

# NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED ANNUAL REPORT 2005

## I INTRODUCTION

The Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (The Commission) is the State vocational rehabilitation agency whose mission is “Empowering blind individuals, promoting opportunities and building belief in the blind”. Our agency 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 achieve or 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 utilizes three surveys to quantify client satisfaction and to seek input for improvement. These surveys are completed at different times. The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Survey and the Independent Living (IL) Survey are completed six months after case closure. In order to get better feedback from our VR clients, a more comprehensive survey instrument has been developed to be conducted over the phone and was implemented in January 2004. The Orientation Center Survey is conducted also over the phone, three months after training is completed. Another form of feedback is via input from consumers received at public meetings and forums, which are held four times a year with the Board and also at state conventions of consumer organizations (the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska, National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska) and groups (Nebraska VIPS).

On September 30, 2005, the Commission completed the fifth and last year of the Helen Keller National Center Grant and also the fifth and last year of the Transition Grant. The Older Individuals Who Are Blind Grant became formula-funded, by Congress, in December 1999. The In-Service Training Grant, a “Quality Award”, ended its fifth of five years; which enabled the Commission to enhance and maximize the professional strength of the staff to serve our consumers. During our fifth 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)	\$	2,699,932
B. Aid	\$	558,674
• Older Blind Program	\$	229,646
• Independent Living Program	\$	34,259
• Supported Employment	\$	30,000
• Transition	\$	275,000
• Deaf-Blind	\$	10,000
• In-Service Training Quality Grant	\$	57,711
• Social Security Reimbursement	\$	40,827

## 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, information about blindness to family and friends, vocational education, counseling and guidance, job training, job development, job placement and assistive technology services. During fiscal year 2005, 840 Nebraskans received services in all statuses; of which 54 consumers were competitively employed in a variety of jobs. Twenty-three individuals were successfully closed as Homemakers, which allowed them full participation in their homes, eliminating the need to rely on the nursing home/assisted-living system and in some cases also allowed blind parents to continue raising their children independently. In addition, this year our staff worked with 217 multi-handicapped individuals who also happen to be blind. The Commission successfully achieved levels required by Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) Standards.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for the Commission work diligently with employers to educate them about the potential of blind job candidates 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, including bookkeeper, engineer, daycare provider, assembly worker, lawyer, clerical worker, licensed massage therapist, telephone operator, administrator, human services professional, teacher, farmer, animal care provider, caseworker, counselor, and small business owner, 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 that enables them to provide better services to our consumers. Our staff also receives ongoing training on multi-handicap issues, as individuals in this population group continue to increase. 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, they will no longer need to receive social security benefits or welfare.

Counseling and guidance are 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 to the general public of blindness and the abilities of people who are blind. We have the fundamental belief that with proper training and opportunity, blind people can be fully integrated into 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 are 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.

#### **IV TRANSITION PROGRAM**

The Transition Program is a special project funded by a federal grant through RSA, which ended September 30, 2005. However, we were running the programs described below before receiving the grant; and will continue to do so.

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 these opportunities across the state. Three Transition Counselors and one Transition Coordinator worked with students between the ages of 14 and 26 years of age. After September 30, 2005, the Deputy Director for rehabilitation services started to coordinate the transition services together with field staff. 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.

This past summer, the WAGES (Work And Gain Experience in the Summer) Program, held in Lincoln, Nebraska, provided work experiences for 8 Nebraska students. During the first week of the program, students received intensive cane travel instruction in order to become familiar with the UNL campus where they resided. They were then able to travel to and from work independently each day. Throughout the program, students increased their self-esteem by participating in weekly seminars involving discussions regarding blindness issues. They were exposed to adult blind role models who hold competitive jobs. These role models shared their work experiences and answered the students' questions. The transition staff were in constant contact with the employers during the duration of the program to insure the success of the students in the work place. The staff also worked to educate employers, encouraging them to raise their expectations of individuals who are blind. The WAGES Program was a partnership with Lincoln Action Program, which paid most of the salaries of the students working in Lincoln.

The jobs students held included: office worker at the Ombudsman's Office, Youth Program worker at Calvert Recreation Center, office worker at NCBVI, staff assistant with the Lincoln-Lancaster Health Department, warehouse worker at The Food Bank of Lincoln, and a receptionist at the Help Desk in the City-County Building.

Students and eight clients who participated in the Opportunity Knocks Program were placed in jobs and their work experiences ranged from three weeks to nine months in duration. Placements included a pet shop worker, a computer technician, a lab assistant, a warehouse worker and an office worker.

The College Workshop is a program designed to provide transition students with the skills and information needed to participate fully in the academic experience and employment search. This year's workshop, with 52 participants, was accomplished in collaboration with the Nebraska Association of Blind Students. The keynote speaker was Pam Allen, Director of the Louisiana Center for the Blind. During the session, students engaged in a discussion on various topics including how to manage readers, dealing with science courses, the expectations from society, scholarships, effective ways to take independent notes, social skills, self-advocacy, and workplace behaviors. As part of the on-going partnership with the College workshop and consumer organizations in the state, The National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska provided an evening social, where useful information was shared.

Two other programs are "Winnerfest" and Project Independence (PI). "Winnerfest" is designed for blind teenagers from across the state to participate in these semi-annual retreats. We had 20 students participate during each of these two sessions. Activities were focused on the importance of mastering the skills of blindness, personal achievement, goal setting, communication and other life skills. One of the most important aspects of these sessions was that the participants were exposed to successful blind role models. PI is a one-to-two week program designed for younger children, ages 7 to 15 where they are introduced to social skills and to work using blindness alternative techniques. This year, the 9 blind and visually impaired youngsters also had an excellent opportunity to observe blind adults in their work environments, using alternative skills, and demonstrating success in the workplace. During PI, the parents were involved in a seminar in which issues regarding blindness were addressed.

The Changing Times Transition Newsletter has been published four times a year, providing information, resources, and interesting articles on transition and opportunities available across the state. The mailing list contains approximately 272 names. The electronic list continues to grow.

The Nebraska Transition Team for Students who are Blind, Deaf-Blind or Visually Impaired is a collaborative effort among the Commission, the Department of Education, school districts, the Nebraska Center for Education of Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired, the Nebraska Department of Education Deaf-Blind Project, consumer organizations and other entities. The primary purpose is to share information with each other, advise, 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.

Mentoring for Excellence is a grant that our agency was awarded for the next 4 years from the National Federation of the Blind—Jernigan Institute. Mentoring is a committed, supportive, and encouraging long-term relationship between two blind participants. The older, more experienced individual (mentor) provides consistent support and guidance focused on developing the character and capabilities of the young person (mentee). Mentors have been critical to the success of many blind adults, both personally and professionally. Mentors have provided encouragement, while challenging these individuals to seek their own solutions in order to make their dreams a reality.

By participating in a mentoring program, the mentees will have the opportunity to have a personal relationship with a positive blind role model, learn firsthand how other blind people lead successful lives and achieve goals, develop friendships with blind and visually impaired peers, and have fun! The kickoff of the program took place on November 10, 11, and 12 at the Aurora Leadership center with 20 mentors and 20 mentees participating.

NCBVI employees continue to be active in the Youth Council of the Workforce Investment System in Omaha, Lincoln, Lancaster County 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 the Omaha, Lincoln and North Platte Districts. They provide training and consultation to blind consumers and employers across the state. During the past year over 300 evaluations were completed. Additionally, approximately 60 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, Lincoln, Lancaster County, University of Nebraska-Omaha, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Nebraska-Kearney, Southeast Community College, Hamilton College, Marriott Hotel Reservations, US Info, the Hyatt Hotel in Omaha, United Parcel Service, Red Cross, Nebraska Department of Revenue, Cabela's, Workforce Investment System, Nebraska Department of Labor, and Lincoln Public Schools, among others.

Our technology specialists and administrative staff also worked diligently to assure that the new Nebraska Information System (NIS) is fully accessible to blind employees and potential blind applicants who qualify for state jobs. They also worked to ensure that the new E-Government initiative would be as accessible for blind consumers in general. As a result of our involvement with accessibility issues with the state, the Information Management Service is creating a position and will hire a person who will address such situations on an ongoing basis. 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 in work place settings. Many times, only small changes are required to make the blind person's job easier and more competitive. The focus continues to be on demonstrating speech systems for Windows 98, 2000 and XP. Windows-based applications with speech and magnification are taught. Voice recognition systems are also 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 provided by the Commission. These apartments are located in downtown Lincoln.

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 tour the facility to view the various features of Center training and promote the potential of blind persons. Participants have included students from public and private schools and colleges, teachers of blind children from educational institutions, government officials, personnel of other governmental agencies, and employers. Furthermore, an educational video was developed which demonstrates consumers receiving training and who eventually move to an integrated life.

Our training of attitude and techniques are fully integrated. The attitude training motivates the student to learn and excel at alternative techniques. 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. They must also be capable of functioning in a training program that lasts eight hours a day, five days a week. Prior to the start of training, 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, thereby building self-confidence and helping them learn 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 the alternative techniques by reflex, they are able to make informed decisions regarding when to use their remaining sight.

Students obtain experience in traveling through airports, shopping malls, public bus transportation, shuttle services and taxicabs. 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.

During this calendar year, the Orientation Center provided intensive training to 31 clients. Additionally, one new Commission staff member is participating in the twelve-week Staff Training Program. The Center also conducted 82 tours with a total of 187 individuals who were

provided direct education regarding blindness from NCBVI staff. The Center continues to assist the Business Enterprise Program staff in evaluating prospective vendors.

## **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 offices. 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 2005, there were a total of 844 consumers served through the IL/OB programs. Six hundred ninety-eight individuals were 55 and over (OB program) while 146 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.

Seven Independent Living-Older Blind teachers serve the entire state, reaching many in traditionally underserved 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, and other activities of daily living. Our orientation teachers also provide instruction in the use of NFB-NEWSLINE<sup>®</sup> (a digital voice newspaper service accessed via touch-tone telephone), Talking Book Library (Braille and audio-cassette books and magazines), Radio Talking Book (a voice newspaper service accessed via closed circuit radio and television SAP), and use of the Internet and emails. Assistive technology devices and various aids may be provided to help individuals become more self-sufficient, including a long white cane, Braille writing equipment, talking calculators, talking glucometers, Closed Circuit TVs (to read regular or large print), magnifiers, and Braille or talking watches.

Comprehensive outreach efforts continue 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 for older individuals. During a one-week program, students network with other individuals from across the state to build self-confidence and develop their skills in a setting away from home. Training during this program is conducted using sleep shades. Sessions include: cane travel, Braille, cooking,

woodworking, problem solving, and focusing on 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.

A new curriculum-based training system has been implemented in order to serve those who cannot come to Home-Teaching Plus due to budget restrictions. Clients will come for three days and during four sessions and be trained on independent living skills. Clients are expected to complete all the skills designed in the curriculum, such as: Cooking, sawing, cleaning, travel, etc.

## **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. In 2002, the program initiated a process for identifying the deaf-blind population. To date, the number of individuals identified for the Helen Keller National Center Deaf-Blind registry has increased to 241. During this fifth 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, 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. This program provides services and assists 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.

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 develop resources and services that will help eliminate the service gaps to consumers who are deaf-blind. Do to our efforts to provide quality services to the deaf-blind of Nebraska, the Helen Keller National Center gave our agency a recognition award this year.

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

NFB-NEWSLINE® for the Blind was established in 1995; Nebraska began subscribing in 1999. This program is a computer-based system that allows all blind, visually impaired and reading impaired persons to access three Nebraska-based newspapers, plus 150 national 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. They can then skip to the next story or column, replay it, jump ahead or go back in 10 second increments, change 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 that allows the listener to stop reading a story for a period of two minutes without losing his/her place in the story, the availability to spell a word, go forward or backward by paragraphs, go forward or backward by sentences, and/or to search for a subject throughout the paper by a chosen word. There are 1000 users currently although this service is available to all of those who qualify. NFB-NEWSLINE® is free of charge to consumers, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in all 93 counties in Nebraska.

Blind persons preparing for jobs in the year 2005 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 truly 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 provides ongoing referral services to consumers. There are also a variety of services available to consumers that the agency does not provide in a direct manner. Some of those services are:

Nebraska Visually Impaired Peer Support (VIPS): This network of support groups, located throughout the state, offers an environment where 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; and to educate the public and public officials about the circumstances of aging and blindness.

Nebraska Talking Book and Braille Services is the State Library Service for the Blind and Reading Impaired. Commission staff assists consumers in completing applications and teaching consumers how to use the service and the equipment.

Consumer controlled organizations allow blind people to be exposed to other blind people in order to give them invigoration and encouragement, in addition to our services. Our counselors continue to refer clients to these consumer organizations in the state; which are the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska and the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska. Long after the rehabilitation experience is over, mentoring will continue giving them that extra support. When a person becomes blind or even grows up blind, his or her first need is to associate with other blind people. The individual initially needs to know what is possible to do as a blind person. The family won't likely know, nor will his or her community. So first, blind people need to have exposure to other blind people, not just for the encouragement from those who have done remarkable things, but also to gain a new perspective on how societal attitudes about blindness play out.

Radio Talking Book Network (RTBN) which 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 consumers complete applications for RTBN services and teach consumers to use the equipment.