

**NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND  
AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED**

**ANNUAL REPORT  
FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2013**



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# NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED ANNUAL REPORT FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2013

## INTRODUCTION

The Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (Commission or NCBVI) is the State of Nebraska vocational rehabilitation agency for persons with visual impairments. Our mission is: Empowering blind individuals, promoting opportunities and building belief in the blind. The Commission provides a variety of comprehensive 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 major challenge is to change society's misconceptions about the capability of the blind. The Commission works on this by providing comprehensive training to our consumers about their own potential, and also by educating their family members and the general public, especially businesses, about the ability of the blind to be fully integrated into the social and economic mainstream. The following programs and services provide the means, by which blind persons can obtain, regain or retain a productive role in society:

- Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)
- Technology
- Independent Living Part B (IL)
- Older Blind (OIB)
- Deaf-Blind
- Business Enterprise
- Digital Voice Newspaper Delivery System (NFB-NEWSLINE<sup>®</sup>)

The Commission utilizes three types of surveys to quantify client satisfaction and to seek input for improvement. These surveys are completed at different times. The Rehabilitation Track Survey and the Independent Living Survey are completed at least four months after case closure. To get quality feedback from our VR clients, a more comprehensive survey instrument is conducted over the phone. The Nebraska Center Survey is conducted also over the phone, three months after training is completed. Another form of phone survey is done after some of the programs, such as transition programs and Employment Conference. The last form of feedback is via input from consumers received at public meetings and forums, which are held four times a year with the Board of Commissioners, twice per year State conventions of consumer organizations, and other times as requested.

The Enrichment Foundation project provided assistance to older blind clients in the Omaha area (PILBO – Providing Independent Living for the Blind of Omaha). A renewal of the grant will start in January 2014 and will help the older blind in the Omaha area.

The Commission was able to obtain its full federal match to include ability to capture reallocation funds available last summer. We also received Social Security Reimbursement funds during the past year. You will find an increase in VR, OIB and IL Part B expenditures this year which has most to do with how we are spending our Social Security Reimbursement funds. During the first

decade of the agency's history, all Social Security funds were utilized for the Vocational Rehabilitation program. Federal regulation 34 FR 361 allow for us to use those funds for Independent Living (IL and OIB) programs, as well as VR. The past five years have shown significant reallocation funding of the VR program that NCBVI has been able to take draw down. With that funding available, we have opted to utilize more of our Social Security Reimbursement funding to enhance our Independent Living Programs. We currently show this funding in two places, the program it was spent on and the Social Security Reimbursement funds expended.

## FINANCIAL REPORT

Expenditures July 1, 2012 through June 30, 2013

**1. Basic Support:**

<b>A. Operations (Most of which are spent on direct services)</b>	<b>\$ 3,378,842</b>
<b>B. Aid</b>	<b>\$ 780,773</b>

**2. Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program**

<b>A. Operations (Most of which are spent on direct services)</b>	<b>\$ 350,624</b>
<b>B. Aid</b>	<b>\$ 38,187</b>

**3. Supported Employment**

<b>A. Operations</b>	<b>\$ 0</b>
<b>B. Aid</b>	<b>\$ 31,344</b>

**4. Independent Living Part B**

<b>A. Operations (Most of which are spent on direct services)</b>	<b>\$ 112,289</b>
<b>B. Aid</b>	<b>\$ 40,676</b>

**5. In-Service Training Grant**

<b>A. Operations (only)</b>	<b>\$ 18,943</b>
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**6. PILBO**

<b>A. Operations</b>	<b>\$ 1,985</b>
<b>B. Aid</b>	<b>\$ 7,624</b>

<b>7. Senior Blind</b>	<b>\$ 128,364</b>
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<b>8. Program Income</b>	<b>\$ 37,106</b>
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**9. Social Security Reimbursement (Also reflected in above totals)**

<b>A. Operations</b>	<b>\$ 715,991</b>
<b>B. Aid</b>	<b>\$ 168,563</b>

## VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION (VR) PROGRAM

The purpose of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program is to prepare blind/visually impaired individuals to enter, retain or advance in a full-time or, if appropriate, part-time competitive employment in the integrated labor market. In rehabilitating such individuals, the Commission provides training and placement in quality jobs that are appropriate to each individual's capabilities, abilities, potentials, interest, resources, and informed choice. Some of the services that can be provided are: learning positive attitudes about blindness, training in the skills of blindness, self-advocacy, blindness information to family and friends, elevating their expectations, vocational education, counseling and guidance to individuals and their family members, assistance on higher education, job training, job development, job placement and adaptive technology services. During federal fiscal year 2012/2013, 942 Nebraskans received services in all statuses; of which 42 consumers were competitively employed in a variety of jobs. In addition, this year our staff worked with 174 multi-handicapped individuals who also are blind (24 more than the previous year); and 175 Transition age clients ages 14-26. The Commission successfully achieved levels required by Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) Standards.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for the Commission worked diligently with businesses and public entities to educate them about the potential of the blind. For instance, this year the commission invited businesses to a state-wide employment conference and an Open House ceremony sponsored by our agency. We also provided Power-Point presentations informing employers about reasonable accommodations that will not lower their expectations of productivity. Consumers were placed in a variety of jobs, including: Administrative Assistant, Assembler, Certified Nursing Assistant, Chef/Head Cook, Community Health Worker, Computer Programmer, Construction Managers, Counselor, Customer Service Representative, Dental Hygienist, Educational School Counselor, Engineering Manager, Farmer, Hand Packer and Packager, Lutheran Minister, Maintenance and General Repair Worker, Management Analyst, Massage Therapist, Mechanical Engineer, Office Clerk, Packaging and Filling Machine Operator, Paper Goods Machine Setter/Operator, Punch Machine Operator, Randolph Sheppard Vendor, Receptionist, Regulatory Affairs Specialist, Security Guard, Special Education Teacher-Visually Impaired, Taxidermist, Teacher Industrial Arts, Telemarketer, Vendor, and Word Processor/Typist.

Staff development continues as an important facet of improving the quality of services to our consumers. All members of NCBVI staff continue to receive training on counseling skills, job development, job placement, dealing with other mental and physical disabilities, adaptive equipment for the blind, the importance of consumer organizations, adaptive technology, customer service which enables them to provide good services to our clients and stakeholders, as well as other timely emerging topics. Our staff also receives ongoing training on issues related to multi-handicapped persons, as the numbers in this population group continue to increase. The Commission emphasizes high quality competitive employment, not just the first available job, but full-time jobs that will provide consumers good wages, benefits including health insurance, and the potential for upward mobility. As a result, the clients who achieve employment as a result of our agency's VR services, will no longer need to receive social security benefits or welfare.

Counseling and guidance are also 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 know that with proper training and opportunity, blind people can be fully integrated into the social and economic mainstream. This philosophy is disseminated through educational programs designed to reach business people/employers, educators, health care professionals, human services agencies, and other individuals and organizations that come into contact with people who are blind.

New curriculum training has been implemented to enhance clients' job-seeking skills. Each of the three districts have clients come for three-day sessions to be trained in the following: alternative techniques of blindness: interviewing skills, social skills, resume writing, networking, job hunting, problem solving, and focusing on a positive attitude toward blindness, among others.

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

Transition services were funded by a federal grant through RSA from October 2000 through September 2005. Since then we have funded the programs with some help from the private sector and partnership with workforce youth councils. In the 2010 calendar year we used ARRA funds and some private donations to conduct transition from school to work services. During FY 2012-2013 we used Social Security reimbursement funds.

Employment experiences and independent living skills 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. The two Deputy Directors 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 social skills, work ethics, 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 for six weeks, provided work experiences for eleven Nebraska students. During the first few days of the program, students received intensive orientation and mobility instruction to become familiar with the UNL campus where they were housed and the near downtown area. 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 work ethics and blindness issues. They were exposed to adult blind role models who hold competitive jobs. These role models shared their lives and work experiences and answered the students' questions. The WAGES coordinator was 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. In addition, WAGES participants had challenging activities such as grill their own burgers, hiking, horseback riding, obstacle course, high ropes, and wall climbing, among others, which were geared to developing skills and confidence for all aspects of life.

The students worked a variety of different jobs this year. This was also a year of new employers. One of our participants worked at two different job sites. In the morning he would work at the Comfort Inn vacuuming floors, picking up trash, and cleaning windows. In the afternoon he would walk across the street to the mall and start his job at Applebee's Neighborhood Bar and Grill. There he would measure and weigh food, construct a variety of dips, and clean where necessary. Another participant had one job site, Lancaster County Records and Information Management, but two different jobs. In the morning she would shred documents and then use a pallette mover to place the shredded documents by the loading dock. In the afternoon she would go upstairs and scan documents to a computer and then double check to make sure that all the documents copied correctly. One participant, worked at Canine Design. There she bathed and groomed dogs as well as sweeping and cleaning floors and pet toys. She was even asked to work one Saturday to help out. A first-time participant had a very short travel to work every day on her way to the Malone Center. There she was constantly guiding, instructing, and observing children at summer camp in a variety of settings around the Lincoln area. Her supervisor told me that "she has what it takes" to be a great teacher one day" which happens to be great because she is planning on becoming an elementary special education teacher. The next participant worked all day at St. Elizabeth Hospital. His work would vary from day to day, depending on what they needed him to do, but for the most part he would alphabetize documents and clean pharmaceutical tools. Toward the end of the program he even started logging the alphabetized information onto the hospital's server. Also at the hospital we had a participant work the afternoons in the cafeteria. He was one of six participants who received training at the center for part of the day. In the afternoons he would type the nutritional facts for all the entrees and desserts to be displayed on a daily basis at the cafeteria. It gave him pride to see his work being utilized by so many hospital employees on a daily basis. If and when he was finished typing the nutritional facts, he would then work on data entry. Another participant received training at the center in the afternoon and worked at Aging Partners in the mornings. At Aging Partners she would measure, weigh, and package food. She would also sweep the floors and cut up vegetables towards the end of her shift. Her supervisors loved working with her. One of the participants made it known that he really enjoyed working outside. So after training he would go to Lincoln Southeast High School. There he occasionally worked inside sweeping floors and polishing metal corners, but most of the time is was outside working with landscape. He would edge grass, pick up trash, and even removed a tree stump. Another participant worked in the mornings at Selleck Cafeteria. He started his day working at 7:00 a.m. He mostly washed dishes, and there were thousands of them daily. In the later mornings he would also mop floors and put dishes away. Another one of our participants worked with a new employer. In the mornings she would work at Antonio's Tastes of Lincoln, located in the basement of the State Employee Building. There she would wash dishes in the early morning, and then take orders and make change from customers in the late morning hours. Our last participant also worked with a new employer this summer. The participant worked the afternoons at the ACLU. There, along with law school students, he would research information pertaining to his topic. He would call heads of facilities and ask them questions. When he was all done he wrote a report of his finding and gave it to his supervisor for her to evaluate.

Two other programs are Winnerfest and Project Independence (PI). Blind teenagers from across the state participate in Winnerfest, a 3-day event held twice a year. Eighteen and seventeen students participated in the two sessions in 2013. Activities were focused on the importance of effective communication styles, socialization skills, and the importance of community involvement as blind people. Blind children aged 6 to 14 participate in PI, a 4-day summer camp experience. The fifteen campers have the opportunity to be with other blind children and learn the alternative, non-visual skills of blindness. The theme for PI this year was, "Life's Journey Begins With Me."

For many years, the Nebraska Transition Team for Students who are Blind, Deaf-Blind or Visually Impaired was 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 was to share information with each other, improve relations and services for youth, and promote an understanding of the issues and critical needs of the students involved in the education and transition process. A work-product of the Team was a protocol which is helping to build partnerships between the transition stakeholders in the state. The document was finalized and continues to be disseminated across the state to educational entities, early childhood agencies, consumers, and parents.

The Transition Team decided that quarterly meetings were no longer needed, so the team was disbanded. Now, emphasis is placed on collaboration directly between Commission staff, educators and parents following guidance from the protocol across the state. Commission staff continues to be active in the Youth Council of the Workforce Investment System in Omaha, Lincoln, Lancaster County and Greater Nebraska.

## **TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM**

The Commission's technology program facilitates technology services to blind Commission clients and current and potential employers across the state. These services are provided through in-person consultations, over the phone, and via email. The program is comprised of a Technology Program Manager and three Technology Specialists based in Kearney, Lincoln, and Omaha. The Specialists serve clients and employers in each of the three districts. They instruct clients in the use of access technologies such as screen access software, refreshable Braille, screen magnification, and personal note taking devices. In addition, they assist in the use of mainstream technologies such as web browsing, use of smartphones, the Windows and Macintosh operating systems, and word processing, skills that assist the client in meeting their vocational goals. The Manager supervises the Specialists, collaborating with the field office teams, and works on many aspects of administering technology needs within the agency and other State of Nebraska agencies.

Over the past year, we have worked to ensure that our staff have adequate technology training to assist them in working with clients and completing their job duties. As part of this effort, we have undertaken some training opportunities this year. In April, some technology staff and counselors took part in a two-day training given by Triumph Technologies of Columbia Heights, MN. The training focused on basic usage of the Macintosh computer with the built-in VoiceOver screen reader. Apple's Macintosh computer is becoming more popular among people who are blind, and we wanted our staff to understand how it functions.

We have also collaborated with Southeast Community College to provide other training opportunities for members of our Technology Staff, Support Staff, and Administrative Staff. These focused on Microsoft Office Word Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced, as well as Microsoft Excel, Basic and Intermediate. These trainings were well received and staff members are using the knowledge they have gained to be more efficient in instructing clients and completing their daily work.

Offering training through Southeast Community College has strengthened our collaboration with the school. When setting up our group training opportunities, we worked to ensure that the technology and materials being used would be accessible to our staff members who are blind. After the training was completed, Southeast Community College asked our Technology Program Manager to collaborate on a project to educate IT professionals, Instructional Designers, and school administrators in the guidelines for accessible content and deploying access technology in the classroom. The presentation also featured participants from the University of Nebraska, the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and the lead for the Web Accessibility Team at Humana. It was well-received and the attendees asked many pertinent questions about accessibility strategies and concepts.

The Technology Program Manager continues to work on accessibility projects at the Commission. Accessibility ensures that staff members who are blind can efficiently use web sites, software, and equipment necessary to complete their jobs. The Technology Program Manager has assisted the State of Nebraska with accessibility testing and remediation strategies for the Payroll and Financial Center, Employee Work Center, the Employee Development Center, and the Nebraska Technology Commission web site. Although it is not the goal of the Commission to be the primary source of accessibility testing and remediation for the State of

Nebraska, we do work on projects that directly touch the work of our staff and affect some of our clients. We work to spread awareness of accessibility and to urge state agencies to incorporate accessibility into their products at the time of procurement or development. Adding accessibility features to a system at the beginning of the product lifecycle ensures the applications are usable by all, and is less costly and time-consuming than retrofitting applications that are already in use. To assist us in providing recommendations for accessibility testing resources, we have worked with the Carroll Center for the Blind of Newton, Massachusetts to evaluate their testing analysis and remediation strategies. Although the Carroll center has only completed one web site evaluation for us, we believe that they would be a good resource for web site and application testing expertise.

Technology Specialists work with employers and clients to ensure that they have the resources necessary to meet the client's vocational goal, and to work with the systems used by the employer. For instance, last year, consultations were provided to the Apogee call center, Bennett Martin Library, Nebraska Assistive Technology Partnership, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, University of Nebraska-Omaha, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Nebraska-Kearney, Southeast Community College, St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Nebraska Office of the CIO, Lincoln Public Schools, Omaha public schools, Oshkosh High School, Wilcox-Hildreth High School, Gothenburg High School, St. Paul High School, Loup County Elementary and McCook Elementary, College of Art Creative Design, Creek Counseling Center, Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, St. Patrick's School of Elkhorn, Allegiant Health, Boys Town, Cox Communications, Metro Community College, among others. The technology program also provides loaner equipment to consumers and employers through the AT4All web site. This loaner equipment allows consumers to evaluate specific pieces of access technology to ensure that the technology will meet the client's needs.

Our Technology Specialists utilize adaptive software for consumers' on-the-job settings. Most of the time, only small changes are required to make the blind person's job feasible and more competitive. However, in some instances it takes a lot of effort, research, and resources to solve a problem. When Technology Specialists meet with clients who may be in a job-jeopardy situation, job duties are analyzed and intensive on-the-job training is provided to keep that person's employment. If a person is working toward employment, the technology specialist evaluates what skills will be necessary for the educational and employment activities to reach employment. Keyboarding and Braille assessments are given, depending on the type of technology needed. On occasion, NCBVI contracts with third parties to provide scripting to make applications more accessible and to teach the use of access technology in some instances.

The Technology Specialists and Technology Program Manager also do some outreach work to educate clients in a group setting or present topics to educate members of the public that could include potential clients or employers. Examples of such work include a training seminar at the National Federation of the Blind convention to educate the public about the Macintosh computer, an iPad training session at a Commission-sponsored program in North Platte, and hosting a technology expo that was held in conjunction with the Commission's Employment Conference. The Commission also held a ribbon cutting where technologies of all types were demonstrated to clients, employers, and business people throughout Lincoln. As part of the renovation of the Lincoln District Conference room, a new audio/visual system has been installed which includes an Apple TV box to allow people who are blind to accessibly show video content from a number of sources. A Technology Specialist also attended the Bennett Martin Library's event to celebrate

the installation of accessible workstations as part of Nebraska's Broadband Initiative. Technology Specialists also hold memberships in the Association of Information Technology Professionals and the Greater Nebraska Workforce Investment Board.

In an effort to prepare high school students for college, technology specialists oftentimes work with clients on accessing textbook materials from Learning Ally, BookShare and the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. Public school systems too often do this for the student instead of teaching them to do it for themselves. Teaching younger students to get excited about technology can also mean teaching them to do things their sighted peers are doing, such as sending text messages and using mainstream technologies such as the iPod, iPhone, and iPad. Some phones contain capabilities, or can be outfitted with software that read aloud the contents of the phone's screen or allow the user to read phone output on a device called a Refreshable Braille Display. Several students served by the Commission are using iPads in the classroom to take notes, access books and other applications, and for accessing information from smart boards used by the teacher. Technology specialists also teach students strategies for finding information online and present methods for accessing books and content from mainstream sources.

Technology is advancing at a rapid pace. More and more mainstream software and hardware developers are including accessibility features in their products. For example, Apple provides a screen reading package called VoiceOver in all of their products. It allows blind people to read what is on the screen of their Apple device with spoken output or in Braille using a refreshable Braille display device. Google provides accessibility through the TalkBack screen reader on its Android Platform. Many of our staff use iPhones in their daily work, and each of our offices, as of this year, has iPad and iPad Mini units for demonstration and evaluation. Technology Specialists will do as much as possible to expose themselves to these products to ensure they can provide the best services to their clients. Over the coming year, Technology Specialists will work with Apple iOS hardware and applications as well as the Macintosh computer. They will also continue to work with Windows 8 and Microsoft Office 2013 to learn how these products and applications can meet the needs of our clients.

## **THE NEBRASKA CENTER FOR THE BLIND**

The Nebraska Center for the Blind is a six to nine month comprehensive program which provides highly effective pre-vocational rehabilitation training to blind individuals. The training provided is based on the techniques utilized by successful blind persons, and is designed to build confidence and skills. This includes training in the alternative skills of blindness, such as Braille, communications, technology, cane travel, basic woodworking and home repair, home management, apartment living, philosophical counseling, vocational development and job placement. On average, 92% of individuals graduating from the Nebraska Center for the Blind achieve their vocational goals, primarily obtaining and maintaining competitive employment.

During training, clients live in individual, furnished, efficiency apartments which are located in downtown Lincoln. The cost of the training is \$5,250.00 per month; this includes the cost of Center training and materials, apartment rent, utilities, local telephone service, transportation expenses, grocery and activity costs. Center clients are responsible for personal expenses, such as cable television, individual internet service in the apartment, cab fares to and from medical appointments, or those related to personal shopping, and the costs related to a shop project that exceeds the budgeted amount. The goal of the program is to provide pre-vocational training to blind clients, without creating a financial burden for them.

When clients finish our program we expect them to live independently and to obtain competitive employment. For this reason, the primary focus of training for blind adults at the Nebraska Center for the Blind addresses individual attitudes regarding oneself, such as one's abilities, one's potential, and one's place in society. Alternative skills training focuses on acquiring and mastering the blindness-specific methods necessary for functioning competitively in performing all major life tasks. Clients learn to effectively and appropriately confront the attitudes held by the public toward the blind. Career exploration and development is provided, to set aside the myths and misconceptions regarding blindness. There is also an emphasis on the critical importance of giving back to the community, thus changing the negative beliefs held by both the general public and individual blind persons themselves.

Various approaches are used to accomplish these five goals of the Center training. Individual and group instruction, as well as independent learning experiences, are utilized in the acquisition of blindness-related skills, employing the tried and true method of structured discovery learning. During the training, all clients 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 upon inadequate vision has been overcome, and the clients have learned to truly rely upon the alternative techniques, they are able to make informed decisions regarding when to use their remaining vision.

These instructional approaches and experiences equip individuals with the ability to communicate, travel independently, manage household duties, and function competitively in the work place. We provide individual philosophical counseling to help clients successfully confront societal attitudes. Regular philosophy classes educate clients about specific experiences that can be anticipated, career related subjects, and introduction of novel alternatives for handling frequently experienced circumstances and events. Woodworking class provides an opportunity to challenge negative beliefs regarding the abilities of blind persons, refine problem solving skills, and build confidence. Living independently in an actual apartment brings the real world

challenges of daily life to the skills of blindness being developed in the training environment, and helps solidify the individual's sense of self-sufficiency.

We also initiate and encourage a variety of classroom based activities as well as off-site activities. Such activities have included pumpkin carving and the preparation of a full Thanksgiving meal at the Center. Other experiences include Legislative meetings, public hearings, banquet, NFB and ACB state and national conventions, county fair, fishing, art show, senior conference, college employment work-shop, movie activity, appetizer, soup and salad, Christmas tree, Easter egg dying, ringing bell for donations, and community service and other volunteer efforts. A total of 24 activities were held during the year.

All experiences provided by the Center, whether crafted from years of experience, or a spontaneous idea, are designed to incorporate and engage all of the elements previously outlined, which lead clients toward achieving the five goals of rehabilitation promoted at the Nebraska Center for the Blind. Clients are expected to take increased responsibility in their own training, as well as the operation of the Center during the course of their training, which is a direct result of the Center's belief in the abilities of blind people. When Center clients realize they can hold jobs, raise a family, and be valued members of the community, their lives change. Clients then look forward to the future with a confidence and determination to meet life's challenges.

In the course of encountering both classroom and real world experiences, clients are not only challenged to expand their own levels of functional competency, but they also have the opportunity to learn firsthand more effective approaches for interacting with the sighted public. This provides clients with the opportunity to develop the confidence needed to effectively respond to prevalent negative attitudes, discrimination, and low expectations held by society.

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. Visitors have included students from public and private schools and colleges, vision teachers from Nebraska public schools, government officials, personnel from other governmental agencies, and businesses.

Our clients start their application process in the field, where they receive initial alternative skills training before entering the center. Center clients must be legally blind or have a condition that will eventually lead to legal blindness. They must also be capable of functioning in an intensive training program. Prior to the start of training, a tour of the facility is scheduled, followed by an interview with the Center's Director. Professional Vocational Rehabilitation counselors and instructors working in the field will bring the potential client to the Center for their first tour and perhaps a three-day stay. During the three-day stay, clients are mentored by senior Center clients, and receive training under sleep shades, 8 hours a day. This provides them with a firsthand Center training experience, promoting a truly informed choice. Ninety-six percent of clients who come for the three-day stay make the decision to return for the full course of training.

Eligibility for Center training is not determined through a formal evaluation of clients conducted by the Center or field staff. Rather, the decision to attend the Nebraska Center for the Blind is made by the consumers themselves, with the assistance of the field and Center staff, based upon informed choice. Clients choosing to attend The Nebraska Center for the Blind are fully aware

that the training is an intensive, five day per week, eight hour a day program, based upon high expectations, demands a true commitment to learning, and requires each of them to attend all major areas of the center program. Day-only clients are rarely accepted, and such exceptions are made only in situations where health, employment, or family well-being may be compromised by full-time attendance.

Our Center apartments are located in downtown Lincoln, and require the clients to commute to the Center by city bus daily. Each day, Monday through Thursday, clients are scheduled for a one hour Braille class, as well as one hour communications class, primarily focusing on computer skills, but also providing training in other critical communication skills, such as the use of a telephone, various types of office equipment, and handwriting. Clients also receive two hours of cane travel, two hours of home management, and two hours of shop each day. Fridays, from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. clients are provided with individual philosophical counseling, and assistance with resolving other issues that may arise during their training. This is followed by a philosophy class that focuses on the issues related to blindness. Following this, from 12:30 pm through 2:30 pm Center clients are required to attend a vocational seminar. From 2:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., staff members meet, conduct client staffings, and complete paperwork, while clients work on independent assignments, usually at the apartments.

Each month we have one or two required activities, we provided 24 activities this calendar year, either in the Center facility, or off-site. These may include activities such as visiting a museum, cooking a Thanksgiving dinner for all of the Center clients, Lincoln staff and guests, and many other activities. In the same manner as sleep-shades are required from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. for all Center classes, they are likewise used during Center activities. The only exception is during lunch breaks. Our Center Apartment Resource Counselor provides training and some activities three evenings a week, and activities, as well as some additional training, every other weekend. While the training provided by the Apartment Resource Counselor are mandatory and require the use of sleep-shades, the evening and weekend training and activities do not require the use of sleep-shades. It is during these times that clients can learn how to best use any partial vision and explore when their remaining vision does and does not work effectively for them.

Over the last five years, we have averaged ten clients at any given time, with a waiting list of 1 to 2 clients. This average does not include three-day stays or staff trainees. All newly hired staff members are required to go through Center training for a period of 600 hours, eight hours a day, using sleep-shades, whether blind or sighted. The average training period in the Center for clients, is six to nine months.

During this calendar year, the Center provided intensive training to 13 clients. In addition to 13 clients, Nebraska Center provided training to four new Commission staff members, 1 teacher of the blind and 6 WAGES program students. Center also trained 83 Bryan Nursing students. In addition, we had 12 three day stays. The Center conducted 78 tours with a total of 201 individuals who were provided direct education regarding blindness. The Center continues to assist the Business Enterprise Program staff in evaluating prospective vendors.

## **INDEPENDENT LIVING-OLDER BLIND PROGRAM**

The Older Blind (OB) Program serves individuals age 55 or older who are legally blind or who have a progressive eye disease leading to blindness. The Independent Living (IL) 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 in 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 federal fiscal year 2012/2013, 517 consumers were accepted for independent living services through the IL/OB programs. Three hundred eighty-five individuals were 55 and over (OB program) while one hundred thirty-two were under 55, of which forty-five were between the ages of 5 and 19 and 5 were under 5 years of age, 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 Center.

Eight Independent Living-Older Blind Orientation Teachers and a Program Specialist serve the entire state, reaching many traditionally underserved populations, especially those in rural areas. These 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 by phone and internet), Talking Book and Braille Services (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 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, Veterans Administration, and other resources.

Each of the three districts operated by NCBVI offer group independent living skills training; Senior Adventures in Independent Living (SAIL) in the Omaha district, Group Alternative Techniques Experiences (GATE) in the Lincoln district, and For Your Independence (FYI in the North Platte district).

Clients gain confidence in their ability to use the skills they've learned in a setting away from home. Training during these programs 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 promote use of community resources to effectively conduct the activities of daily living such as shopping, engaging in recreational options, keeping medical and other important appointments, and so on.

## **DEAF-BLIND PROGRAM**

Prior to developing 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 406, of which 233 are females and 173 are males. Commission staff continues to provide services to Deaf-Blind consumers, to enable individuals who are Deaf-Blind to live full and productive lives with dignity and self-respect. This program strives to assist individuals who are Deaf-Blind to achieve full participation within their home communities through awareness, use of 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 a support group for consumers who are Deaf-Blind; mentoring, 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 experience the combination of hearing and visual impairments.

## NFB-NEWSLINE® FOR THE BLIND

NFB-Newsline® for the Blind was established in Nebraska fifteen years ago with the help of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and continues to grow. This program is an audio information system that allows all blind, visually impaired and reading impaired persons to access local and national newspapers, and a variety of other publications and magazines. Currently there are 403 print publications available on NFB-Newsline®. Included are 323 newspapers, including six Nebraskan newspapers, eight national papers, ten international papers, five Spanish publications, seven breaking news publications, four blindness publications and 40 magazines; all accessible by touch-tone telephone, computer or through Apple devices. Also available are weekly store circulars, TV listings and job listings. The system enables those who cannot read conventional print to have access to all content offered on NFB-Newsline® when traveling throughout the United States.

Using the buttons on the telephone, the listener chooses first a paper or a magazine, then the category within the paper, such as national, state, or local news, sports, area events and editorial opinions. 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, adjust the volume, choose a different voice, 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. Articles can even be emailed to subscribers with a single key stroke.

The number of subscribers continues to grow and there are currently 1,719 users in Nebraska. NFB-Newsline® is available to qualified readers free of charge, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in all 93 counties. Emailing and the internet are the most popular forms of communication today. NFB-Newsline® recognizes this and is constantly thinking of new ways to keep up to date with this fast paced world. NFB-Newsline® online was created for subscribers to browse through papers and have more access to current events without having to be connected to a telephone. Also released in June 2012 is the addition of a NFB-Newsline® application available on the iOS devices of Apple.

**Who Can Benefit?** **Anyone** who cannot read conventional newsprint could qualify for this free service. Many **seniors** have lost enough vision that reading the daily newspaper is no longer possible. They can enjoy being able once again to participate actively in community affairs. Furthermore, **blind children** are now able to research their own civics assignments and do their homework independently. Additionally, blind persons preparing for jobs in the year 2014 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® is the only service that makes so much information available to these eligible people.

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 and a variety of magazines.

## **REFERRAL SERVICES**

Commission staff members provide 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 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 vocational rehabilitation experience is over, mentoring will continue giving them that extra support. When a person becomes blind or even grows up blind, it is very important 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) 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; it is also now available via the internet.

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.

The American Council of the Blind coordinates subsidized half-fare taxi coupon programs for blind and visually impaired consumers living in the Omaha ("Give a Lift") and Lincoln ("Share a Fare") metropolitan areas. NCBVI counselors routinely inform potential beneficiaries to these programs and assist with the application process, if needed.

Blind and visually impaired consumers with functional vision may be referred to the University of Nebraska-Omaha Low Vision Clinic for a low vision evaluation. Financial assistance may be available if low vision devices are recommended promoting greater independence in the home or on the job.

## INFORMATION REGARDING ACTIVITIES AND EXPENDITURES OF BUSINESS ENTERPRISE

### Nebraska Business Enterprises (NBE)

The NBE provides individuals who are legally blind the opportunity to manage their own small businesses in vending facilities and/or cafeterias located within federal buildings, state buildings, local governmental buildings, and other vending routes. NCBVI's support to NBE blind **entrepreneurs** across the state includes: two (2) FTA staff members at The Nebraska Commission for the Blind, all equipment, supplies, initial stock, on-going training, equipment repair, assistance in skill areas essential for business management, and continuous follow-up.

Since its creation by the Federal Randolph-Sheppard Act, the NBE Program has provided competitive employment opportunities for blind individuals served by the Commission. The NBE purpose is also to demonstrate to the general public the abilities of the blind, thereby helping to improve attitudes regarding the hiring of blind persons.

In accordance with the Randolph-Sheppard Act, vendors make monthly payments of "Set Aside" to the agency. This covers a portion of the management services provided and for new equipment, repairs, etc. to keep the Vendors fully and efficiently operating.

There are fourteen (14) licensed vendors and three (3) running vending facilities that are in training. NBE vendors manage 95 sites and run three cafeterias, maintaining more than 300 machines in federal, state and local buildings. This also includes 20 rest areas on Interstate 80 which crosses Nebraska. NBE is currently working on several new vending opportunities. For fiscal year 2013, net profit to the vendors was \$359,488.00; which is around \$28,000.00 more than FY 2012.

In 2013, there were 80 different agreements, contracts, and permits for vending food service in Nebraska that are under Business Enterprises. Some of the locations of the NBE vending facilities are as follows:

Five break rooms, 1124 Pacific, Main Post Office, Omaha  
INS, 1717 Avenue H, Omaha  
FBI, S. 120<sup>th</sup> St, Omaha  
Five break rooms, Zorinski Federal Building, 1616 Capital Ave, Omaha  
Federal Court House, 18<sup>th</sup> and Dodge, Omaha  
Parks Service Headquarters, 700 Riverfront Drive, Omaha  
City County Building, 19th Farnam, Omaha  
County Courthouse, 18<sup>th</sup> and Farnam, Omaha  
700 'R' Street, Lincoln, (Main Post Office) Lincoln  
INS, 850 'S' Street, Lincoln  
Veterans Administration, 3800 Old Cheney, Lincoln  
Library Commission at the Atrium, 12<sup>th</sup> and N Streets, Lincoln  
Homeland Security, 1301 West Highland, Lincoln, NE  
Department of Environmental Quality at the Atrium, 12<sup>th</sup> and N Streets, Lincoln  
Nebraska Banking Commission, Lincoln

Taste of Lincoln Café in the State Office Building at 301 Centennial Mall South, Lincoln  
 Denney Federal Building, 100 Centennial Mall North, Lincoln  
 Grand Island Federal Building, West Second Street, Grand Island  
 Main Post Office, West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, Grand Island  
 Postal Distribution Center, Highway 30 West, Grand Island  
 Nebraska State Patrol Training Academy, Grand Island  
 National Guard Armory, N. Hwy 70, North Platte  
 All 20 rest areas across Nebraska from Omaha to Sidney on Interstate 80  
 Seven Hall County Buildings, Grand Island  
 UPS Distribution Center, Hwy 385, Sidney  
 Progress Rail Repair Center, Sidney  
 A Body Shop, Kearney  
 Main Post Office, 2510 S. 11<sup>th</sup>, Kearney  
 Wilson's Truck Repair, Hwy 30, Grand Island  
 DuVal Diesel Service, Shady Bend Road, Grand Island  
 Grease Monkey, S. Jeffers, North Platte  
 Camp Ashland Military Dining Facility, Hwy 6, Ashland  
 Greenleaf National Guard Training Center, East 'J', Hastings  
 Hastings Main Post Office, 300 N. Kansas Street  
 Fremont Main Post Office, 348 E. 6<sup>th</sup> Street  
 Norfolk Main Post Office, N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
 Five Lincoln Post Office annexes  
 Joint Forces Headquarters, Nebraska National Guard

The program continues to grow and the blind entrepreneurs increased their annual income by developing more vending routes across the state. We also started to operate fourteen new postal locations in Omaha, a federal processing center in Omaha, and the new National Guard Joint Armed Forces Headquarters in Lincoln.

All prospective vendors are assessed to determine the skills they need to acquire, such as basic math, basic accounting, writing, techniques of blindness, and customer service. Vendors have passed an adult basic education test and a background check.

Business skills are developed by taking courses at Nebraska's Community Colleges relating to areas such as human relations, supervision, business practices, basic accounting, tax law, marketing costs and inventory control.

The NBE Vendors Committee met in March, May, September, and December. Training sessions included in the annual retreat were provided by the NBE staff for vendors in September 2013.

#### NBE STATISTICS

<u>Gross Sales</u>	<u>Set Aside</u>
\$1,986,556.00	\$49,500

It is estimated that the amounts will be higher for 2014.