

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Friday, July 21, 2023, 9:00 a.m.
NCBVI, Room 4A
4600 Valley Road
Lincoln, NE

Minutes

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

Brent Heyen, Chairman of the Board of Commissioners, called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. The meeting began with introductions.

Commissioners present: Brent Heyen, Chairperson, Lincoln; Cheryl Livingston, Vice Chairperson; Lincoln; Linda Mentink, Executive Secretary, Columbus; Mark Bulger, Designee of the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska, Omaha; Miguel Rocha, Scottsbluff.

Staff present: Carlos Serván, Executive Director; Erin Brandyberry, Deputy Director-Services; Kat Carroll, Deputy Director-Finance; Cristal Dimas, North Platte District Supervisor; Connie Daly, OIB Counselor; Jessica Bartenbach, Center Supervisor; Tammie Dunn, Accountant II; Brandy Harper, Accountant I; Vanessa Kunz, Accountant I; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist.

Public present: Jim Jirak, ACB representative, Omaha; Barbara Loos, NFB representative.

A copy of the Nebraska Open Meeting Act was available in both print and Braille formats. The Notice of the Meeting was published in the Lincoln Journal Star, the State Government Calendar, NCBVI Website, NFB Newsline® and Radio Talking Book. The Notice was also sent to ACBN, NFBN, and the NCBVI listservs.

Approval of the May 6, 2023 public meeting minutes

Commissioner Livingston moved to approve the Minutes of the May 6, 2023 Commission Meeting. Commissioner Rocha seconded the motion.

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

Report from the Commissioners

Miguel Rocha – Miguel reported that he completed his Spring courses at UNL. He is currently taking one course at UNO, which is Social Security and is learning JAWS scripting language. Miguel attended the meetings for the NFB At-large Chapter and he attended the ACB National Convention in Chicago, Illinois.

Mark Bulger – Mark reported that as of April 15, he is no longer the President of the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska (ACBN). Kristal Platt is the newly elected President of ACBN. Mark also reported that he continues to serve as the President of the Omaha Association of the Blind and he has been attending monthly in-person meetings. Mark noted that he has been President of this group for about 14 years. They just celebrated their 100th anniversary of being a group. They are looking forward to the next 100 years. Mark noted that he is also involved in the Independent Living movement and he serves on the Board of Directors of this group. Mark noted that while we want blind people to work; we also want all disabled people to be independent.

Linda Mentink – Linda reported that there are not a lot of blind people in Columbus that she knows, but they still get together monthly as a forward Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) Columbus area. Linda also reported that she attended the NFB National Convention in Houston. Linda noted that she attended some good meetings. She attended the newly formed blind Christians group, which used to be the NFB in Communities of Faith Division. Linda stated that she enjoys getting together with old friends and meeting new ones.

Cheryl Livingston – Cheryl reported that she has been active with the NFBN as their State Treasurer. Cheryl stated that she has been treasurer for NFBN for over 30 years. Cheryl noted that she also serves as Treasurer for the NFB Senior Division and she was elected as Secretary for the NFB Lincoln Chapter. Cheryl reported that she also attended the NFB National Convention in Houston. Cheryl noted that the convention was very good. While in Houston she went on a tour of the NASA Space Center. This is an example of how blind people can travel and have fun. Cheryl added that she currently cares for two foster cats. Cheryl also volunteers at the Cat House in Lincoln.

Brent Heyen – Brent reported that he works as a blind manager at a hotel in Lincoln and he demonstrates the abilities of a blind person every day in the work that he performs. Brent noted that he was recently promoted to Interim General Manager. Brent noted that he sets a good example of what a blind person can do. Brent also reported that he attended a Lincoln Chapter meeting of the NFB.

Report from the Executive Director

I. Administration

During the last quarter, I attended the following meetings and activities: NCSAB monthly meetings, including a strategic meeting held July 11-12 in Chicago. Some of the areas discussed were going over the Spring conference and start planning the Fall conference; Randolph-Sheppard issues such as a higher focus on military cafeteria contracts and vending machines at US Post Office locations; and equipment versus supplies expenditures. We drafted a letter to be sent to the U.S. Senate to ask for their support to increase the OIB funds as per the President's recommendation (I sent the letter to the U.S. Senate HELP Committee on behalf of NCSAB to support the President's recommendation) and NCSAB having more presence with OSER, RSA and other stakeholders.

At the StarTran monthly meetings some of the issues discussed were preventing violence in the buses, number of bus driver increase to almost 100%; updating the StarTran regulations, and promoting bus rides.

The OCIO and Disability Rights Nebraska organized a statewide webinar on Digital Accessibility. I was invited to do a presentation about the challenges blind people face when technology is inaccessible. However, due to my flights being cancelled and then rescheduled and delayed, I could not attend this panel. Therefore, Jessica Bartenbach and Hugh Phan attended this webinar in my place.

In early June, I met with AFB research staff to talk about national research that will help agencies for the blind. Main areas covered were transition services, the importance of having separate agencies for the blind, and the impact of technology in the near future in the area of employment.

After Commissioner Rocha brought to my attention the requirement of a driver license for NCBVI job postings, I addressed this issue with the Director of State Personnel and it was resolved.

I attended Silver Summit in Kearney at the end of May and addressed the attendees. I want to thank Angie Hoff for helping in the coordination of this event.

Since March of last year, Curtis Chong has been working with the HHSS tech team to ensure that the Nebraska iServe Portal--including its landing page and its various application forms--are accessible to nonvisual users. This project has taken a long time to achieve fruition, but it is supposed to go live sometime in July of this year. Curtis said, "I consider the iServe Portal project to be a success from the perspective of the blind person who uses the site to complete applications for various benefits."

NCBVI asked for additional state funding to cover VR Basic Support funds that went to pay for Pre-ETS. The Governor's and Appropriations Committee initial budget recommendation did not include an increase other than the cost of living. I approached several members of the Appropriations Committee to explain NCBVI's need. As a result, the Unicameral and Governor's office did increase our budget by an extra \$305,100. We are in a very good financial position and do not have to depend on unreliable funding like Federal reallocation and/or program income (social security reimbursement). Six years ago, our state appropriation was around 1.2 million and now is around 2.6 million dollars, more than double. We used to say that the state only matched 20%, but now it is a little over 40%. We have some flexibility using state funds compared to the restrictions of Federal funds.

We started the radio, YouTube, Facebook, and TV campaign at the end of May. The purpose is to educate the community about the capability of the blind, and at the same time promote our services to those who don't know about us.

We had our Employment Conference on June 6-8. I attended part of it and provided a presentation during the evening of June 7. I want to thank Connie Daly for helping to put this together.

Around the middle of June, NCBVI and the ADA Task Force Coordinator put more pressure over the tech team from E1 to have the accounting system be accessible. According to this team, E1 is accessible. I put an official request to have Oracle, the subcontractor, provide training to us. I have not received a response from them yet.

I met with the Friends of the Commission subcommittee to figure out how they can help NCBVI. We explored the idea of starting a supportive service provider (SSP) for deaf-blind Nebraskans as

this will help them to be independent and feel more integrated in society. As a result, on June 20, NCBVI leadership along with the Friends sub-committee met with Beth Jordan from Hellen Keller and Cory from VANCRO, to talk about a pilot project for SSP in Nebraska. At this point, we have the funds to help the start of this project with the idea to get funds from the Unicameral in the future for ongoing support. On July 18, we had a follow-up meeting, this time including the Nebraska stakeholders to start planning for this project.

On June 20, Jeff Altman and I were invited to talk at the Speaking Out for the Blind show on American Council of the Blind's ACB Media Channel, known as Mainstream. We talked about our Nebraska Center for the Blind, and as they put it, the Center is well recognized across the country for quality training.

On June 27, the Director of the Nebraska Commission for Latinos came to meet with me and we talked about ways to collaborate. One of the main areas will be for them to include NCBVI on their training to stakeholders across the state.

During the last couple of days in June and first week of July, I attended the ACB and NFB National Conventions.

On July 14, I was invited by Nebraska Apple Seed to do a presentation about blindness and the services NCBVI provides. This was a statewide zoom event.

I have been invited to be a keynote speaker on September 13 at the International Association of Industrial Accident Boards and Commissions (IAIABC). This international conference will be held in Denver, Colorado. It is mainly for personnel dealing with workers compensation and they would like to learn about employees going back to work after injuries.

- Kat Carroll completed the State Fiscal Year End 6/30/2023.
- Completed Benefits Open Enrollment.

Kat continues to improve the Internal Budget Projection for FFY 2023 that shows budgeted, year to date expenditures. She presents this information in detail to Leadership and Supervisors on a monthly basis.

Kathy Stephens has been working with Surplus Property to have technology items from the Lincoln office hauled to State Surplus and/or posted on Gov.Deals for auction.

Kathy also has been working on year-end inventory for the technology items that NCBVI has in E1. This is an ongoing project.

A letter was received from Pat Selk from the Office of the Governor asking for assistance in tracking membership on boards, commissions, and other bodies. She stated that their office is working diligently to eliminate conflicting information in the appointment process as well as to clear the backlog of unfilled positions. Some positions, she noted, have been vacant for years. Pat stated that compounding this challenge for them has been the lack of confirmation appointments which have been submitted to the Legislature, due to the pace of the legislative session. The Governor's office asked each Board, Commission or other body to forward them a list of their current membership, as well as any unfilled vacancies. They also asked for the length of term and

current expiration date, their appointment or start date and the statutory requirement for filling each position. Kathy provided Pat Selk the information she requested.

II. Human Resources

Staff up-date:

In the Lincoln District: Pam Rademacher was hired as the Lincoln District Supervisor and she is in Center training until August 17.

Charles Anderson was hired for the Technology Specialist position in Lincoln and started Center training on July 10. With this new hire, the Lincoln District will be fully staffed.

In the Omaha District: Tammi Thomas, VR counselor, finished her Center training and started to work in the field on June 15.

We are pleased to be able to hire Tim Jefferson as the Omaha District Supervisor. He already went through our Center training when he was hired to be a VR counselor, therefore, he will start working in the field on August 10.

In the North Platte District: We still have three positions open, the VR counselor position for the Scottsbluff area, as Angie took the OIB Coordinator duties; the VR position that Cristal Dimas vacated when she became the supervisor, and the Technology Specialist position vacated several months ago.

The Training Center is now fully staffed. However, with Jeff Altman retiring in 2025, we want to make sure there is adequate time to recruit and train his replacement. Thus, a second Cane Travel Instructor will be added to the Center as part of our succession planning.

In NBE: Lizzie Heidenreich finished her Center training on May 8 and is now helping Eric. We still have one position open, the one vacated by Dave Robinson.

In Administration: we hired Hugh Phan for the Technology Manager position. He finished Center Training and started to work as our new Technology Manager on July 10. Kat Carroll announced her retirement on February 29, 2024.

Since 2020, we have hired 22 new staff and have five who were promoted or are working in a different position.

We are consulting With Mark Schultz, previous RSA Commissioner and Assistant Secretary of Education, to help us facilitate our strategic and succession planning. He will meet with the NCBVI Succession Planning Committee the last week of August.

Training Opportunities:

Several staff attended the NFB National convention. Commissioner Rocha and I attended the ACB Convention.

Several staff also attended the Contemporary Issues in Rehabilitation and Education for the Blind-22nd annual Rehabilitation and Orientation and Mobility Conference. This was held July 1 in Houston.

Jeff Sheer attended the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition that was held in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Field and Center staff attended the Employment Conference held in Lincoln in June. Gracie participated in a Learning Professional Webinar.

Angie continues to attend monthly OIB program manager meetings via zoom

III. Field Services

The Silver Summit took place at the end of May, it was very well attended, with around 195 attendees, including 110 consumers, 50 plus family members, and several staff and contractors. Commissioner Bulger and state consumer leaders attended also. This statewide conference was for OIB clients and was coordinated with the help of Angie Hoff and Sky is the Limit.

The Employment Conference was held the first week of June and it was well attended, over 30 consumers. Connie Daly helped to organize it with Dynamic Buna.

WAGES is going on now, and the end of the six week program is July 21.

PI, Project Independence, will start the following week at Calvin Crest Camp and Retreat Center. We are using funds from the Friends for this program.

The Lincoln District staff have held several GATE teaching programs where clients participated in several activities. These activities are designed to put blindness alternative techniques into practice.

Staff set up several work-based learning experiences and On-the-Job Trainings for several consumers.

Our field staff participated in the following networking events:

Lincoln:

- *Partnering with Project Search, Lincoln Public Schools, and Embassy Suites Hotel,
- *Helen Keller National Center for Deaf Blind;
- *Coalition for Older Adult Health;
- *The Salvation Army in Norfolk to talk with them about on-the-job training;
- *Disability Pride planning Committee event;
- *Attended New & Improved Norfolk Collaboration meetings where all Northeast Service Providers in the Health Field gather to discuss different services for low-income families;
- *Connected with Pizza Hut in Madison to tour and discuss a work-based learning opportunity;
- *Connected with Madison Public Library to discuss community service hours for consumers and possible work-based learning opportunities;

- *Met with staff at the Atkinson Public Library to share information about our services and provide instruction on how to use the CCTV;
- *Attend zoom meetings with Community Food Access- United Way in Columbus;
- *Participates via zoom with a Spanish Networking Group in Fremont with business leaders and discusses possible employment openings;
- *Provided training to the staff and treatment team at the Lincoln Regional Center about mobility skills for blind patients;
- *Met with Midwest Eye Care and UNMC Neurologist unit about NCBVI services;
- *Participated in the Employ Columbus partnership meetings with Norfolk ILC Agency, Platte County Courthouse, and Indian College at the Santee Reservation and shared information about NCBVI.

Omaha:

- *Amazon, took a tour with a consumer;
- *Nebraska Department of Transportation, Mutual of Omaha, Citi Trends, and Omaha Public Power District;
- *Provided a presentation to Boys and Girls Club about blindness,
- *Attended a meeting with Employ OMA;
- *Networked with Vodec, Vocational Development Center and Metro Community College-Disability Support Service;
- *Toured Job Corps in Dennison, Iowa to learn about their program and offered valuable insights on enhancing its accessibility for students who are blind;
- *Engaged in the partnership with NCECBVI, delivering transition services to the students;
- *Attended an ISP meeting with Developmental Disabilities Center Nebraska to introduce NCBVI services to administrators and service coordinators;
- *Collaborating with Denizen Management to provide a thorough explanation of services to assist with job retention;
- *Met with Duet services and shared information about NCBVI services;
- *Collaborating with Darla Bell, TVI, from Millard Public School District to deliver JAWS training. The training will assist teachers of the visually impaired to effectively teach their students how to use JAWS software on their computers.

North Platte:

- *Met with teachers of the visually impaired, which will play a significant role in supporting our students and identifying new students who could benefit from the services we offer;
- *Attended an ISP meeting with the Office of Human Development to showcase our services and engage in discussions regarding the potential need for assistance with one of their clients;
- *Presentation to the Doniphan Community Center highlighting the services provided by NCBVI;
- *Participated in Employ GI and Kearney;
- *Networking with the following businesses to explore work-based learning opportunities: Adam's Corner Market, Teaching Tree and YMCA;
- *Connections with school professionals which includes several public schools;
- *Networked with United by Culture and YMCA to explore work-based learning in Lexington; met with NE-Vocational Rehabilitation Program Director's to coordinate transition partnership meetings.

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

OIB clients was 576.

IL clients under 55 was 97.

VR clients was 450.

This quarter we had clients from the three districts get jobs as:

Assembler/Fabricator, Business Operations Specialist, Community and Social Service Specialist, Food Prep and Serving Worker, Fitness Trainer/Aerobics, Healthcare Support Worker, Helper-Construction Trade, Janitor/Cleaner, Maids/Housekeeping, Massage Therapist, Mental Health Counselor, Receptionist/Information Clerk, Rehabilitation Counselor, and Retail Salesperson.

IV. Training Center

The Center has seven people in training: five students (three VR clients and two OIB) and two staff trainees. During the last quarter, one VR consumer graduated, and three staff trainees completed immersion training.

During this quarter, we had six tours and one 3-day stay.

Jessica recorded an interview for Radio Talking Book's Community Connection broadcast which aired on June 23. A tour was also provided to 11 students from Union College's Occupational Therapy program on June 28. On July 24, we plan to work with O&M students from UNL on structured discovery and cane travel skills.

Activities we have included are a tour of Talking Book and Braille Services in Lincoln, an audio described movie, attendance at the Silver Summit in Kearney, the Employment Conference in Lincoln, mall travel and lunch in the food court, Jazz in June, dinner with the WAGES participants, and attendance at the NFB Lincoln Chapter picnic. In addition, representatives of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska, and American Council of the Blind of Nebraska presented to Center students about the role of consumer organizations and what to expect at the national conventions.

V. Nebraska Business Enterprise

State Buildings:

The remodel of the dining and cafeteria area of the State Office Building in Lincoln is now complete, and the vendor has returned to occupy the place.

Standing Bear building, remodel work continues in this space.

Vending machines were installed on April 27 at the Douglas County Justice Center, which is an extension of our services at the Douglas County Civic Center. A Blind Vendor is operating this building. This building was open by the middle of May.

DHHS

NBE is in talks with DHHS to provide service to at least three large facilities in the DHHS system; Lincoln Regional Center, Beatrice State Developmental Center, and an YRTC campus. NBE has made some positive connections within DHHS and it is starting to prove fruitful as they are

dissatisfied with current providers and their procurement division is now aware of NBE and the priority we have on state sites.

NBE is also in conversation with NDE/ATP/VR about providing services in their new building on 84th Street in Lincoln.

NBE, in conjunction with the Committee of Blind Vendors, decided not to have a retreat this year because of being short staffed.

There are currently 12 licensed Vendors in the NBE program, and one person is in training to become a vendor.

Chair Heyen thanked Carlos for all the good information in his report. Chair Heyen noted that he watched the PSA's and thought they were done very well and professionally made. The results NCBVI is already receiving from the PSA's is amazing and it shows that it was money well spent.

Commissioner Mentink stated that she agrees. As she read the reports and listened to the PSA's and the interviews, she was very impressed with what the NCBVI staff is doing and she publically thanked everyone for their hard work.

Vice Chair Livingston stated that she has also seen the PSA's on TV that were done with Mary and she also watched the longer one that was done on YouTube. Cheryl noted that the PSA's were great. Cheryl thanked NCBVI for the good work.

Commissioner Bulger stated that he has been reading the NCBVI reports for about seven years and he felt this report was one of the most impressive. Blind people are getting a lot of jobs, which is what we want to happen.

Commissioner Rocha stated that he agrees with his colleagues and he is glad that NCBVI is doing well.

Public Comment

Barbara Loos – Barbara stated that concerning the PSA's and the YouTube videos, she also thinks that they are great. The interview on the radio was also good, although she is concerned about the confusion that happens when we talk about the School for the Blind rather than the Center. Barbara suggested that NCBVI be consistent with the name of the Center.

Carlos noted that we at NCBVI have been consistent, however, sometimes journalist miss-speak and call the Center the School for the Blind. We keep telling them that we call it Training Center and he always follows up telling them that NCBVI runs the Training Center.

Barbara commented that she feels there should also be descriptive video versions of the PSA's. She knows that some of what is said is self-explanatory, but she is guessing that there are other visual things going on and, while we want to target family members and others besides blind people, we must also target blind people. Carlos noted that NCBVI is working on this.

Barbara stated that she also feels that the Spanish PSA's should be voiced in Spanish. Carlos noted that a separate PSA will be coming out which will be just in Spanish.

Focus Topic: The NCBVI Center (includes a tour of the Center)

OVERVIEW

The Nebraska Center for the Blind was established in 1974 as a comprehensive residential training program for blind and visually impaired adults in Nebraska. Currently, Nebraska is one of only six programs certified by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB) as a Structured Discovery Training Center. Nebraska has been certified since 2008, and is currently certified through the end of 2024, which will be the 50th anniversary of the residential program.

Centers wishing to be approved by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board are evaluated every three years to ensure that the program is consumer-focused and has a positive philosophy of blindness. Centers holding this certification have demonstrated their use of Structured Discovery methods and principles and are approved to provide immersion, internship, and apprenticeship opportunities for those training to become Structured Discovery professionals.

Structured Discovery is a consumer-based rehabilitation model "derived out of the collective knowledge, experiences, and attitudes of blind people who have achieved independence and success" (www.nbpcb.org). It is based on Cognitive Learning Theory rather than the vision paradigm which is typical of conventional training programs. This teaching methodology was first tested in Iowa during the 1950s-1970s under Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, and it was brought to Nebraska in the 1970s under Dr. James Nyman. Nebraska was the first training center to adopt the use of sleepshades full-time, and we employed the first blind Cane Travel instructor. Nebraska was instrumental in spreading this philosophy to other states. Structured Discovery training in a residential program is strongly correlated with higher educational attainment, higher salary, and higher rates of employment, which is important since nearly 70% of blind people are unemployed or under-employed.

The Center has five classes: Cane Travel, Technology, Shop, Home Management, and Braille. Students attending the Center participate in all classes, and training lasts for an average of 6-9 months, but can be extended to a maximum of 1 year. Like other NCBVI services, there is no cost to attend the Center.

Each class follows a curriculum, but the training is customized based on the previous knowledge and experience of the student, the student's specific needs and goals, learning style and speed, and any secondary disabilities. Class sizes are kept to 1-3 participants per instructor to facilitate individualized instruction. Training is available to consumers of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program as well as the Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) program. Nebraska is unique in this regard, as most states only allow VR clients to attend residential training programs. NCBVI began allowing OIB clients to attend in 2019 as a result of receiving additional state funding.

Students live in apartments in downtown Lincoln rented by the Commission. There are 9 efficiency apartments and 1 2-bedroom apartment which is available for a student who is the primary

caregiver for a young child, or a student who requires an overnight nurse or home health aide. The apartments are fully furnished, and are located on the third floor of a secured building at 11th and O. This location provides access to the main bus terminal, including the bus that serves the center. There are also many shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues within easy walking distance to provide opportunities for community involvement. On the same floor of the apartments is a laundry room, computer room, and conference room for students to share meals together if they wish.

Apartment meetings and inspections are conducted weekly to identify any areas where students need to practice cleaning skills. Students live in the apartments to develop independent living skills so that they can cook, clean, do laundry, shop for groceries, and manage other activities of daily life without the assistance of family and friends. They are able to be immersed in blindness around the clock, and can also benefit from the peer support, mentoring, and role modeling that occurs when surrounded by other blind people.

Through classes and community-based activities, students also learn problem-solving and transferrable skills so that the focus of control is internal rather than external, the student is an active participant in learning who takes responsibility for their own safety, success, and failure, rather than simply memorizing information that is given to them by their instructor. The transferability of skills is important so that what students learn in Lincoln can be applied to their home communities, whether that is Lincoln, Omaha, rural Nebraska, or even outside the state.

Because students wear sleepshades during training, they learn to function regardless of the amount of eyesight they have today or in the future, and their ability to safely and efficiently function does not depend on the environment. When students are not attending classes, they learn to incorporate the use of any remaining vision, and this helps them learn what their vision is reliable for and what it is not, and when an alternative technique is the most efficient. One consistent thing about low vision is that it is not reliable, so eliminating reliance on low vision increases learning and also helps the instructor assess progress more accurately. The use of the long white cane is required at all times so that the use of the cane becomes automatic, students learn to stow the cane appropriately in a variety of settings, learn to deal effectively with the public's misconceptions about blindness, and more quickly accept their own blindness.

Enrollment at the Center is on a rolling basis, so new students are starting training at all times of the year without waiting for the next training session to begin. This allows us to meet them where they are, rather than have a minimum skill level requirement for admission and classes taught in a group format. There are no pre-determined starting and ending dates, so students do not need to wait months before starting training, and are able to graduate earlier or stay longer if needed, and receive individualized instruction. The nature of rolling enrollment, varying skill levels, and differences in training time means that enrollment fluctuates over time, just like in any other training Center that uses this model.

Having students starting at various times throughout the year is beneficial for both the new and experienced students. For new students, it provides them the opportunity to interact with other blind role models who are farther along in their training, and to learn vicariously. More experienced students learn to give back by taking newer students under their wing, showing them local businesses downtown, being a peer mentor, assisting a new student to the bus stop, and serving mini and commencement meals.

All students take turns cleaning the apartment common areas and the student lounge at the Center, and take turns preparing a group meal when a 3-day stay is scheduled. Students are also encouraged to attend local chapter meetings of consumer organizations, and also attend NCBVI programs such as the employment conference, silver summit, and college workshop in order to promote the Center and serve as role models. Students are also sometimes asked to assist with giving tours of the Center, including to participants of the Work and Gain Experience in the Summer (WAGES) program.

PHILOSOPHY

In addition to the core classes, students also participate in weekly philosophical seminars. Centers teach not only nonvisual techniques, but more importantly, they help students develop a positive philosophy of blindness. According to the book *Freedom for the Blind* by James H. Omvig (2002), this philosophy can be summarized with the following ten factual statements:

Blind people are simply normal, ordinary people who cannot see;

The blind are merely a cross-section of society as a whole, mirroring society in every way with the same hopes, interests and desires, the same dreams, abilities and potential as everyone else;

The physical condition of blindness is nothing more than a normal, human characteristic, like the hundreds of others which, taken together, mold each of us into an unique human being;

Given proper training and opportunity, the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business, can have a family, can be a tax paying and participating citizen and can be in every way a contributing member of society who can compete on terms of absolute equality with his or her sighted neighbors;

With proper training and opportunity, blindness is not a tragedy. It literally can be reduced to the level of a physical inconvenience or nuisance;

The actual physical limitations associated with the characteristic of blindness can easily be overcome by using alternative techniques for doing without sight what you would do with sight if you had it;

The concept of the hierarchy of sight, that is, the notion that the level to which a blind person can be competent and successful rises or falls in direct proportion to the amount of vision he or she has is nothing more than a myth and is completely false;

To sum it up, "IT IS RESPECTABLE TO BE BLIND" and the blind, themselves, are primarily responsible for pushing back the frontiers of ignorance and changing what it means to be blind in the broader society;

"You can't have your cake and eat it, too." That is, blind people cannot, on the one hand, use their blindness to get some advantage or something they want and then, on the other hand, demand equality and opportunity when it would be nice to have it. The blind deserve freedom and equality, yes, but hand-in-hand with equality comes responsibility; and, finally

The real problem with blindness is not the physical loss of eyesight at all, but rather is to be found in the wide range of societal misunderstandings and misconceptions about blindness shared by the blind and sighted alike. Putting it bluntly, the blind are, in every sense of the word, a minority group, with all of the negative implications which this phrase conjures up.

Freedom for the Blind is one of the textbooks used in the master's degree and graduate certificate programs at Louisiana Tech University, the only university that trains Structured Discovery professionals. Without a positive philosophy, high expectations, problem-solving skills, and self-confidence, teaching the techniques of blindness is less effective and leads to higher recidivism rates.

CLASSES

Travel class includes both indoor and outdoor travel, starting with basic cane technique and exploration skills in the building, then progressing outside to the sidewalks in the immediate block, the bus stops, and learning to identify and manage driveways. Students learn orientation and problem-solving skills, how to judge distance to traffic, and how to regain orientation. Students learn to cross at all types of intersections, progressing from quiet residential streets with a stop sign to major light-controlled intersections and offset intersections. Students ride the bus daily between the apartments and training Center, but also utilize the bus for grocery shopping, and later for travel assignments. They progress from working in the immediate area to working in other parts of Lincoln, including downtown where they practice address locations. Drops are conducted roughly once per month to promote confidence, problem-solving, and transferrable skills. Students also learn to use taxi cabs and ride-share apps, and learn rural travel, mall travel, stairs, elevators, and escalators. Interacting with the public, including requesting directions, and refusing unwanted help, are also taught and practiced regularly. Students who have a guide dog use the long white cane for Travel class. For those interested in being matched with a guide dog, orientation and mobility skills are a prerequisite for admission to guide dog training programs.

In Technology class, students learn to use their phones to nonvisually make and receive phone calls, read and respond to text messages, and other routine tasks such as adding contacts, changing settings, adding calendar events, and making notes. The Center has access to iPhone, Android, and BlindShell phones. Most students learn to use JAWS for Windows, but a Mac with VoiceOver is also available, and students are introduced to other Windows-based screen readers including NVDA and Narrator. Students work on nonvisual typing skills, then proceed to File Manager, Microsoft Word, Internet, email, and some also work in Excel and PowerPoint. Optical Character Recognition (OCR) apps and devices are also taught, as well as other smartphone apps geared towards accessibility such as Seeing AI and Be My Eyes. Interested students are also exposed to digital book players such as the one available from NLS, or the Victor Reader Stream and Stratus.

In Shop class, students learn to use a variety of hand and power tools in order to build a project of their choice. Students also learn basic home repair and maintenance skills, such as how to change a furnace filter, locate and flip switch in the circuit breaker box, plug a cord into an outlet, replace a lightbulb and batteries, patch drywall, hang pictures, unclog a sink, and fix a running toilet. Shop promotes planning, problem-solving, and self-confidence.

In Home Management, students learn cooking, cleaning, laundry, sewing, meal planning, grocery shopping, budgeting, marking and labeling, lighting candles, writing guides, accessible medical

devices, and organizational skills. All students learn core skills, such as centering a pot on the stove and setting the temperature, measuring wet and dry ingredients, chopping, testing meat for doneness, flipping ingredients in a skillet, using the oven, etc., but they choose the recipes that they want to make in order to learn these skills. They locate the recipes, write the grocery list, shop for the ingredients, label and put away their items, prepare the food, and clean up. While in training, they are exposed to gas and electric stoves/ovens, both flat-top and coil styles. They also learn to use several smaller appliances, such as the blender, food processor, mixer, Instant Pot, Crock Pot, air fryer, and countertop grill as well as an outdoor propane grill. Students serve a mini meal for six people which is family-style using a formal table setting, and a commencement meal, which is for 12 people and is a buffet-style. While accessible devices are available, such as a talking meat thermometer, food scale, and liquid level indicator, they are rarely used so that students learn to utilize alternative techniques.

In Braille, students are taught using the Simply Braille curriculum as well as a variety of real-life exercises. Students are taught the uncontracted Braille code, slate and stylus and Braillewriter, and work on the Unified English Braille contracted Braille code. They also learn to make labels, play accessible games, take notes, and have the opportunity to explore and use a variety of Braille displays and notetakers. Duxbury Braille Translation software and an embosser are also available for students who are interested. For those interested in Nemeth or UEB Math, music Braille, Computer Braille Code, or Braille in foreign languages, this can also be an option once study of the contracted Braille code is complete. Students take notes during weekly seminars to practice notetaking skills, have daily alphabet speed drills, and also regularly take notes when listening to podcasts. Students are also encouraged to Braille recipes and labels for Home Management class. Approximately 90% of blind people who are employed use Braille on a daily basis, so there is a strong correlation between Braille usage and employment.

Apartment living provides students with the opportunity to live separate from family and friends in order to develop independence and efficiency in all of the activities of daily living. Students do their own grocery shopping, prepare their own meals, do their own laundry, clean their apartments, help clean the common areas, and participate in some optional activities outside of the training environment. When a potential student comes for a 3-day stay to evaluate if they want to attend the Center, two current students work together to prepare a meal to be shared with everyone at the apartment. Students commute daily to the training center using the city bus. Techniques of daily living are taught at the apartments once per month in a group setting. Topics include cleaning mirrors and windows, cleaning the bathroom, cleaning appliances (inside, outside, and underneath/behind), vacuuming, sweeping, mopping, dusting, and cleaning counters.

STAFF

The Center has seven full-time staff members: Jessica Bartenbach (Center Supervisor), Jeff Altman (Cane Travel Instructor), Nancy Coffman (Technology Instructor), Nicole Gothier (Home Management Instructor), Shane Buresh (Braille Instructor), Ted Haubrich (Shop Instructor), and Mark Coleman (Client Resource Counselor). Out of the Center staff, three have master's degrees, two have graduate certificates, and two have bachelor's degrees. Several staff also have professional credentials including: one National Orientation and Mobility Certification Trainer (NOMCT), three National Certification in Unified English Braille (NCUEB), two National Certification in Rehabilitation Teaching for the Blind (NCRTB), and one JAWS certification. All instructional staff are current Certified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for the Blind (CVRCB).

With the exception of Jeff Altman, all other Center staff are new to the Center, starting between 2020 and 2023, though Nancy Coffman and Shane Buresh are longtime NCBVI employees, and Jessica Bartenbach has experience working at another Structured Discovery Training Center. For more than nine months, the Center had one-third of our positions vacant, but we are now fully staffed.

We are in the process of adding a second Cane Travel Instructor position to the Center so that this critical position is not left vacant when Jeff Altman retires in 2025. It can take a year or longer to train and certify a travel instructor, and NOMC's are in high demand across the United States with only one university-based program that is based on Structured Discovery, and only five other Centers eligible to train apprentices/interns in order for them to receive National Orientation and Mobility Certification (NOMC).

CONSUMERS

Attendance at the Center is available to adult Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) consumers. Prospective students take a tour of the Center, and then complete a 3-day stay where they attend classes under sleepshades and stay overnight at the apartments to get a feel for the program in order to make an informed choice regarding attendance.

In federal fiscal years (FFY) 2017-2021, there were 47 consumers who attended Center training, averaging 9.4 students per year. Federal fiscal years run from October 1 through September 30 of the following year. For example, FFY 2023 runs from October 1, 2022 through September 30, 2023.

In FFY 2022, 10 consumers attended training, five graduated, four left training due to medical reasons, and one chose to discontinue training prior to graduating.

So far, in FFY2023, seven consumers have attended training, one graduated, one chose to discontinue training, and five are still attending the Center.

The number of consumers who had a 3-day stay listed on the Special Programs page of their plan was ten in FFY 2019, three in FFY 2020, and nine in FFY 2021 for an average of 7.3. In FFY 2022, there were six 3-day stays, and so far, there have been 11 in FFY 2023.

In FFY2022, there were 18 tours and six 3-day stays. Of the six 3-day stays, three started training, one plans to begin training once the family situation permits, and one was unable to attend due to worsening health problems. So far in FFY 2023, there have been nineteen tours, and eleven 3-day stays. Out of the eleven 3-day stays, six started training, three decided that Center training was not a good fit for them, and two are unable to attend training at this time due to physical health but plan to attend in the future when they are able to do so.

Reasons given by consumers for not wanting to attend the Center include not wanting to wear sleepshades, wanting low vision instruction, preferring to have less structure or more individualized instruction, not wanting to take all of the classes, not being able to attend a full-time program, physical health conditions currently preventing attendance, being the primary caregiver for children/grandchildren/spouse, not being able to leave pets/animals in order to attend training, still attending high school, needing to work in order to support their family, needing to develop some of the survival skills necessary to attend the Center such as medication management, or being unwilling to move to Lincoln for the training.

Enrollment has decreased or been sporadic since 2020, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Center switched to providing only remote instruction in response to public health measures and analysis of the risk in Lincoln/Lancaster County. The nature of Center training makes it difficult to socially distance, and requires frequent physical contact to instruct consumers in appropriate techniques and demonstrate proper technique. Residential facilities also carry higher risk of spreading airborne illnesses. Many consumers and staff were also at high risk for serious illness due to other medical conditions, or lived with high-risk relatives.

Remote instruction is not ideal, and is not possible in some classes, so these periods of remote instruction were limited and we returned to hybrid and fully in-person services as soon as possible, but sometimes had to switch back to remote training for a period of time. We also paused giving in-person tours and 3-day stays when the Center was virtual, which negatively impacted the enrollment of new consumers. During the pandemic, we also saw a dramatic increase in the instances of mental illness, including major depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations, and nationally there has also been a trend of increasing instances of mental illness, and disabilities in addition to blindness. The increase in mental illnesses and health conditions is a trend observed in the general population, and blind people are a cross-section of society.

STAFF TRAINING

In addition to providing training to consumers, the Nebraska Center for the Blind provides 600 hours of sleepshade training to new NCBVI employees. This is a requirement in order to earn the designation of Certified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the Blind (CVRCB). Training is provided to VR counselors, orientation counselors, Center staff, NBE staff, technology specialists, and supervisors. Administrative staff also complete Center training but it is typically shorter due to not providing direct services to consumers.

In FFY 2021 (October 1, 2020-September 30, 2021), six staff members attended the Center; nine in FFY 2022; and eleven so far in FFY 2023. Note that training for some staff crossed fiscal years, so the total who attended training since 2020 is 23 staff, which is more than half of NCBVI's positions, and there are another four positions yet to be filled.

Starting in 2020, many NCBVI employees retired or left employment with the Commission, leading to greater than 50% turnover and causing some districts to be short-staffed. It takes four months to complete Center training, and roughly one year to fully train a new staff member. New staff members typically carry lower caseloads as they learn their jobs and shadow more experienced counselors. Some NCBVI staff also changed positions, limiting the number of staff available to provide direct services to consumers in the field.

Over the past three years, field staff have carried higher caseloads. For example, the North Platte District is still short three full-time positions, and given the long distance between consumers, the optimal caseload size is 40 consumers for experienced counselors, but some new counselors have nearly double that amount. At one point during the last year, Omaha District had only three staff members out of seven positions, and while they typically travel less than the other districts, their district also serves the most clients. The optimal caseload size is roughly 60 clients for experienced counselors, but some counselors have more than double that amount, and some new counselors have more than that amount on their caseloads.

As of July 11, 2023, NCBVI had 868 current consumers, 202 were VR clients under the age of 25, and 445 were VR or OIB age 55 and older. Out of VR clients, nearly 50% are under the age of 25, and this is an age group that we are specifically targeting for Center training because they are less likely to be employed and have family obligations, and Center training leads to higher academic achievement and salary in the future. We are also targeting the population who are 55 and older who do not plan to work, as the Older Blind program is rapidly growing and some seniors may end up in nursing homes simply because of vision loss. Since NCBVI has received additional state funding since 2019 and typically applies Social Security reimbursements to the OIB program, OIB consumers are able to attend Center training for the full length of the program.

RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

To help increase the enrollment at the Nebraska Center for the Blind, these are some of the steps that have been taken:

Providing more tours and 3-day stays for consumers interested in Center training, even if they are not currently able to attend. For example, students still attending high school, consumers who are employed or who need to be employed right away, and new consumers of NCBVI services who are still adjusting to blindness. Some tours have also been offered virtually for consumers who live far away from Lincoln.

Meetings with counselors and supervisors to identify consumers who may be a good fit for Center training.

Continuing education and professional development for Center staff to remain competitive with private training centers and keep up on best practices and current technology. Many staff had the opportunity to shadow their counterparts at other SD centers, or have a mentor come to Lincoln to provide on-site coaching, and all attended the Rehab Conference.

Increasing the amount paid for Home Management and apartment groceries, and also providing supplemental maintenance checks, if needed, to help offset the cost of attending training. Like all NCBVI programs, there is no charge to attend the Nebraska Center for the Blind.

Increased attention to providing individualized training to new staff members, of which there have been 23 since 2020. NCBVI staff are the referral source for the Center and provide the training to consumers before they come to the Center.

Reducing the prerequisites to attend the Center, such as eliminating the requirement to have sleepshade experience prior to attending, and allowing more flexibility for students to spend additional time at home in order to have the emotional support of family during training.

Hiring a full-time Client Resource Counselor in place of a part-time Apartment Technician. This allows for additional evening support for clients who need more intensive independent living skills at the start of training, and also provides a resource to help with arranging counseling, locating medical providers, applying for housing, and other tasks that impact center training participation.

Attending NCBVI events, such as college workshop, employment conference, silver summit, and meeting with WAGES participants to specifically target the youth and older blind populations for enrollment.

Offering virtual vocational seminars to VR consumers in the field.

Attending consumer organization conventions and local chapter meetings.

Helping with monthly group teachings in the field, making home visits to consumers, and working with some consumers in the office who were not able to attend the Center but needed intensive training.

Public education, such as tours provided to occupational therapy students attending Union College, Orientation and Mobility students attending UNL, students/family/staff of Golden Plains Christian School and Platte Valley Christian School, Community Connection podcast on Radio Talking Books, news story on Channel 8 in Lincoln, and NCBVI public service announcements.

Break – A break was taken at 11:05 a.m. The meeting resumed at 11:15 a.m.

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or issues – Jodi Bodnar

NE Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) Quarterly Report April/May/June 2023

There were no new cases to the Client Assistance Program relating to the NE Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) during this quarter.

Provided five new staff CAP/Hotline presentation on April 27, 2023.

Jodi Bodnar continues to attend NCBVI monthly supervisor meetings.

Jodi will be reaching out to NCBVI offices to schedule outreach and presentations.

NFB Newsline® Update – By Kimberly Scherbarth, NFB Newsline Coordinator

There are currently 2178 Newsline subscribers, with six new subscribers between April and June. Total calls remain in a range between 700 and about 800 per month, with a range of 10,000 to 13,126 monthly minutes this quarter. There were 7848 web sessions in April and the numbers dropped in both May and June to 4354 and 3723 respectively. Email deliveries remained about the same between April and June.

Both the National Federation of the Blind and the American Council of the Blind held their National Conventions this past quarter and NFB Newsline provided access to convention agendas for each. The National Federation of the Blind held a meeting for all state coordinators at the NFB National Convention, but unfortunately, neither NFBN Affiliate President Richey nor I were able to attend the meeting.

No further updates this quarter.

NFB Newsline Stats for 2023

	January	February	March	April	May	June
Number of Subscribers:	2170	2171	2172	2174	2175	2178
New Subscriptions:	0	2	1	2	1	3

Telephone Usage:

Total calls:	795	716	783	738	782	716
Average call length: (Minutes)	15.27	15.27	16.76	13.64	16.06	13.97
Percent local calls:	54.3	57.43	62.99	52.71	62.23	50.62
Total call minutes:	12138	10929	13126	10069	12556	10004

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Online Usage:

Web Sessions:	6700	5775	7072	7848	4354	3723
NFB-NEWSLINE Mobile Sessions:	549	416	459	572	497	525
In Your Pocket Deliveries:	4086	4020	4067	4014	3196	2928
Email Deliveries:	461	455	491	439	472	433
Total Online Accesses:	11796	10666	12089	12873	8519	7609

<u>Total Content Accesses:</u>	6966	6501	6716	6667	5826	5605
Content Access Frequency(Minutes)	6.41	6.2	6.65	6.48	7.66	7.71

Nebraska Newspapers:	3250	2811	3110	3777	3495	3261
Nebraska Local Channels:	20	15	28	30	23	37
Local Weather and Emergency Alerts:	169	150	163	198	163	187
National Newspapers	1448	1337	1640	1509	1188	998
International Newspapers:	2	0	0	1	0	0
My Newspaper:	131	100	137	77	126	69
Breaking News Online	366	359	324	215	242	225
Nmagazines:	206	189	109	158	187	139
TV Listings	447	314	302	358	261	308

New Business

Officer Elections

Chair Heyen reported that every year at this time, the Board conducts officer elections. The positions on the Board are Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and Executive Secretary. Chair Heyen noted that the commissioners only make decisions related to NCBVI when they are together at a Commission Board meeting. Chair Heyen stated that it has been the tradition of the Commission for the Chair to step down before his/her term is up so they will be available to mentor and assist the next Chair as needed.

Commissioners who currently holds an office gave an overview of their position.

Chair Heyen stated that the Chair oversees the proceedings of the meetings and they work closely with the Vice Chair to put the Commission meeting agendas together. The Chair also tries to make sure that NCBVI is headed in the right direction.

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

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

Commissioner Bulger moved to elect Commissioner Heyen as Chairperson. Commissioner Mentink seconded the motion. There were no additional nominations. The nominations ceased and Commissioner Heyen was elected by acclimation.

Commissioner Heyen accepted the nomination.

Roll call: Ayes: Bulger, Mentink, Heyen, Livingston, Rocha

Nayes:

Motion Carried

Commissioner Mentink moved to elect Commissioner Livingston as Vice Chairperson.

Commissioner Bulger seconded the motion. There were no additional nominations. The nominations ceased and Commissioner Heyen was elected by acclimation. Commissioner Livingston accepted the nomination.

Roll call: Ayes: Bulger, Mentink, Heyen, Livingston, Rocha

Nayes:

Motion Carried

Commissioner Livingston moved to elect Commissioner Mentink as Executive Secretary. Commissioner Bulger seconded the motion. There were no additional nominations. The nominations ceased and Commissioner Heyen was elected by acclimation.

Commissioner Mentink accepted the nomination.

Roll call: Ayes: Bulger, Mentink, Heyen, Livingston, Rocha

Nayes:

Motion Carried

Technology Access Clause, 2023 Review

Kathy Stephens read the Technology Access Assurances clause for the record.

Technology Access Assurances:

- 1.) Commitment : The State of Nebraska is committed to ensuring that all information and communication technology (ICT), developed, leased, or owned by the State of Nebraska, affords equivalent access to employees, program participants and members of the public with disabilities, as it affords to employees, program participants and members of the public who are not persons with disabilities.

- 2.) Understanding and warrantee : By entering into this Contract, Contractor understands and agrees that if the Contractor is providing a product or service that contains ICT, as defined in (subsection XX), and such ICT is intended to be directly interacted with by the user or is public-facing, such ICT must provide equivalent access, or be modified during implementation to afford equivalent access, to employees, program participants, and members of the public who have and who do not have disabilities. The Contractor may comply with section by complying with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and its implementing standards adopted and promulgated by the U.S. Access Board.

- 3.) Scope of ICT: ICT means information technology and other equipment, systems, technologies, or processes, for which the principal function is the creation, manipulation, storage, display, receipt, or transmission of electronic data and information, as well as any associated content. Contractor hereby agrees ICT includes computers and peripheral equipment, information kiosks and transaction machines, telecommunications equipment, customer premises equipment, multifunction office machines, software; applications, web sites, videos, and electronic documents. **Proposed addition: For the purposes of these assurances, ICT does not include ICT that is used exclusively by a contractor.**

Commissioner Bulger moved to accept the Technology Access Assurances Clause as read. There were no recommended changes to the clause for the next two years. Commissioner Rocha seconded the motion.

Roll call: Ayes: Bulger, Mentink, Heyen, Livingston, Rocha
 Nays:
 Motion Carried

Public comment period.

Barbara Loos – Barbara thanked Jessica Bartenbach for the tour of the Training Center and for the delicious cookies that were baked by Center students.

Final Announcements

The NCBVI Wages banquet and program will be held immediately following the meeting at 12:30 p.m. at the Cornhusker hotel. All NCBVI Commission Board Members are invited to attend.

The next NCBVI Commission Board meeting is scheduled for November 4, 2023 in Omaha. The Focus Topic will be OIB and IL Services.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:35 a.m.

If you have an item that you would like to have placed on the agenda of the November 4, 2023 Commission Board meeting, please email it to the NCBVI Commission Board at ncbvi.commission-board@nebraska.gov.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Stephens, Administrative Specialist
NCBVI

Brent Heyen, Chairperson
NCBVI Board of Commissioners

Staff Quarterly Reports for July 21, 2023 Commission Board Meeting

Lincoln District Activity Report – Cristal Dimas

I am excited to announce the Lincoln District is fully staffed! Charles Andersen is the new technology specialist and started Center training on July 10. We welcome Charles to NCBVI!

Networking:

The Lincoln staff are actively engaged in networking with various employers and agencies. These are valuable connections and partnerships to enhance our services and opportunities. Jeff networked with the following agencies: Region V locations in Lincoln and David City, Dimensions Education Programs and Capital Humane Society, and I-Hop for on-the-job training opportunities. Jeff is a part of Project Search partnering with Lincoln Public Schools and Embassy Suites Hotel. He will have a student who will be participating in Project Search in the fall. Jeff networked with Helen Keller National Center for Deaf Blind and has a consumer attending a six-week summer employment camp. Amy continues to serve on the Planning Committee for Disability Pride that is scheduled in July in Lincoln. Charli attended the Coalition for Older Adult Health ProMotion breakfast where she listened to a presentation about AARP and the Legislature. Gracie networked with the Salvation Army in Norfolk to talk with their business manager about on-the-job training and volunteer opportunities. Gracie attended New & Improved Norfolk Collaboration meetings where all Northeast Service Providers in the Health Field gather to discuss different services for low-income families. Gracie connected with Pizza Hut in Madison to tour and discuss a work-based learning opportunity. Gracie also got connected with Madison Public Library to discuss community service hours for consumers and possible work-based learning opportunities. Gracie met with staff at the Atkinson Public Library to share information about our services and provide instruction on how to use the CCTV they have for the public. Gracie attends zoom meetings with Community Food Access- United Way in Columbus for food distribution for the community and families who have a family member with disabilities. Gracie attends and participates via zoom in a Spanish Networking Group in Fremont with business leaders and discusses possible employment openings. Gracie provided training to the staff and treatment team at the Lincoln Regional Center on the Forensic Unit about augmentative and mobility skills for blind patients. She also provided Center DVDs about the skills we provide at the Center. Gracie networked with Midwest Eye Care to discuss with eye doctors and UNMC Neurologist unit about NCBVI services. Gracie attends and participates in the Employ Columbus partnership meetings where she networks with local businesses about employment opportunities. Gracie networked with Norfolk ILC Agency, Platte County Courthouse, and Indian College at the Santee Reservation and shared information about NCBVI services.

Projects:

Connie coordinated and organized the employment conference in collaboration with Buna Dahal from Dynamic Buna. The workshop took place at the Graduate Hotel in Lincoln and aimed to provide valuable insights and guidance on employment related matters. Charli and Jeff took part in the GATE fishing activity, which was organized in collaboration with the Omaha district. This activity included consumers from Lincoln and Omaha. Gracie assisted in the distribution of food alongside the United Way in Columbus. Charli participated in the volunteering luncheon at the Silver Summit. Gracie assisted with the student WAGES program in Lincoln. Connie, alongside a past consumer, has collaborated on a compelling Public Service Announcement (PSA) that focuses on NCBVI. We are delighted to share that the PSA has now been officially launched, both

on television and through online streaming platforms. This multi-channel approach ensures that a wide audience will have the opportunity to view and engage with the PSA's impactful message.

Training:

Kathy, Gracie, and Amy attended the National NFB Convention that was held in Houston, TX. Connie, Kathy, Gracie, Charli, and Jeff attended the Silver Summit that was held in Kearney. Jeff attended the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition – Back Together to Build Together - that was held in Charlotte, North Carolina. Connie, Amy, and Gracie attended the Employment Conference that was held in Lincoln. Gracie participated in a Learning Professional Webinar.

Client Outcomes:

Amy has one student participating in WAGES and two clients attended the Employment Conference. Two clients graduated from high school. One is employed at Super Saver and will be attending SCC in the fall and the other is attending a summer program, then full-time classes at Kansas City Art Institute. Amy had clients gain employment as a gutter installer, receptionist, community and social service specialist, and Randolph-Sheppard BEP. Charli had ten clients attend the Silver Summit Conference. Jeff assisted with finding part-time employment for a student washing dishes at a restaurant. Jeff had two consumers attend the Employment Conference. Connie had a couple clients attend the Silver Summit. Jeff had three consumers attend the Silver Summit Conference. Jeff had a student attend the Helen Keller employment camp in New York. Gracie set up work-based learning experience for a student at Pizza Hut. Gracie had two consumers attend the Employment Conference; two attend the Silver Summit, and has one student participating in WAGES. Gracie had a student graduate with her associate degree from Northeast Community College. One consumer passed several of his pre-requisites for his GED. One student graduated from high school. Through our job retention services, Gracie assisted two consumers in maintaining their employment. One consumer successfully retained their position as a schoolteacher, while the other maintained their job in sales/retail at a golf resort.

Omaha District Activity Report – Cristal Dimas

I am thrilled to share that the Omaha district is fully staffed! Tammy Thomas, vocational rehabilitation counselor, graduated from Center training and started her first day in the field June 12. Mickie Saltzman, technology specialist, has been in the field since April. We're delighted to welcome Tim Jefferson back to NCBVI as the new Omaha district supervisor! Tim brings valuable experience, having previously worked with the agency as a vocational rehabilitation counselor for eight years. It's great to have him on board again. Welcome back, Tim!

Networking:

The Omaha staff are actively engaged in networking with various employers and agencies. They are dedicated to establishing valuable connections and partnerships to enhance our services and opportunities. Adrienne networked with the following: Amazon, took a tour with a consumer, Nebraska Department of Transportation, Mutual of Omaha, Citi Trends, and Omaha Public Power District. Craig and Adrienne partnered with and provided a presentation to Boys and Girls Club about blindness awareness. Adrienne is an active participant and contributor to Employ OMA. Kelly networked with Vodec, Vocational Development Center and Metro Community College-Disability Support Services. Craig had the opportunity to tour Job Corps in Dennison, Iowa. He learned about their program and offered valuable insights on enhancing its accessibility for

students who are blind and low vision. Alex, Craig, and Jeff remain actively engaged in their partnership with NCECBVI, delivering transition services to the students. Craig attended an ISP meeting with Developmental Disabilities Center Nebraska to introduce NCBVI services to administrators and service coordinators. Craig is collaborating with Denizen Management to provide a thorough explanation of services to assist with job retention. Craig networked with Duet services and shared information about NCBVI services. Alex has been collaborating with Darla Bell, TVI from Millard Public School District to deliver JAWS training. The training will assist teachers of the visually impaired to effectively teach their students how to use JAWS software on their computers.

Projects:

Kelly has been actively involved in planning and leading the Project Independence Camp along with the committee, who include Alex and Kimberly. The camp will provide valuable opportunities to enhance students' independence. Alex assisted with the WAGES program. Adrienne participated in Lincoln/Omaha Lake Wanahoo skills training day. Adrienne, Kelly and Craig participated in the Silver Summit Conference held in Kearney. Adrienne participated in the Employment Conference held in Lincoln. Mickie has been instrumental in delivering comprehensive training and support for a range of technology products. Mickie assisted with setting up the new computer lab in the Omaha office. This lab will allow staff to train clients on a variety of software programs such as: JAWS, ZoomText, and Microsoft Office like Word, PowerPoint, Outlook and much more.

Training:

Craig, Alex, Adrienne and Mickie attended the NFB National Convention in Houston.

Client Outcomes:

Kelly and Adrienne had several clients and family members attend the OIB Silver Summit Conference in Kearney. Kelly, Adrienne and Craig had several clients attend the Employment Conference. Adrienne has one student participating in WAGES and Craig has six students in WAGES. Adrienne had one student complete a work-based learning experience in their local community. Craig had three clients graduate from high school and one graduate from UNL with a bachelor's degree. Adrienne had multiple students graduate from high school and college. Craig has one student who is registered to attend a Smithsonian camp themed "Aerospace and Race to Mars". The camp starts in Washington D.C. and will end in Houston, TX. Craig has one student who attended a camp in June, "Leap into Linux", in conjunction with the Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired. Craig has one student attending NASA Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama. Craig had two clients gain employment: Randolph Shepard vending facility operator and dietician.

North Platte District Activity Report – Cristal Dimas

The North Platte District still has vacant positions for the Central NE- vocational rehabilitation counselor and technology specialist. The Western/West Central- vocational rehabilitation counselor position has been officially posted for recruitment. Despite the current staff shortage in our district, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and commend the tremendous dedication and hard work demonstrated by our counselors. They go above and beyond to ensure that our clients' needs are met, even in challenging circumstances. Their commitment to their work is truly commendable and greatly appreciated each day!

Networking:

Kimberly and Cristal met with TVI, Leslie Wegner. This partnership will play a significant role in supporting our students and identifying new students who could greatly benefit from the services we offer. Angie attended an ISP meeting with the Office of Human Development. Angie had the opportunity to showcase our services and engage in discussions regarding the potential need for assistance with one of their clients. Fritz delivered a presentation to the Doniphan Community Center highlighting the services provided by NCBVI. The presentation was well-received with seven attendees present. Kimberly continues to be a part of Employ GI and Kearney. Kimberly has been networking with the following businesses to explore work-based learning opportunities: Adam's Corner Market, Teaching Tree and YMCA. Kimberly has actively been making connections with school professionals as well and include the following: Horizon Middle School, Lexington High School and Greeley High School. Cristal networked with the following businesses to explore work-based learning in Lexington: United by Culture and YMCA. Erin and Cristal met with NE-Vocational Rehabilitation Program Director's to coordinate transition partnership meetings.

Projects:

Angie took charge of pre-organization and post-documentation for the OIB Silver Summit, successfully coordinating the older blind conference. The conference which was held May 23-26 attracted 195 attendees from across the state. Additionally, Angie assisted with the Silver Summit outreach video project. I would like to thank everyone who participated and assisted in making this conference such an achievement. Everyone's dedication and hard work played a significant role in its major success; we received positive feedback from the consumers. Kimberly is working with two clients who are involved in the self-employment process. Kimberly is providing guidance and support to help them navigate this journey successfully. In addition, Kimberly has connected two other clients to the NE Commission for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing for participation in the NSTEP program.

Training:

Cristal attended the Capacity Building Institute in Charlotte, NE with colleague, Jeff Scheer. This event proved to be a valuable networking opportunity, as we had the chance to connect with various professionals, including the NE Department of Education's transition coordinator and career and technical education coordinator, as well as representatives from NE-Vocational Rehabilitation and ESU transition coordinators. Angie and Cristal attended and participated in the OIB Silver Summit that was held in Kearney. Fritz participated in a Blindness and Glaucoma webinar. Kimberly and Cristal attended and participated in the Employment Conference that was held in Lincoln. Angie participated in the new OIB managers training on Mondays throughout the months of April and May, each session included a required an online class that was completed prior to each virtual training. Topics included: An Overview of Independent Living Services for Older Individuals who are Blind, Best Practices in the Administration of the OIB Program, Understanding Data Collection and the 7-OB Report and Basics in Program Evaluation. Angie attended the National Federation of the Blind convention in Houston.

Client Outcomes:

Angie had one client graduate from Center training and one client complete a virtual tour of the Center. Kimberly, Angie and Fritz had several clients attend the OIB Silver Summit. Angie had 15 clients attend and seven guests. Kimberly had seven guests attend, and Fritz had 15 clients attend. Angie worked with a client to effectively establish a home-based online business. Kimberly had four clients attend and participated in the employment workshop in Lincoln. Kimberly has two

pre-ETS students who are completing work-based learning experiences and one in the process of getting set-up. Kimberly has one student enrolled in WAGES. Kimberly had one student graduate from high school. Cristal had one student graduate from high school. Cristal had two students graduate from a post-secondary institution: UNK and UNO. The student who graduated from UNK obtained a teaching degree and has been offered employment. She will be starting her teaching job in August.

Center Activity Report – Jessica Bartenbach

The Nebraska Center for the Blind currently has seven individuals attending training: three VR consumers, two OIB consumers, and two staff trainees.

During the last quarter, one VR consumer graduated, and three staff trainees completed immersion training. A new VR consumer began training on May 15, and two new staff members began training on April 24 and July 10, respectively.

The staff who completed training were Lizzie Heidenreich (NBE counselor on May 2), Tammy Thomas (Omaha district VR counselor on June 9), and Hugh Phan (technology manager on July 10). The staff trainees currently attending the Center are Pam Rademacher (Lincoln District supervisor started on April 24), and Charles Andersen (Lincoln District technology specialist started on July 10).

During this quarter, we had six tours and one 3-day stay. One consumer left the 3-day stay early due to deciding the program was not a good fit based on the structured nature of the training and requirement to wear sleep shades. Another 3-day stay was scheduled but had to be postponed.

Jessica recorded an interview for Radio Talking Book's Community Connection broadcast which aired on June 23. A tour was also provided to 11 students from Union College's Occupational Therapy program on June 28. On July 24, we plan to work with O&M students from UNL on structured discovery and cane travel skills.

Activities this quarter have included a tour of Talking Book and Braille Services in Lincoln, an audio described movie, attendance at the Silver Summit in Kearney, the Employment Conference in Lincoln, mall travel and lunch in the food court, Jazz in June, dinner with the WAGES participants, and attendance at the NFB Lincoln Chapter picnic. In addition, representatives of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska, and American Council of the Blind of Nebraska presented to Center students about the role of consumer organizations and what to expect at the national conventions.

Center staff and trainees attended the National Federation of the Blind national convention and the Contemporary Issues in Rehabilitation and Education for the Blind- 22nd annual Rehabilitation and Orientation and Mobility Conference provided by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board. The NBPCB certifies Structured Discovery training Centers and professionals. The annual rehab conference is held in conjunction with the NFB national convention. Center students were encouraged to attend a national convention of their choice with NCBVI support.

Nebraska Business Enterprise Activity Report – Eric Buckwalter

VENDING SITE UPDATE

State Office Building – Lincoln

The remodel of the dining and cafeteria area of the State Office Building in Lincoln is now complete, and the vendor has returned to occupy the space. There are still a few small details we are waiting to complete, but nothing that affects the day-to-day operations of the space.

Chief Standing Bear Building (formerly Executive Building)

Remodel work continues in this space. No recent updates as to the anticipated completion date of this project have been received.

Douglas County Justice Center

This building opened to the public in mid-May with a vendor providing service to the machines.

DHHS

NBE is in talks with DHHS to provide service to at least three large facilities in the DHHS system; Lincoln Regional Center, Beatrice State Developmental Center, and an YRTC campus. NBE has made some positive connections within DHHS and it is starting to prove fruitful as they are dissatisfied with current providers and their procurement division is now aware of NBE and the priority we have on state sites. NBE hopes to have more to report on this exciting project in the near future.

NDE

NBE is also in conversation with NDE/ATP/VR about providing services in their new building on 84th Street in Lincoln.

NBE LICENSEE UPDATE

There are currently 12 licensed vendors active in the NBE program. One vendor did choose to give up sites in the past quarter to pursue other opportunities. There are several people who are interested in exploring the NBE program as a potential career – with one actively training.

VENDING SITE COMPLAINTS

There have been no major complaints from sites during the past quarter.

OTHER UPDATES

Departing Staff

Dave Robinson left the agency to pursue an awesome opportunity for himself in the beginning of May. Dave had been with the agency for over 20 years and worked directly with NBE for the past five years. Dave left us with detailed notes on his processes for handling the business end of NBE, which is greatly appreciated. We miss Dave's knowledge, but wish him the best on his new adventures.

New Hire

Lizzie Heidenreich exited Center training and started working in the field on May 9. She is doing a great job at picking things up quickly and has been invaluable in the wake of Dave's departure with helping NBE continue to run smoothly and continue to serve our vendors and our sites.

A special thanks also is extended to our vendors who have been patient with NBE staff as we navigate the change in duties.

NBE Retreat

With the change in NBE staff and some unexpected projects that have popped up, NBE, in conjunction with the NBE Committee, has decided to not hold a retreat style event at the end of the summer.

Business Office Highlights - Kat Carroll

This past quarter, I have worked on the following projects:

- Continued training Tammie Dunn on completion of Federal Reports.
- Continue to improve the Internal Budget Projection for FFY 2023 that shows budgeted, year to date expenditures, projected fixed expenditures for the remainder of the year, and remaining funds to spend on client services and extras such as vending machines and technology. Present this information to Leadership and Supervisors monthly to ensure we are planning for the best use of our available funds.
- Continue testing new resources for tracking and projecting expenditures for grant funds which were provided to us by VRTAC at the monthly Fiscal Forums.
- Continue improving client supply inventory tracking and the items kept in client supply.
- Continue work on improving communication between the Business Office team as well as communication between the Business Office and the Field. Business Office Staff attend the monthly Supervisor's meetings for the first hour to continue this work.
- NCBVI is in a very strong financial position. We carried over all the FFY 2022 VR grant plus \$1.5 million of Reallotment and have received \$161,562 in social security reimbursement so far this Federal Fiscal Year. In addition, the FFY 2023 grants show a 6% increase in grant funds for the new fiscal year. For OIB we spent remaining FFY 2022 grant and some Social Security funds that were transferred from VR, and are now using FFY 2023 grant funds and state funds.
- Completed reclassifications and in grade increases for three Business Office staff to position them so they can better help the Field Staff.
- Received the State Fiscal Year 2024 budget total of \$2,493,929, an increase of \$319,485 over the previous State Fiscal Year.
- Attended the National Federation of the Blind convention in Houston.
- Attended the CSAVR/NCSAB conventions in Bethesda, MD the week of April 16.
- Attended the CSAVR Regional Meeting in Kansas City on May 1-2.
- Completed the State Fiscal Year End 6/30/2023.
- Completed Benefits Open Enrollment the first two weeks of May.

Kathy Stephens – Highlights

I have working been with Surplus Property to have technology items from the Lincoln office hauled to State Surplus and/or posted on Gov.Deals for auction.

I have been working on year-end inventory for the technology items that NCBVI has in E1. This is an ongoing project. Our year-end inventory report needs to be submitted to DAS Material Division before August 31 each year.

I completed the hotel reservations, flights and registrations for staff, clients and one commissioner attending the National conventions and other events.

A letter was received from Pat Selk from the Office of the Governor asking for assistance in tracking membership on boards, commissions and other bodies. She stated that their office is working diligently to eliminate conflicting information in the appointment process as well as clear the backlog of unfilled positions. Some positions, she noted, have been vacant for years. Pat stated that compounding this challenge for them has been the lack of confirmation appointments which have been submitted to the Legislature, due to the pace of the legislative session. The Governor's office asked each Board, Commission or other body to forward them a list of their current membership, as well as any unfilled vacancies. They also asked for the length of term and current expiration date, their appointment or start date and the statutory requirement for filling each position. I provided Pat Selk the information she requested.

Julie Buren - RSA Dashboard Highlights

Program Year 2022 **Quarter 3: Jan-Mar 2023**

In the quarter reported, NCBVI served 401 consumers. In Program Year 2021 Quarter 2, NCBVI served 384 consumers. 96.6 percent of our eligibility determinations were within 60 days and 95.2% of our Individualized Plans for Employment (IPE) were within 90 days. Comparatively, in the previous program year same quarter, we had 100% Eligibility timeliness and 100% IPE timeliness. Our rate of employment in this quarter was 25% versus 32% in the same quarter last program year.

NCBVI purchased 287 services for consumers as well as provided 543 services by our staff. The previous year saw 236 purchased and 679 provided services within the same quarter. In addition, 40 students were provided Pre-ETS during this quarter versus 35 last year at the same timeframe. These students received 53 purchased services and 44 provided services by our staff. In comparison from the same quarter last year, we purchased 41 services and provided 77 services via our staff time.

NCBVI closed 27 cases in this quarter versus 25 in Program Year 2021, Quarter 3. We had six successful closures in this quarter, which is the same as last year in the same timeframe. Our average earnings per hour was \$18.74 this quarter compared to \$16.83 last year during this same timeframe.

The following sections are a part of our performance measures combined with General VR. NCBVI and General VR worked with RSA to agree on goals for our agencies to achieve. The numbers below are NCBVI data only:

Measurable Skill Gains

We had 100 students eligible for a Measurable Skill Gain (MSG) as they are currently listed on their case as being involved in a school/apprenticeship/On-The-Job Training setting. Of those students, we received documentation on 23 students within this quarter as they achieved a skill

gain. In the previous year, same quarter, we had 85 students eligible for an MSG and received documentation on 25 students. This equates to a rate of 23.0% this quarter versus 29.4% last year. NCBVI's cumulative rate for the program year is 48.8% and our RSA combined goal is 61.5%.

Employment in 2nd and 4th Quarter after Exit

We had 49% of our closures employed in the 2nd quarter after their case closed and 40% of our closures employed in the 4th quarter after their case closed. In Program Year 2021 Quarter 3, we had 22% of our closures employed 2 quarters after their case closed and 24% of our case closures employed 4 quarters later. Our combined RSA goal is 60.5% for 2nd quarter after closure and 60% for 4th quarter after closure.

Credential Attainments

In Quarter 3 of this current program year, we had 48% of students enrolled in postsecondary education/occupational licensure receive a degree/certificate. The same quarter last year had 29% receive degrees/certificates. Our combined RSA goal is 31.8%

Median Earnings

Out of the wages reported to RSA during this quarter, NCBVI had a median earnings rate of \$8,194.39. The same time last year had a median earning of \$6,002.43. Our combined RSA goal is \$5,058.00.