Lancaster and Greater Nebraska.

## V TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM

Computer access equipment enables individuals who are blind or visually impaired to acquire skills necessary to compete effectively in vocational training and employment.

The Commission's Technology Program is the heart of computer training for blind consumers in Nebraska. This program employs three full-time Technology Specialists located in Omaha, Lincoln and North Platte, and provides training and consultation to blind consumers and employers across the state. During the past year around 320 evaluations were completed. Additionally, around 90 computer systems were designed, configured, and delivered to consumers. Technology services were provided to consumers via telephone and e-mail. Consultations were also provided to the Nebraska Health and Human Services System, Nebraska Department of Corrections, University of Nebraska-Omaha, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Nebraska-Kearney, The Gallup Organization, Marriott Hotel Reservations, United Parcel Service, Nebraska Department of Revenue, Greyhound Bus Lines, Workforce Investment System, Nebraska Department of Labor and public schools, among others. Our technology specialist also worked very diligently on assuring that the new Nebraska Information System (NIS) would be fully accessible to blind employees and potential blind applicants who qualify for state jobs. Another service provided by the technology program, is the capability to provide loaner equipment to consumers and employers.

Our technology specialists utilize adaptive software for consumers' on-the-job settings. Many times, only small changes are required to make the blind person's job much easier and more competitive. The focus continues to be on demonstrating speech systems for Windows 98 and 2000. Windows-based applications with speech and magnification are taught. Dragon Dictate voice recognition system is valuable for consumers who cannot physically use a keyboard.

The Commission's technology specialists are constantly researching in order to keep up with changes in technology and to have it available to consumers and employers.

## **VI ORIENTATION CENTER**

The Orientation and Adjustment Center is a comprehensive 8-hour a day, 5-day a week program located in Lincoln. It provides intensive training in the techniques used by successful blind persons in a program designed to build self-confidence. This training includes instruction in areas such as independent travel using a white cane, public transportation, community access, homemaking, apartment living, typing, adaptive technology, Braille, and woodworking. Training may last up to nine months as students learn to apply alternative techniques to solve problems facing them in everyday life. During the training, students reside in apartments in downtown Lincoln provided by the Commission.

The Center also engages in an ongoing program of public education to promote the integration of blind persons into jobs, home and community. The Center invites individuals and groups to come in for tours to view the various features of Center training and promote the potential of blind persons. Participants have included students from public schools and colleges, vision teachers from educational institutions, government

officials, personnel of other governmental agencies, and employers. Furthermore, an educational video was recently developed, to demonstrate consumers getting training and eventually moving into an integrated life.

Attitude and technique training are fully integrated. The attitude training motivates the student to learn and excel at alternative techniques, and learning the techniques allows the student to put his or her new attitudes of confidence into practice. In addition to training in alternative techniques, the Center provides introductory course work in the following areas:

- College Preparation
- Vending Facility Management
- Cooking and Food Service
- Typing and Word Processing
- Computer Operation
- Power Machinery Use and Hand Tool Operation

Center students must be legally blind or have a condition that will eventually lead to legal blindness and must be capable of functioning in a training program which lasts eight hours a day, five days a week. A tour of the facility is scheduled, followed by an interview with the Center's Director.

During the training, all students use sleep shades to eliminate the desire to rely on inadequate vision, build self-confidence and this assists their learning how to think and function successfully as a blind person. Once the cycle of dependence on inadequate sight is broken and the students have learned blind techniques by reflex, they are able to make informed decisions regarding when to use their remaining sight.

During this calendar year, the Orientation Center provided intensive training to 32 blind persons. Additionally, one Commission staff participated in the twelve-week Staff Training Program, and one completed a one-week refresher program. The Center also has started to assist the Business Enterprise Program staff in evaluating prospective vendors.

Students obtain experience in traveling through airports, shopping malls, public bus transportation, shuttle services and taxi-cabs. They also experience traveling in heavier populated areas. To build students' self-confidence, Center training involves activities such as camping trips, hiking trips, swimming, and horseback riding.

Students continue to take increased responsibility in the operation of the Center - a direct result of the Center's belief in the abilities of blind people. When Center students realize they can hold jobs, raise a family, and be valued members of the community, their lives change. Students then look forward to the future with a zest and willingness to meet life's challenges.

## VII INDEPENDENT LIVING-OLDER BLIND PROGRAM

The Older Blind Program serves individuals age 55 or older who are legally blind or who have a progressive eye disease leading to blindness. The Independent Living Program serves blind individuals under the age of 55. The purpose of the Independent Living-Older Blind (IL/OB) Program is to enable blind individuals to live more independently in their homes and communities. Direct services are provided to individuals in their homes and/or group settings at the Commission office. Through the Independent Living and Older Blind programs, individuals receive training and encouragement to continue living fulfilling lives with dignity and independence.

During the calendar year 2002, there were a total of 750 consumers served through the IL/OB programs. 644 individuals were over 55 (OB program) while 106 were under 55 and in the IL program.

Individuals who are blind or visually impaired receive training in the alternative skills needed to pursue personal and vocational goals. Instruction typically begins in the home, focusing on areas of cane travel, Braille, and homemaking. Those needing more intensive instruction often move on to training in the Orientation Center.

Nine Independent Living-Older Blind teachers serve the entire state, reaching many traditionally underserved and unserved populations, especially those in rural areas. The teachers provide the training, guidance and counseling necessary to promote positive attitudes, and encourage consumers to regain active and productive lives. Instruction for the newly blind person may include training in the skills of blindness, such as Braille instruction; orientation and mobility, including learning to use public transportation and orientation to the individual's neighborhood and community facilities; and personal and home management skills including meal preparation, identification of coins and currency, telling time, instruction in the use of NEWSLINE (digital voice newspaper service accessed via touch-tone telephone), Talking Book Library (Braille and audio-cassette books and magazines), Radio Talking Book (voice newspaper service accessed via closed circuit radio and television SAP), and other activities of daily living. Assistive technology devices and various aids may be provided to help individuals become more self-sufficient, including a long white canes, Braille writing equipment, talking calculators, talking glucometers, Closed Circuit TVs (to read regular or large print), magnifiers, and Braille or talking watches.

Comprehensive outreach continues to provide information, consultation and training to other service providers, the general public, and agency staff. The Commission staff helps coordinate services among other providers such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, offices of the area Agencies on Aging, Independent Living Centers, and the Veterans Administration. Peer support groups are available statewide to provide moral support to newly blinded individuals.

Home Teaching Plus: Designed as a supplement to home teaching, older individuals network with other individuals from across the state, to build self-confidence, and develop their skills in a setting away from home during a one-week program. Training during this program is conducted under sleepshades. Sessions include: cane travel, Braille, cooking, woodworking, problem solving, and generally learning a positive attitude toward blindness. Other training activities (such as shopping, golfing, fishing, and visiting museums) are geared to developing skills and confidence for all aspects of life.

Nebraska Visually Impaired Peer Support (VIPS): This network of support groups across Nebraska offers an environment within which individuals who are visually impaired can meet, learn from each other, and cope more effectively with blindness. At present there are 48 such groups. Local peer groups usually meet monthly at accessible, convenient locations. Transportation is provided when possible.

The Nebraska VIPS is a statewide organization developed by blind persons interested in helping each other while helping themselves.

The goals of VIPS are:

- To create and maintain a network of mutual support and peer counseling groups for persons who experience vision loss.
- To inform and educate blind and visually impaired Nebraskans about available services and resources.
- To educate the public and public officials about the circumstances of aging and blindness.

## **VIII DEAF-BLIND PROGRAM**

Prior to setting up the Deaf-Blind Program, services to deaf-blind consumers in the state had been limited by the constraints of time available to individual staff members who had other duties. This year, the program initiated a process for identifying the deaf-blind population; in which the number of individual identified for the Helen Keller, National Center Deaf-Blind registry has double. During this second year of the Helen Keller grant, the Deaf-Blind Program achieved its purpose of providing full-time services to deaf-blind consumers. This includes services to enable individuals who are deaf-blind to live full and productive lives with dignity and self-respect. More specifically, this program strives to assist individuals who are deaf-blind to achieve full participation within their home communities through awareness, use of the American Sign Language and other alternative forms of communication, and utilization of available resources.

The Deaf-Blind Program works in partnership with Nebraska agencies serving consumers who are deaf-blind as well as staff and consumers of the Commission by providing services to or assisting individuals who are deaf-blind to obtain other services related to all aspects of employment, education, and independent living. The program staff is

responsible for planning and scheduling duties in a manner conducive to smooth transition for consumers, as well as efficient use of time and effort.

Program services provide assistance and direction in placement of job seekers who are deaf-blind, consultation to Commission staff and employers regarding reasonable accommodations for individuals who are deaf-blind on the job, and assistance with special arrangements such as support provided by a job coach.

Other services provided include: coordination and facilitation of support groups for consumers who are deaf-blind; demonstration and assessment of the appropriateness of augmentative technology for consumers who are deaf-blind; development of inter-agency agreements or procedures to facilitate the coordination of services to individuals who are deaf-blind; development, coordination, and implementation of training programs focusing on deaf-blindness for the purpose of increasing professional awareness, community awareness, and deaf-blind advocacy; development, coordination, and implementation of training programs focusing on deaf-blindness for interpreters working for and through the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH); and locating resources and materials for Commission staff and other agencies serving or housing consumers who are deaf-blind.

The Deaf-Blind Program will continue to identify and/or develop resources and services that will help eliminate the service gaps to consumers who are deaf-blind.

## **IX** **NFB-NEWSLINE FOR THE BLIND**

NFB-NEWSLINE for the Blind continues its growth in its fourth year. NFB-NEWSLINE for the Blind is a computer-based system that allows all blind, visually impaired and reading impaired persons to access a variety of newspapers and publications by touch-tone telephone. Using the buttons on the telephone, the listener chooses a category of the paper, such as local news, sports, area events, editorial opinions or grocery ads. The listener immediately hears the first story of that category, or can skip to the next story or column, replay it, jump ahead or go back in 10 second increments, raise the volume, or exit the category and choose another by pressing a single digit. Listener options also include the ability to slow down or speed up the rate of speech, a special time check key and a pause control to allow the listener to stop reading a story for a period of two minutes without losing his/her place in the story, availability to spell a word, go forward or backward paragraphs, go forward or backward sentences, to search for a subject all over the paper by a choosing a word. The service is available to 632 users free of charge, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in all 93 counties.

Blind persons preparing for jobs in the year 2003 and beyond cannot afford to ignore the idea of newspaper availability. NFB-NEWSLINE has made it possible for hundreds of blind and print impaired Nebraskans to address this compelling need, thus affording them the opportunity to become even more independent and productive. NFB-NEWSLINE

has a new speech system based on eloquence sound. This sound system is similar to a human voice and is being used for most blind people in the country. NFB-NEWSLINE has indeed contributed to a more literate blind population and the ability to better understand and master the printed word through better access to daily newspapers.

NFB-NEWSLINE for the Blind proudly continues to lead the way as it forges ahead in its quest to take its rightful place on the information "super highway." In the same way the Internet has created a global village, NFB-NEWSLINE has opened a whole new world to its users by enabling them to achieve vocational, economic and social equality to help meet the challenges of today and the hopes and dreams of tomorrow.

## **X REFERRAL SERVICES**

Commission Staff provide ongoing referral services to consumers to a variety of services available to them that the agency does not provide in a direct manner. Some of those are:

Radio Talking Book Network (RTBN) is a statewide, closed-circuit radio reading service for those individuals who have disabilities, visual or physical, which prevent them from reading printed material. Special receivers, or televisions with the Secondary Audio Program (SAP) feature, are required to hear the broadcasts of RTBN. Although there are books available for the visually impaired, including the Talking Book Program of the Library of Congress, there is still a daily informational void that visually handicapped people experience. RTBN makes it possible for people to stay in touch with their community and what is going on around them. Our counselors help to fill out applications for RTBN services and teach consumers to use the equipment.

NFB-Jobline, which provides dial-up access to America's Job Bank, continues to be available to all job seekers, not just individuals who are blind. Job seekers can access the information on NFB-Jobline via a keypad telephone 24 hours a day, all days of the week. NFB-Jobline is operating through a cooperative agreement with the Commission, Health and Human Services, and the Department of Labor.

Nebraska Talking Book and Braille Services is the State Library Service for the Blind and reading impaired. Commission staff assist in filling out applications and teaching consumers how to use the service and the equipment.