

Older Blind Services – A Historical Perspective

To properly understand the status of services to older blind consumers in Nebraska, it is necessary to review the history of services to this target population in general.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was amended in 1978 to include Title VII Chapter 2 authorizing for the delivery of services to older individuals who are blind. This action recognized the existence of a large population of older blind consumers in need of services to maintain personal independence, but it did not authorize funds for the delivery of those services.

Estimates based on national statistics indicated that between 20,000 to 25,000 Nebraskans 55 years of age and older were struggling with problems created by vision loss that could not be corrected. This estimate was far larger than similar estimates for individuals representing younger ages. Clearly, the largest group of blind people in need of services was over the age of 55, a group not traditionally served by state rehabilitation agencies at that time.

Nebraska Rehabilitation Services for the Visually Impaired, or SVI as we were called then, responded to this need with the provision of services including basic information and referral and home teaching. The range of services available to blind consumers, including Talking Book and Braille Services (TBBS) and Radio Talking Book (RTB), were described to new referrals. Assistance was provided to those who elected to apply for services provided by other agencies. Counselors often returned to instruct consumers in the operation of equipment provided by TBBS or RTB.

Home teaching was provided then much as it is today. The counselor and new referral would discuss specific problems caused by vision loss in that person's life. Alternative skills of blindness would be explored relevant to the individual's situation. The stove or thermostat would often be marked with raised indicators during the initial visit. Low cost items such as writing guides or needle threaders would be provided depending on the individual's need.

A positive understanding of blindness and appreciation of the alternative skills of blindness was and is considered essential to the rehabilitation process. The idea that people could continue doing what they did visually using non-visual or low vision skills was promoted from the initial visit on.

Individuals aged 55 or older were typically placed in what was called a "non-client" status. Since federal funds were not available to older individuals who were blind throughout much of the 1980s, there was no official mechanism in place for reporting services to this population to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). Case service recordkeeping, what there was of it, was simple and maintained strictly for internal tracking purposes.

The need for services to many new referrals would often be satisfied during the first few visits after which the case would be closed. Those who elected to continue with more comprehensive services including instruction in the use of the long white cane, Braille,

or other alternative skills of blindness were often placed in the VR track with an "Individual Written Rehabilitation Plan" and a goal of "Homemaker."

Another crucial element in the rehabilitation of blind consumers is the opportunity to network with other blind consumers. This has special relevance to the aging population already at risk of isolation and withdrawal.

Peer support groups for older individuals struggling with problems caused by vision loss were started in the early 1980s. Consumers wishing to participate in a peer support group were encouraged to contact a group near them. This was an effective strategy for providing support to a larger number of older consumers than could be accomplished through individual counseling, and peer support groups continue to be a significant source of new referrals.

There were twelve groups with approximately 100 members across the state when the Nebraska Visually Impaired Peer Support (VIPS) incorporated in 1986 with assistance from SVI. Title VII Part B funds were used to award VIPS its first grant from SVI in the amount of \$6,500.

Note: Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act authorizes for the provision of rehabilitation services to consumers with independent living rather than vocational goals. Title VII Chapter 2 of the Act authorizes funding for services specifically to "older individuals who are blind." Title VII Part B of the Act authorizes funding for independent living services to all consumers regardless of disability or age. The Commission receives 11.25% of Part B funds allocated to Nebraska ; VR, the state agency designated to serve people with disabilities other than blindness, receives the rest. The Commission received Part B funds in the amount of \$33,324 in fiscal year 2008.

RSA launched the National Individuals Who are Blind (OIB) Project towards the end of the 1980s, a discretionary process for awarding federal grants for state projects serving older blind consumers. Discretionary grants are awarded on the merits of the grant. When SVI was awarded its first grant in 1994, the amount awarded to SVI compared well with other state rehabilitation agencies for the blind.

The availability of federal funds for services to older blind consumers increased the amount of paperwork counselors were expected to do as reporting requirements were instituted comparable to those for services provided to vocational rehabilitation clients. There was no longer any need for a "non-client" status to track services provided to consumers with independent living rather than vocational rehabilitation goals and this practice was discontinued.

The initial Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) grant awarded to SVI in fiscal year 1995 was \$150,970. This provided funding for grants to Radio Talking Book (RTB) (formerly funded with Title I or VR funds) and VIPS, low vision assessments and aids and devices such as closed circuit TV's and magnifiers, and salaries of staff providing services to older blind consumers. (OIB funds were used to contract services provided by a part-time Newsline Coordinator after NFB Newsline was established in Nebraska in 1999.)

Title VII Chapter 2 funds to SVI increased gradually from 1995 until the year 2000 when the National Older Individuals who are Blind Project achieved formula rather than discretionary grant status. This meant that Title VII Chapter 2 funds would be awarded to the states according to population rather than on the merit of individual grant applications. A base annual allocation of \$225,000 was established for states with the lowest population such as Nebraska . The formula for determining the level of OIB funding to minimally funded states has not changed since 2000 with the result that federal funding for older blind services in Nebraska has remained constant at \$225,000 per year.

Title VII Chapter 2 funds were not enough, however, to cover the total cost of staff time committed to older blind services. A portion of the funding came from the Title VII Chapter 2 grant and the balance came from the Title I grant. The expedience of using Title VII Chapter 2 and Title I funds to pay the salaries for the time commitment of staff providing services to older blind consumers was widely practiced among state rehabilitation agencies for the blind and so long as OIB funds were allocated as part of a discretionary process, this did not seem to raise concern at the federal level. This changed in fiscal year 2000 when increased funding for the National OIB Project crossed the threshold transforming it from a discretionary grant program to a formula grant program. This meant that rules and regulations governing the administration of OIB funds changed. Funds from one formula grant are not supposed to be used to pay for activities or services supported by another formula grant.

By this time, however, direct services to older blind consumers had expanded to such a point that many state agencies for the blind found it difficult to discontinue using at least some Title I funds to pay for the salaries and fringe benefits for personnel working with older blind consumers without adversely affecting the delivery of services that had been established. Consequently, many state agencies for the blind, including SVI, continued to use Title I and Title VII Chapter 2 funds to serve older blind consumers without comment from RSA

VIPS had grown steadily since its incorporation in 1986 from 12 peer support groups and 100 members to a peak of 50 groups with over 1,000 members in 1999. The success of VIPS is a testament to the value of peer support, but success brought a different set of challenges to SVI.

As anticipated, Peer support groups proved to be an effective means for serving a larger number of consumers than counselors could have done working with consumers individually, but as the number of peer support groups increased, the time commitment devoted to the provision of older blind services increased as well. Not only were counselors more involved with support groups but older blind consumers were applying for services in greater numbers.

Once older blind consumers applied for services, many remained on the caseload year after year if they belonged to a peer support group. In 1998, an administrative decision was made to close all cases from active independent living services if they were no longer receiving any services other than peer support. This helped to relieve the growing paperwork burden and did not affect the continued participation of consumers in peer support groups or their eligibility for future services provided by SVI.

In 1999, another administrative decision was made to limit attendance of counselors at peer support group meetings to not more than once every two months. This decision precipitated a crisis for some groups. Some groups elected to meet only when counselors could attend and run the meeting. Others decided to continue meeting every month.

Note: SVI was taken from under the umbrella of the Department of Health and Human Services and established as a separate commission with a new name, the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

For the past several years since 2002, leadership training workshops for peer support group leaders were held in each of the six offices operated by the Commission across the state. The purpose of this training was to provide group leaders with information, resources, and skills for planning and facilitating peer support group meetings and reduce reliance on Commission staff. Because of declining attendance the last couple of years, leadership training workshops were not scheduled in 2008.

A committee of Commission staff met throughout 2004 to consider ways in which limited staff time and resources could be focused on meeting the training needs of consumers struggling with the initial stages of vision loss. The committee recommended a gradual phasing out of counselor attendance at peer support group meetings over the next two years. Beginning in July 2005, counselors were expected to attend no more than one peer support group meeting every three months for each group they supported. Beginning in July 2006, counselor attendance at peer support group meetings was reduced to once every six months. Regular counselor attendance at peer support group meetings discontinued altogether after June 2007.

While some peer support groups continue to thrive without counselor support, many struggled and some eventually folded. Today, 38 groups are thought to still be active, down from 50 in 1999.

The committee also recommended a curriculum-based model for providing more comprehensive training at the local level as an alternative to Home Teaching Plus. This model features a series of three-day sessions to be held monthly over a period of four months for three or four people. Training would focus on Braille, cane travel, and activities of daily living with seminars on topics related to blindness. The goal was for each office to conduct training for two groups a year using this model. Up to 48 consumers could benefit from this approach. This compared well with Home Teaching Plus which typically provided training for 12 consumers at a much higher cost. The curriculum based model also had an advantage over traditional home teaching in that it provided opportunities for networking with other blind consumers learning the alternative skills of blindness locally.

The curriculum-based model of instruction is referred to differently in each district. In the North Platte district it is called For Your Independence (FYI); in the Lincoln district, it is called Group Alternative Techniques Exploration (GATE); and in the Omaha district, it is called Senior Adventures in Independent Living (SAIL).

NOTE: The curriculum-based model underwent some modification in the North Platte district where the larger geographical area made it more difficult to bring the same

group together for training over a span of several months. FYI is designed to bring a half dozen or so consumers together for one 4-day training experience. In many respects, it is similar to Home Teaching Plus but not quite as large.

It would be useful now to consider the budget for the first formula grant awarded to the Commission in 2000.

\$109,000 Staff salaries

- 32,000 Direct services to consumers including training tools and equipment
- 31,000 Grant to VIPS
- 30,000 Grant to RTB
- 10,000 Support for NFB Newslite
- 3,000 Travel and conference expenses

\$225,000 Total

The FY 2000 formula grant came after the discretionary grant had already been awarded that year giving Nebraska, in effect, a bonus grant for one year. This was the year special grants were awarded to consumer groups for special projects benefiting older blind consumers. The American Council of the blind of Nebraska received a one-year \$30,000 grant to launch a program to assist blind and visually impaired persons living in rural parts of the state with transportation expenses through reduced taxi fare coupons and subsidized vouchers for drivers. The American Council of the Blind of Nebraska-Omaha Chapter received a one-year \$20,000 grant to supplement Share a Fare, a half-fare taxi coupon program for blind and visually impaired residents of the greater Omaha metropolitan area. The National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska received a one-year \$30,000 grant to launch Computer Options, a computer lab providing training in the use of computer access technology for the blind. It also provided funding that carried over into the next year.

Fiscal year 2005 was a year of significant financial challenge. Five-year grants bolstering transition services and services to individuals with deaf-blindness expired in 2005 leaving less money for direct services. In addition, the Commission's budget was cut by 10%. Difficult decisions were made regarding how diminishing resources were to be used.

In addition, During the 2005 annual Older Individuals who are Blind Project Managers meeting in Washington, DC, it was revealed that at least one other state rehabilitation agency for the blind (Oklahoma) was cited for using Title I funds to cover staff time committed to the provision of services to older blind services. This has forced Oklahoma from a position of administering a program with the larger portion of the funding covering direct services to consumers to a program with the larger portion covering staff salaries. Given the situation in Oklahoma, continued use of Title I funds to pay for staff commitments to older blind services did not appear to be an option. Since October 1, 2005, OIB funds have been used to cover all salaries and fringe benefits of counselors working the program in accordance with the amount of time committed to OIB.

Grants to the Low Vision Clinic and VIPS were terminated at the beginning of fiscal year 2006; OIB support for a Newline Coordinator was discontinued in 2003. Five staff members were laid off in October 2005 including one vocational rehabilitation counselor, two orientation counselors, one program Specialist, and one support staff person. The fleet of vehicles available to counselors was reduced, limiting counselors to more time in the office and less contact with consumers in the field.

VIPS has struggled mightily to continue operations since discontinuation of the grant from the Commission. Although VIPS held Spring Conferences in 2006 and 2007, plans for a conference in 2008 were canceled. VIPS has also discontinued publication of its newsletter during the last year. Financial reimbursement of drivers providing transportation to members to and from peer support group meetings was discontinued in 2007.

Following the implementation of cost-saving measures in 2005, the Commission's financial situation improved, making it possible to refill some of the positions vacated as a result of the layoff. One full-time and one part-time orientation counselor and one part-time support staff person were hired in fiscal years 2006 and 2007, but the Commission is still not functioning at pre-fiscal year 2006 levels.

Note: The VR (vocational rehabilitation) and OC (orientation counselor) positions in Kearney were vacated in the fall of 2007 when Deanna took the Older Blind Specialist position and Jean Wurtz resigned. Given overall staffing considerations, it was decided to fill the VR counselor position but not the OC position.

In January 2007, the Enrichment Foundation in Omaha awarded \$34,500 to the Commission to expand independent living services to blind and visually impaired adults living in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. The grant allowed 15% (\$4,500) to be used for administrative costs with the rest (\$30,000) to be used for the purchase of assistive technology promoting independent living. While the target population includes all adults over 21 years of age, most of those benefiting from this grant were 55 or over. The partnership between the Enrichment Foundation and the Commission is expected to be long term, but, because of the sluggish economy, the grant awarded to the Commission for 2008 is somewhat lower (\$32,400 overall; \$30,000 for assistive technology and \$2,400 for administrative expenses).

Also in early calendar year 2007, the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN) petitioned the state legislature to increase funding for services to blind and visually impaired seniors. It was the contention of NFBN that increased funding for older blind services would save tax dollars by enabling older blind and visually impaired individuals to live longer at home (and out of more restrictive living arrangements) and reducing reliance on family members or other caretakers making it possible for them to work more and pay taxes.

In June 2007, the state legislature increased the budget to the Commission by \$75,000. This increase does not come close to meeting the needs of older blind consumers, but it did provide funds for creating an Older Blind Specialist position. Deanna Jesse assumed the position of Older Blind Specialist on October 1, 2007.

~The priorities established for this project include:

- define the target population to be served with increased funding for older blind services.
- collect data relevant to the target population
- establish close working relationship with the aging service network and educate other service professionals about services offered by the Commission
- Educate Commission staff about services available through the aging service network that will make it possible for older blind and visually impaired consumers to remain longer in their own homes in conjunction with services offered by the Commission
- Increase referrals representative of the target population to the Commission
- establish and maintain a dialogue with the state legislature and consumer groups regarding progress being made

The target population for this project is defined as those blind and visually impaired Nebraskans, aged 55 or older, who are identified as "at risk" of placement in a nursing home or more restrictive living arrangement.

For years, the demand for assistive technology and training in its use has been steadily increasing without a corresponding increase in the number of personnel qualified to meet that demand. At the same time, the Rehabilitation Services Administration has made it clear that state rehabilitation agencies were to place greater emphasis on serving consumers with employment rather than independent living goals. A decision was consequently made in the spring of 2007 to reprioritize services provided to independent living clients. Technology Specialists may continue meeting with individual IL clients to assess their need for assistive technology and provide limited support or training, but if support or training is expected to take more than a couple of follow up visits, alternative local resources should be contracted to provide the follow up before the Commission will assist with the acquisition of equipment or financial support. Each field office has since been encouraged to identify and make use of local resources capable of providing technical support to IL clients as needed.

Reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act is not expected before 2010. If it is enacted with current language relevant to formula funding intact, Title VII Chapter 2 funds available to minimally funded states such as Nebraska will be increased to \$350,000 annually, an increase of \$125,000. To capture the additional federal funds, the Commission will need to provide a 10% match (\$11,250).

The Commission can expect real challenges in the provision of services to older blind consumers in the years to come. The number of individuals 55 years of age and older experiencing vision loss is anticipated to increase dramatically as the Baby Boom generation ages. Funding increases for services to older blind consumers cannot be assumed. The focus of services to older blind consumers' needs to be more firmly placed on provision of independent living services to consumers in the initial stages of their adjustment to blindness. Efforts to identify and explore innovative approaches to serving a growing population of older blind consumers with existing staff will continue.