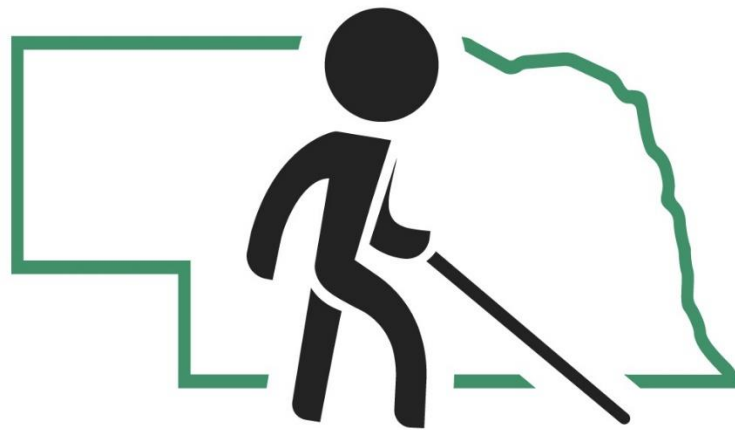


**NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND
AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED**

**ANNUAL REPORT
FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2021**



NCBVI

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NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED ANNUAL REPORT FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2021

INTRODUCTION

The Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) is the State of Nebraska vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency for blind and visually impaired persons. NCBVI is a Core Partner in the Nebraska Workforce Development System, pursuant to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Our mission: Empowering blind individuals, promoting opportunities, and building belief in the blind.

The wide array of programs and services offered by NCBVI make it possible for blind people to become fully participating, contributing members of society. Blind people lead normal lives, work in a wide range of jobs, have families, raise children, and participate in community activities. The following programs and services provide the means for blind persons to achieve their personal vocational or independent living goals:

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Transition services

Nebraska Center for the Blind

Technology Program

Nebraska Business Enterprises

Independent Living/Older Individuals who are Blind Services

NFB-NEWSLINE®

Information and Referral Services

Four methods are used for gauging the level of consumer satisfaction with NCBVI services and gathering information for a needs assessment. First, Gemini Research and Training (GRT), a private contractor, conducts an online survey to assess the level of consumer satisfaction throughout VR services, four months after VR case closure, and three months after graduation from the Nebraska Center for the Blind. Second, Consumers served through independent living (IL) services are given a customer satisfaction survey via the phone six months after case closure. Third, Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) consumers are given the consumer satisfaction survey twice a year in the spring and fall by GRT. GRT follows up with a telephone call to non-respondents or those who cannot fill out the survey via the internet to assist with completion of the survey. The last form of feedback is via input from consumers received at public meetings and forums, held four times a year with the Board of Commissioners, twice a year at State conventions of consumer organizations, and other times as requested.

During this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, NCBVI has been and continues to practice social distancing and following all state and federal health and safety guidelines. NCBVI staff are utilizing remote alternatives (i.e., phone, text, email, mail, skype, Face Time, and such) in combination with of in-person services when it is safe to do so in order to continue providing good, quality services to consumers. The following sections will describe what NCBVI is doing across the state to provide services to consumers during these difficult and challenging times.

FINANCIAL REPORT

NCBVI had non-federal match enabling the capture of reallocation funds available last summer, from states unable to meet the full match for federal funds. In ten of the past eleven years NCBVI has received significant Reallocation funding of the VR program that NCBVI has been able to use to enhance our infrastructure, work with the newest innovations in blindness rehabilitation, and restructure the placement of assets in preparation for implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA.) In SFY 2018, we only received about 10% of the amount of reallocation captured in previous years. Hurricanes in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico caused much of funds available in 2018 to be diverted from the VR program. This improved significantly in 2019 through 2021, but it is a soft money source and will never be consistent funding we can rely on each year.

Social Security Reimbursement funds were \$351,113 in 2021, only 57% of the \$616,446 we received in 2018. SSA Reimbursement is soft money and therefore not a consistent, dependable source of funding. Below we show this funding in two places, the program it was spent on and the Social Security Reimbursement funds received.

Expenditures July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021

1. Basic Support	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$ 3,723,228
b. Aid	\$ 712,285
2. Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$ 979,400
b. Aid	\$ 82,224
3. Supported Employment	
a. Operations	\$ -0-
b. Aid	\$ 9,225
4. Independent Living Part B/State IL	
a. Operations (mostly expended on direct services)	\$ 7,687
b. Aid	\$ 10,629
5. PILBO (Promoting Independent Living for the Blind of Omaha – Enrichment Foundation grant)	
a. Operations	\$ 243
b. Aid	\$ 17,966
6. Senior Blind (also reflected in above totals)	\$ 669,114
7. Social Security Reimbursement (also reflected in above totals)	\$ 351,113

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

Due to the unique dynamic of the COVID-19 pandemic, NCBVI staff have paid special attention to the unique needs of consumers as well as businesses in order to fine-tuned service delivery to meet their special needs at this time. NCBVI staff have utilized a combination of in-person visits and video conference meetings, which include other remote alternatives in order to continue providing high-quality services. VR counselors have put a special emphasis on employer services and engagement, specifically to aid in meeting their unique business needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. NCBVI remains committed to lowering the unemployment rate for the blind in our state, and even during this trying time, has maintained finding quality employer/employee matches for

long-term employment outcomes through utilizing creative and innovative remote and in-person service delivery practices.

The VR program prepares blind and visually impaired individuals to enter, retain, or advance in full-time or, if appropriate, part-time competitive employment in the integrated labor market. When fully staffed, NCBVI employs 10 VR Counselors to provide training and placement in quality jobs appropriate to each individual's capabilities, abilities, potential, interest, resources, and informed choice. Some of the services provided include, but are not limited to, development of more positive attitudes about blindness, alternative skills of blindness training, self-advocacy, elevation of personal expectations, individual and family counseling and guidance, vocational training, job training, job development, job placement, and assistive technology services.

During the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY), 477 consumers received active VR services; of these, 32 achieved competitive employment. Consumers served by NCBVI frequently have significant secondary disabilities. During the FFY, VR services were provided to 177 blind and visually impaired individuals with multiple disabilities. For example, blind and visually impaired veterans returning from active duty often have brain/head injuries as well as vision loss. In addition, more people are surviving serious accidents with traumatic brain injuries than had been the case in the past. Regardless of the secondary disabilities involved, NCBVI counselors work with consumers to build self-confidence and high expectations in order to gain the skills of blindness as well as to achieve their vocational goals.

VR Services may include, but are not limited to career exploration, interest testing, and vocational planning. Assistance with tuition, books, technology, and readers are also available to those pursuing vocational training. When an individual is ready for employment, job readiness, job placement, and follow-up services are provided as well.

As part of our staff development, NCBVI personnel receive training on counseling skills, job development, job placement, multiple disabilities, assistive technology, community resources, and consumer organizations as well as other timely emerging topics.

Each of the three districts operated by NCBVI participate and conduct employment workshops and/or conferences to prepare job-ready consumers for a systematic search for employment through preparatory skills of job interviews, social skills, resume writing, networking, problem-solving, and self-assertiveness. NCBVI counselors also reach out to educate businesses and public entities about the capabilities of blind workers and promote high-quality employment options for qualified blind job seekers.

This year, NCBVI consumers obtained the following jobs: Art Teacher (Postsecondary), Automotive Service Technician/Mechanic, Cartographer/Photogrammetrist, Cashier, Cook (Fast Food), Customer Service Representative, Dining Room/Cafeteria/Bartender Helper, Educational/Guidance/Vocational Counselor, Elementary School Teacher, Food Prep Worker, Healthcare Social Worker, Human Resource Assistant, Janitor/Cleaner, Library Assistant, Mental Health Counselor (2), Personal Care Aide, Property/Real Estate Manager, Randolph-Sheppard Vending Operator (5), Receptionist/Information Clerk, Rehabilitation Counselor, Sales Representative, Secondary School Teacher, Social Worker, Software Developer, Special Education Teacher (secondary school), Teaching Assistant-Special Education, and Veterinarian.

NCBVI is committed to helping consumers achieve high quality competitive and integrated employment outcomes, not just the first available job, but full-time jobs with good wages and benefits, which includes health insurance and opportunities for advancement. Many of the consumers who achieve employment as a result of NCBVI services no longer need social security benefits or other public supports.

Employer Outreach

NCBVI continues to educate and serve Nebraska's business community. NCBVI staff make regular contacts with businesses and community partners to educate them about the abilities of blind people and how they are an asset in the workplace. NCBVI has worked with a number of businesses in order to retain existing employees that may be losing their vision. NCBVI also assists businesses in identifying accommodations as well as provides training to the employee in the skills of blindness.

NCBVI staff are represented on the Workforce Development Boards across the state as well as assists the AJC's to be more accessible for blind Nebraskans. NCBVI participates in a number of employment groups such as Employ LNK and Employ OMA to learn about the needs of our business partners so, we can work better with our consumers to meet identified needs. NCBVI is available to provide Diversity training to employers to demystify the hiring of blind individuals into their workplace. In addition, NCBVI has contacted business colleges across Nebraska to provide diversity training to future HR professionals. In conclusion, NCBVI is focused on becoming a partner with businesses in Nebraska to lower the unemployment rate among Blind Nebraskans. NCBVI's efforts are geared to make it easier for businesses to access this untapped labor pool.

TRANSITION SERVICES

NCBVI has always recognized the importance and need for transition services as early as possible for youth in Nebraska. NCBVI prides itself on being a leader in providing meaningful work experiences, job exploration counseling, work readiness skills, postsecondary education exploration, training in independent living skills, self-advocacy, and peer mentoring opportunities to blind and visually impaired youth to ensure a successful integration into society. WIOA placed an emphasis on Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). NCBVI is mandated to invest fifteen (15) percent of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) funds on Pre-ETS services. WIOA promotes a smoother transition for Pre-ETS youth from school to work through a greater focus on job exploration, work readiness skills, postsecondary exploration, work-based learning experiences, and self-advocacy skill development for blind and visually impaired youth ages 14-21.

NCBVI has agency staff who provide services on a statewide basis to strengthen the relationships with schools, families, and local employers in order to ensure short-term and long-term success for blind and visually impaired youth. Below are highlights from some of the programs NCBVI provided to increase independence and confidence in the youth served.

NFB Career Mentoring Program

NCBVI has continued its partnership with the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), the nation's leading consumer organization of persons who are blind or have low vision for the third year, which continued to provide robust and innovative Pre-ETS services. The new reality has required us to adapt virtual learning modules to approximate a comparable level of engagement and learning. There is a monthly hosted audio/video conference, which focuses upon critical pre-ETS skills such as: Mastering the Job Interview, Financial Literacy, Advocating for yourself on College Campus,

and Navigating the Online Job. Finally, mentoring relationships are cultivated and nurtured to substantively contribute to lifelong learning and toward living the lives blind and visually impaired Nebraska consumers want.

WAGES

The WAGES program, (Work and Gain Experience in the Summer) is a six-week long summer program for youth 14-18 designed to empower them with practical work experience in career areas of their choice. During the program, participants are provided with a solid base for vocational planning. Student also get a taste of what it is like to live away from home, as participants live in a dormitory setting on UNL's campus.

Robotics

NCBVI provided a Robotics workshop for the first time this summer. Blind students had the opportunity to explore careers in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) areas. The program was run by STEM educators who are part of Cyber.org. This workshop allowed blind and visually impaired high school students across the state to build and program small rovers/robots, which were complete with speakers, microphones, accelerometers, infrared sensors, and much more.

Winnerfest

Winnerfest is a program for teenagers that takes place twice a year in the spring and fall. Due to COVID 19, the spring program was held virtually. The theme of the program was, "Wild West Career Fest." There were activities designed to increase self-advocacy, career exploration and college exploration. The students also had an opportunity to complete a volunteer work experience.

Project Independence

Project Independence (PI) is a summer camp for youth to immerse themselves in blindness skills training and enrichment activities. This program is designed to elevate expectations for blind students. This four-day camp is for children 8-13. The theme for this summer's camp was, "Soaring to Independence". The children worked on skills of blindness such as Braille, Cane Travel, and Cooking. The students also had campfires, went swimming, and participated in the Olympic Chore Challenge.

Virtual Job Shadow

NCBVI purchased a subscription to Virtual Job Shadow. The Virtual Job Shadow website has career assessments, videos about different career paths, and information about job search activities. This website is an additional tool NCBVI can use to help blind students and youth explore careers and learn about the world of work.

Outreach and Collaboration

During this past year, NCBVI has continued to make efforts to strengthen relationships with teachers of the visually impaired (TVI's) and other education providers by contacting Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in order to reach out to as many youths as possible. NCBVI continued to reach out to schools introducing ourselves and reminding staff that we are the VR agency for blind and visually impaired youth in Nebraska. In addition, NCBVI has entered into a MOU with NDE to define our roles and outline the Pre-ETS services we may provide to blind and visually impaired youth during their school transition years.

NCBVI continues to collaborate and partner with the Nebraska Center for the Education for Children Who are Blind or Visually Impaired (NCECBVI). NCECBVI is a statewide program and facility for blind school-aged youth based out of ESU4. NCBVI participated as a stakeholder in NCECBVI's annual advisory meeting as well as partnered to develop joint programming opportunities and establishing collaborative agreements. NCBVI staff also conduct group training sessions in the NCECBVI facility, which are designed to help severely disabled students strengthen their social and work skill abilities.

NCBVI staff continue to help plan and present at various ESU Transition Conferences. NCBVI staff sit on various regional committees of special education directors and transition professionals, which includes the transition practitioner's advisory committee. This committee was formed through the Mid-Plains Professional Upgrade Partnership – Sensory Disabilities grant given to teachers of the deaf and blind preparation programs by the OSEP office. This Advisory committee meets annually to review progress, evaluate program data, and provide suggestions through the project's completion in 2021. Furthermore, NCBVI staff present at various colleges and universities about blindness, which includes courses for the special education teacher preparation program at UNL conducted by the director of the teachers of the visually impaired endorsement program and other UNL faculty. In conclusion, increasing NCBVI's visibility and community awareness continues to be a priority. It is NCBVI's belief that relationships, partnerships, and programs have led to growth in the professional collaborations for training the blind and visually impaired youth to become contributing members of society.

NEBRASKA CENTER FOR THE BLIND

The Nebraska Center for the Blind is a comprehensive blindness rehabilitation training facility for blind adults living in Nebraska, which provides an estimated fifteen thousand hours of training each year as a component of the federally mandated services provided by NCBVI. Similar to other NCBVI services and programs, the Nebraska Center for the Blind receives the majority of its funding through the Federal VR Grant.

NCBVI continues to welcome older blind consumers into the Nebraska Center for the Blind, which includes the Center apartments. Nebraskans over the age of 55 experiencing vision loss are eligible to attend the center through the use of state-issued Senior Blind funds. Older blind consumers participating in the center gain the necessary independent living skills and acquire the proper resources to remain in their homes. By immersing themselves in comprehensive residential training, blind seniors can avoid moving into assisted living facilities and reduce the pressure on their friends and family. In 2021, NCBVI welcomed two seniors into the center, which is lower than anticipated, due to COVID-19.

The Nebraska Center for the Blind utilizes the "Structured Discovery" approach to training students in the alternative skills of blindness, which is the leading cognitive-based training methodology in the field of blindness rehabilitation. Center students are provided training in five primary areas of instruction: Orientation and Mobility, Braille, Communication/Technology, Home Management, and Wood Shop. These primary areas of instruction are designed to build a base of practical daily living skills, highly effective observation and problem-solving skills, an enhanced understanding of their vocational potential, confidence, and a positive sense of self-esteem.

Potential Center students are provided initial training in the alternative skills of blindness by NCBVI field staff in their home environment. To be eligible for Center Training, an individual must meet the eligibility requirements for NCBVI services and be able to participate in a full-time comprehensive blindness rehabilitation training program. Consumers considering participating in Center Training complete a tour of the Center. Following the tour, if the consumer is still interested, a Three-Day Stay experience is arranged in order to help the consumer make an informed choice of attending the full Center training program.

During the Three-Day Stay, consumers are mentored by senior Center students and receive training under sleep shades to give them a more realistic idea of what Center Training will be like. Consumers choosing to attend the Center are aware that training involves eight hours a day, five days per week, and lasts an average of six to nine months. There were thirteen Three-Day Stays this fiscal year. Sixty-two percent of consumers that participated in a Three-Day Stay returned for the full Center Training program. Both of these numbers are typically higher, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nebraska Center for the Blind was not hosting Three-Day Stays for several months, and several consumers delayed full Center training due to concerns related to COVID-19.

In keeping with the principles of Structured Discovery, Center students are encouraged to solve problems independently during training with minimal assistance from others. This approach to training introduces the student to a series of experiences, ranging from the simple to the complex. This requires the processing of information and how it relates to their blindness. Students with some vision wear sleep shades (blindfolds) in order to focus on the development of non-visual techniques. This eliminates the natural tendency to rely on inadequate or unsafe vision, thereby building confidence in non-visual techniques. Once the students have learned to rely truly on alternative skills, they are better able to make informed choices and decisions regarding when to use visual versus non-visual skills.

Each week, students receive eight hours of instruction in each of the five primary skill areas previously mentioned. Two hours are set-aside during each week for a blindness-related seminar facilitated by one of the students, which is focused on issues related to blindness. In addition, another two hours per month are set aside for a vocational seminar, which is led by the Center staff or guest presenter(s). Center students also meet with the Center Supervisor, when necessary, regarding more personal issues, goals, and objectives through counseling and guidance.

A primary objective of Center Training is the development of a positive overall understanding and adjustment to blindness. Participation in blindness-related group seminars focuses on challenging deeply held attitudes and beliefs regarding blindness, and the capabilities of blind people. With competence in the alternative skills of blindness comes an improved sense of self-confidence and a greater sense of self-efficacy as blind people. Graduates of the Nebraska Center are prepared to pursue personal, educational, vocational, and independent living goals to achieve a competitive place in society.

Real-world experiences during activities or classroom instruction help consumers gain firsthand experience interacting with the sighted public. This provides consumers with the opportunity to develop the insights and confidence necessary to respond effectively to prevailing societal attitudes, discrimination, and low expectations. Center students participate in a wide range of activities, either in the Center itself or with the community. This encourages greater independence and access to the world around them using the skills of blindness. Activities have included attendance at Legislative

meetings, public hearings, banquets, state and national consumer conventions, engaging in traditional holiday events, community service projects, and other volunteer efforts. The Center tries to have the students participate in at least one activity per month. A total of 3 activities were held during this fiscal year, which is lower than previous years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, the Center Apartment Resource Technician coordinates as many as two activities per month in the evenings and on weekends. These activities are optional and do not require the use of sleep shades. It is during weekend and evening hours that consumers learn how best to use their remaining vision, and to appropriately incorporate non-visual skills when visual methods prove unreliable. When a Three-Day stay is involved, the apartment technician also coordinates a dinner with students in order to welcome the three-day stay participant. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, less activities are being held in the evenings. However, regular virtual Zoom meetings are taking place weekly.

Center students live independently in furnished, efficiency residential apartments located in downtown Lincoln. NCBVI support of Center students, in accordance with Federal regulations, includes the cost of training/fees, training materials, rent, utilities, local telephone service, transportation expenses, and grocery and activity costs. Center students are responsible for personal expenses, such as personal entertainment, cable television, individual internet service in their apartment, cab fares to and from medical appointments or those related to personal shopping. Center students commute daily between the apartments and the Center by city bus.

Over the last five years, the Nebraska Center for the Blind has served at least ten students per annum, which has lowered significantly due to COVID-19. New staff members go through Center Training for a period of 600 hours, eight hours per day, and five days per week in order to earn their Certification in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling for the Blind (CVRCB). If the NCBVI staff member has functional vision, then sleep shades will be worn during training. This approach to new staff training promotes a deeper understanding of blindness, a stronger belief in the alternative skills of blindness enabling blind people to compete on terms of equality with their normally sighted peers and achieve greater personal independence. During this fiscal year, the Center provided training to six new staff members.

The Nebraska Center for the Blind engages in an on-going program of public education to promote the integration of blind persons into jobs, homes, and the community. The Center invites individuals and groups to tour the facility, which promotes a greater awareness of the capabilities of blind people. There were two tours this fiscal year, which is drastically lower due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly changed everyone's lives. The staff of the Nebraska Center for the Blind were impressive in their efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff were quick to learn the necessary technology in order to provide remote services when necessary. This required students and staff to rapidly and successfully, integrate more technology into their daily activities. As previously stated, the Center was not hosting Three-Day Stays for several months. Because of this, consumers waiting for Center training still received services during this time by being able to join the Center classes remotely with the other current Center students. There were five Nebraskans who benefited from these remote services from Center staff.

Special efforts were made this year to expand opportunities and programs for both staff members and students alike. NCBVI has and will continue to put the resources provided to the agency to the most efficient use in order to help Nebraskans of all age's transition into successful lives and careers as contributing members of society. NCBVI will keep working and being innovate until consumers can take part in the "Good Life" this state offers.

TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

NCBVI Technology Services provide technology services to blind and visually impaired consumers across the state. These services include employment services to current and potential employers in meeting their staffing needs as well as supporting them in retaining valuable employees. The technology team consists of three Technology Specialist based in Grand Island, Lincoln, and Omaha. NCBVI is an agency that serves individuals of all ages experiencing vision loss. Many of those served have a secondary disability, which required staff to continue to provide high-quality services this past year and be mindful of good safety protocols for COVID-19.

Technology Specialists provide instruction in the use of access technologies such as screen access software, refreshable Braille, screen magnification, and personal note taking devices. Besides access technology, they provide instruction in the use of mainstream technologies such as web browsing, use of smartphones and tablets, the Windows and Macintosh/Apple operating systems, and word processing skills essential for finding and/or maintaining employment. In addition, the Technology Specialists provide training to NCBVI staff in the basic operation of access technology for the blind. This enables NCBVI staff to work with consumers on their caseloads and in completing job responsibilities more effectively because having additional staff with these basic skills enhances technology services across the state.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has continued to impact our lives, the Technology Specialists needed to continue to work with consumers new to NCBVI services in order to learn and utilize various video conferencing platforms as well as other remote learning environments. This instruction and training allowed NCBVI consumers to learn how to navigate various remote platforms with screen reading and screen enhancement software. As previously mentioned, NCBVI serves many individuals with secondary disabilities or health concerns, in which NCBVI staff have continued to provide training to consumers with the tools necessary to participate in remote learning, tele-schooling, and employment opportunities.

These remote platforms allowed NCBVI staff to continue to provide high-quality services to consumers, schools, businesses, and mandated partners. NCBVI provided remote and in-person services and worksite assessments to individual consumers as well as for businesses regarding their operating systems. In evaluating operating systems, it promotes the opportunity for consumers to retain or start employment and/or fully participate in all school courses and activities.

Being aware of emerging issues and technology helps NCBVI staff be proactive in resolving potential problems and to demonstrate and recommend the best technology options to consumers.

With the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic continuing this past year, many assistive technology conferences were held virtually. These technology conferences provide an inclusive setting for researchers, practitioners, exhibitors, end users, speakers, and other participants to share knowledge and best practices in the field of assistive technology. The Technology staff were able to participate in the CSUN conference on Assistive Technology in March to learn of technology that would benefit consumers with secondary disabilities to blindness. In July the two main consumer organizations held their conventions, which allowed NCBVI Technology staff to participate and learn about additional emerging technologies. In addition, NCBVI Technology Staff participated in various trainings for STEM related alternative skills. NCBVI staff are aware of the resources that are available for Science Teachers across the state that have blind or visually impaired students because it is vital to build STEM skills in the future workforce.

This past year NCBVI staff have consulted with the following businesses: Skarda, Metlife, Union Pacific, Video King, Hands of the Heartland, Mosaic, Autism Center of Nebraska, Tyson, Marianna Industries, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Heartland Workforce Solutions, Boystown, Amazon, University of Nebraska at Omaha, HyVee, Nebraska Medicine, Omaha Public Schools, CHI Immanuel Fontenelle, Fiserv, Marriott Worldwide Reservation, First National Bank, Deterrence Diner, Health and Human Services, Bakers Nelnet, Lincoln Public Schools, State of Nebraska, Firespring, BOSR, All About Braille, Department of Transportation, Lincoln City Libraries, Lutheran Family Services, HopCat, Lincoln Treatment Center, Lancaster County Records, Northeast Community College, Winnebago Public Schools, Countryside Home, Green Plains Central City LLC, University of Nebraska-Kearney, Scottsbluff Public School, i2c Inc., Thousand Keyes, Woodman Life, Hillis 66, Inc., ArkCare, Southern Valley Public School, Walmart, Lifegate Cristian School, League of Human Dignity, and Columbus Public School.

Technology Specialists continue to participate in technology organizations that address the misconceptions on blindness and focusing the abilities of blind individuals. These efforts will promote employment opportunities within their technology services. Technology impacts all areas of employment today. In providing this training, it will have a wide-range impact.

NCBVI Technology Specialists have continued to work closely with school districts across the state as schools went to remote learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Technology Specialists consulted with school districts to ensure blind and visually impaired students had the proper access technology in order to continue their education remotely as well as provided follow-up to ensure the access technology was working effectively.

In addition, NCBVI works closely with school districts to provide work-based learning experiences to students with disabilities as well as on-the-job training experiences for adults. This means NCBVI consults with area businesses in order to develop work opportunities in the community. These would be additional areas where the Technology Specialists would assist with evaluating technology needs for work experiences. As mentioned earlier many consumers have multiple disabilities and are more vulnerable to COVID-19 and other illnesses, which has had an impact with consumers and families feeling comfortable in participating in community work opportunities. In

lieu of in-person work opportunities, NCBVI used various remote platforms to provide virtual job exploration and job shadowing experiences as well as provided training and instruction in on-line research in order to find information regarding resumes, careers, and job applications.

When it comes to secondary and postsecondary students, Technology Specialists work closely with consumers to have the skills to be able to access academic materials themselves. This would include how to access textbook materials from Learning Ally, Bookshare, various publisher content portals sites, and the National Library Services for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. This training also includes teaching younger students how to use their mainstream technologies (i.e., iPhone, iPad, and Android phones and tablets), which may contain capabilities, or can be outfitted with software, which verbalizes the information on the screen or allows the user to read phone output on a refreshable Braille Display. Many blind and visually impaired students use iPads in the classroom for taking notes, reading accessible textbooks, and use other applications for accessing information from smart boards used by teachers. The Apple IOS mobile operating system is a great example of mainstream accessibility where the manufacturer has looked at the necessary features to ensure off-the-shelf accessibility for blind people.

For school or employment needs, the Technology Specialists conduct a technology assessment to evaluate the consumer's present level of skill as well as what is needed to be developed to successfully complete the necessary education and gain employment. Furthermore, the Technology Specialists have worked with a number of consumers in pursuit of their vocational goal of self-employment. Some of the occupations were: Real Estate Manager, Mental Health Therapist, Addiction Counselor, Photographer, and Randolph Sheppard Vendor.

NCBVI Technology Specialists have also worked closely with the OCIO to resolve technology issues NCBVI staff have encountered with agency computers, printers, and mobile devices. As new updates are pushed out by the OCIO, problems have resulted for NCBVI staff in accessing technology to perform job duties, which has significantly impacted NCBVI staff who use access technology. Technology Specialist provide the AJCs with information on how to update their access technology, NCBVI Technology Specialist and provide training to AJC staff on the assistive technology in the event they need to assist a consumer in accessing equipment. Technology Specialist continued to work closely with the AJCs to update their websites by reviewing the layout and content regarding accessibility for screen readers and screen enhancement software.

Technology is continuously evolving, and it is essential that NCBVI Technology Specialists remain up to date on changes. This knowledge is necessary as it is essential in providing NCBVI consumers and employers with high-quality services. NCBVI Technology Specialists hold memberships in the Association of Information Technology Professionals and the National Federation of the Blind Assistive Technology Trainer Division as well as follow several listservs in order to learn what access technology specialists across the country are encountering and to share their knowledge.

Throughout the year, leading mainstream technology developers release information on new technology that is to be released to the marketplace, in which NCBVI Technology Specialists

monitor. NCBVI also has relationships with local access technology dealers in order to facilitate demonstrations to NCBVI staff on the latest technology that is being released.

INDEPENDENT LIVING/OLDER INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE BLIND SERVICES

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the format in how IL/OIB services were provided for the first half of the FFY, but services have resumed to standard practice for the last half of the FFY. NCBVI staff provided services in combination of in-person, phone calls, and video conference meetings, which includes other remote alternatives in order to work on providing training remotely so that more consumers are comfortable using technology for remote service delivery for medical and/or health needs, receipt of goods (i.e., groceries, clothing, etc.), home management skills, and other support needs. NCBVI reprioritized funds so that technology could be provided to these consumers as appropriate, which includes mailing items directly to them that are set-up and prepared in advance in order to prevent a delay or gap in service delivery. NCBVI recognized that many consumers in this program are now without the natural supports, which were typically available pre-pandemic. NCBVI staff worked diligently to bridge the gaps in services and natural supports in order to continue to promote each consumer's personal independence during this time of COVID-19 isolation and challenges.

IL services are provided to blind and visually impaired individuals with independent living rather than vocational goals. The IL Program serves clients under the age of 55 while the OIB Program serves clients age 55 and older. IL/OIB clients receive training and services promoting greater independence in the home and full participation in community life.

During the FFY, 86 IL and 489 OIB clients received active independent living services. Of the IL clients: five clients were 55 years of age or over; 47 were 20 to 54 years of age and 34 were under 19 years of age.

Blind and visually impaired clients receive training in the alternative skills needed in order to pursue IL goals. Instruction typically begins in the home environment, which focuses on areas of cane travel, Braille, and home management. Those needing more intensive instruction often move on to training at the Nebraska Center for the Blind.

Five Orientation Counselors serve the entire state, which reaches many traditionally underserved populations, especially those in rural areas. These counselors provide guidance and counseling services, training promoting positive attitudes about blindness, and encourage clients to regain active and productive lives. Instruction may include training in the skills of blindness such as Braille, travel using a white cane, and activities of daily living, which may include cooking, shopping, housekeeping, money identification, telling time, recordkeeping, managing mail, bill payment, and such.

NCBVI offers IL skills training on a statewide basis and in each district for blind and visually impaired seniors and youth. These programs give consumers the opportunity to build confidence in the alternative skills of blindness in a setting away from home. Group teaching and training programs are conducted using sleep shades. Sessions may include cane travel, Braille, cooking, technology, problem-solving, and focusing on a positive attitude toward blindness. Other training activities promote the use of community resources in order to effectively conduct activities of daily living.

Orientation Counselors provide instruction in the use of NFB-NEWSLINE®, a digital voice newspaper service accessed by phone and internet; Talking Book and Braille Services (TBBS), a library service for the blind offering Braille and audio books and magazines; Radio Talking Book Services (RTBS), a voice newspaper and reading service accessed by radio, television, and the internet; and use of the Internet and email. Instruction is also provided in the use of assistive technology devices and various aids, which includes Braille writing equipment, talking calculators, talking glucometers, Closed Circuit TVs (for reading regular or large print), magnifiers, Braille or talking watches, and such. NCBVI staff members work closely with the local Area Agencies on Aging, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Centers for Independent Living, eye care professionals, and other service agencies.

NCBVI also received The Enrichment Foundation grant for \$15,000 for FY 2021 in support of PILBO (Promoting Independent Living for the Blind of Omaha), for blind and visually impaired adults living in Douglas and Sarpy Counties in need of access technology and services to maintain independence in the home. NCBVI continues to serve blind and visually impaired Nebraskans of all ages.

NEBRASKA BUSINESS ENTERPRISES

The Nebraska Business Enterprises (NBE) program provides opportunities for legally blind individuals to manage their own small businesses in vending facilities and/or cafeterias located within federal, state, and local government buildings as well as in other public or private facilities. NBE's support across the state includes two full-time staff members and all equipment, supplies, initial stock, on-going training, equipment repair, assistance in skill areas essential for business management, and continuous follow-up. NBE promotes greater public awareness of the capabilities of blind people and broader employment opportunities for the blind.

2021 was a year of growth and adjustment for the NBE program as licensees continued to navigate owning and operating a convenience service business within the COVID-19 pandemic. While gross sales figures across all licensees were higher this year, thanks to a gradual return to working from office buildings; the availability of optional or mandatory, in some cases, work-from-home options contributed to lower-than-expected gross sales for the second year in a row. Licensees also continued to see scarcity in product; as manufacturers limited production on items or pushed more of their product line to grocery store and convenience store sector. Many licensees were able to draw on their experience from 2020 and adjusted their product mix and inventory flow to better match the demands of the current situation; which enabled them to have a more profitable year. Across the convenience service industry (of which vending machines are a large part) the past two years are considered a new frontier, where things are not going to return to a pre-pandemic model. NCBVI and the NBE program are working hard to stay on the forefront of this change, looking at new concepts and delivery of service options that will better serve blind licensees and our licensees' customers.

In accordance with the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act, vendors (licensees) make monthly payments of "Set Aside" to the agency. This covers a portion of the new equipment, repairs, retirement, and support necessary to keep the licensees fully and efficiently operating. There are 13 licensed vendors currently running vending facilities with an additional trainee who is completing their training to become a licensed vendor. NBE licensees manage many facilities

statewide, which include two cafeterias; the cafeteria in the Nebraska State Office Building in Lincoln as well as the US StratCom Building cafeteria on Offutt Air Force Base in Bellevue. NBE maintains approximately 300 vending machines in federal, state, and local government buildings; which include all 20 rest areas on Interstate 80 across Nebraska. NBE is currently working on several new vending opportunities to promote more jobs for blind people.

During this FFY, there were 96 sites for vending or food services in Nebraska managed by NBE. Some of the locations of the NBE vending facilities are as follows:

- 501 Building, Lincoln
- Airport Post Office Annex, Omaha
- CERT Training Building, Lincoln
- Citizenship Information Services Building, Omaha
- Community Correctional Center Lincoln, Lincoln
- Community Correctional Center Omaha, Omaha
- Cornhusker State Industries Building, Lincoln
- Craft State Office Building, North Platte
- Denny Federal Building, Lincoln
- Department of Administrative Services, Lincoln
- Department of Correctional Services Central Office, Lincoln
- Department of Environmental Quality, Lincoln
- Department of Transportation, Lincoln
- Douglas County Civic Center Complex, Omaha
- Executive Building, Lincoln
- Grand Island City/County Building, Grand Island
- Hastings Post Office, Hastings
- Hruska Federal Courthouse, Omaha
- Homeland Security Nebraska Service Center, Lincoln
- Immigration Services, Lincoln
- Joint Forces Headquarters, Lincoln
- Lincoln Main Post Office, Lincoln
- National Parks Administration Building, Omaha
- Nebraska Law Enforcement Training Center, Grand Island
- Nebraska State Capitol, Lincoln
- Nebraska State Labs Building, Lincoln
- Nebraska State Office Building Cafeteria/Vending, Lincoln
- Nebraska State Office Building, Omaha
- Nebraska State Penitentiary, Lincoln
- Norfolk Post Office, Norfolk
- Norfolk Regional Center, Norfolk
- North Platte Federal Building, North Platte
- North Platte Post Office, North Platte
- Omaha Main Post Office, Omaha
- Public Service Commission, Lincoln
- Transportation Services Bureau, Lincoln
- US StratCom Building, Offutt Air Force Base
- USDA Farm Services and Immigration Building, Grand Island
- Veteran's Administration, Lincoln

Veteran’s Hospital Ambulatory Care Center, Omaha
White Hall, Lincoln
Zorinsky Federal Building, Omaha

The NBE program continues to grow as blind entrepreneurs are earning an annual increase in income as more vending sites are developed across the state. This year, new sites were added at the new Nebraska State Patrol Headquarters; Lincoln V.A. Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC); New Ne. Dept. of Environment & Energy building – Lincoln; and Columbus DHHS building.

NCBVI is continuously promoting the NBE program to increase the number of new licensees in the coming year. All prospective licensees are assessed to determine the skills they need to acquire, such as basic math, basic accounting, bookkeeping, writing, techniques of blindness, and customer service. All Licensees have acquired the necessary adult basic education requirements as well as completed background checks. Business skills are developed through online courses relating to areas such as human relations, supervision, business practices, basic accounting, taxes, marketing costs, and inventory control. In addition, the NBE Licensee’s Committee met quarterly and were provided training at all of the meetings this FFY.

NBE Statistics

Gross Sales	Set Aside
\$ 932,001.32	\$ 14,411.44

NFB-NEWSLINE® FOR THE BLIND

NFB-Newsline® for the Blind was established in Nebraska twenty years ago with the help of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska (NFBN), and it still continues to grow. This program is an audio information system that allows all blind, visually impaired, print disabled, or persons with other physical disabilities to access local and national newspapers, and a variety of other publications and magazines. Currently, there are over 500 print publications available on NFB-Newsline®. Included are 380 state newspapers, three Nebraska-based newspapers, 13 national papers, 14 international papers, six Spanish publications, 44 breaking news publications, and 85 magazines, which are all accessible by touch-tone telephone, computer, Amazon Alexa, or through Apple devices. Also available are local weather alerts, weekly store circulars, TV listings, and job listings. The system enables those who cannot read conventional print to have access to all content offered on NFB-Newsline® when traveling throughout the United States.

Using the buttons on the telephone, the listener chooses first, a paper or a magazine, and second, the category within the paper, such as national, state, or local news, sports, area events, and editorial opinions. The listener will immediately hear the first story of that category. They can then skip to the next story or column, replay it, jump ahead, or go back in ten second increments, adjust the volume, choose a different voice, or exit the category and choose another by pressing a single digit. Listener options also include the ability to slow down or speed up the rate of speech; a special time check key and a pause control option allows the listener to stop reading a story for a period of two minutes without losing his/her place in the story; and the availability to spell a word, go forward or backward by paragraphs, go forward or backward by sentences, and/or to search for a subject throughout the paper by a chosen word. Articles can even be emailed to subscribers with a single key stroke.

The number of subscribers continues to grow and there are currently 2,118 users in Nebraska. NFB-Newsline® is available to qualified readers free of charge, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and in all 93 counties. Email and the internet are the most popular forms of communication today. NFB-Newsline® recognizes this and is constantly developing new ways to keep up to date with this fast-paced world. In 2020, NFB-Newsline launched IOS Mobile 3.0 with KNFB Reader Basic, which allows subscribers to utilize the basic features of the award winning KNFB Reader, text to speech application that utilizes your devices camera. NFB-Newsline® online was created for subscribers to browse through papers and have more access to current events without having to be connected to a telephone. NFB Newsline Mobile has become one of the most accessed platforms in Nebraska during 2021. Also, users were able to continue to access COVID-19 news directly through the breaking news section.

Anyone who cannot read conventional newsprint qualifies for NFB-Newsline®. NFB-Newsline® contributes to a more literate blind population able to understand and master the printed word through better access to daily newspapers and magazines. Because of NFB-Newsline®, blind and visually impaired job seekers are better able to compete for available jobs through greater access of local newspapers. Blind and visually impaired children are able to conduct their own research assignments and complete their homework independently.

Many seniors experiencing vision loss are able to resume reading local newspapers and stay actively connected with community affairs. NFB-Newsline® makes it possible for hundreds of blind and print-impaired Nebraskans to address the compelling need for information; thus, affording them the opportunity to become more independent and productive members of society.

INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, information and referral services were provided primarily electronically for the FFY. NCBVI staff utilized electronic signatures, applications, documentation, and other such submissions in order to prevent any delays in needed services for consumers. NCBVI recognizes the need to have timely, efficient methods for service delivery for all stakeholders supporting blind and visually impaired Nebraskans working toward personal and vocational goals. Because many consumers are still facing challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, NCBVI staff work diligently to ensure quality services to meet the whole consumer's needs during this time.

NCBVI staff routinely provide information and referrals to agencies and organizations serving blind and visually impaired consumers. Assistance with the application process or instruction in the use of equipment issued by these agencies and organizations is also available if needed. Some of the more frequently referred to agencies and organizations are: TBBS (Talking Book and Braille Services), RTBS (Radio Talking Book Services), NFBN (National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska), ACBN (American Council of the Blind of Nebraska), and Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation

TBBS is the State Library Service for the Blind and Reading Impaired. NCBVI counselors frequently assist new users of TBBS services through the use of recorded materials on cartridges as well as via email and smart phone or tablet apps. RTBS is a statewide, closed circuit radio reading service for those individuals who have disabilities, visual or physical, preventing them from reading

printed material. Special receivers or televisions with the Secondary Audio Program (SAP) feature are required to hear the broadcasts of RTBS, which is also available via the internet. Although there are books and magazines available for the blind and visually impaired, there is still a daily informational void that blind people experience. RTBS makes it possible for blind people to stay in touch with their local community and what is going on around them.

The NFBN and the ACBN are two consumer organizations of the blind in the state. These organizations provide important opportunities for blind people to network with and learn from each other, giving them the peer encouragement and support needed for success. Long after the vocational rehabilitation experience is over, these consumer organizations continue to provide that extra support. When a person becomes blind or even grows up blind, it is very important to associate with other blind people to gain the proper understanding about the capabilities of blind people. It is through this association with positive blind role models provided by consumer organizations of the blind that people struggling with vision loss are able to make a more positive overall adjustment to blindness and develop self-confidence in themselves.

The ACBN coordinates subsidized half-fare taxi coupon programs for blind and visually impaired consumers living in the Lincoln “Give a Lift” and Omaha “Share a Fare” metropolitan areas. NCBVI counselors routinely inform potential beneficiaries of these programs and assist with the application process, if needed. This past year this program had the opportunity for blind and visually impaired consumers to submit for reimbursement for Uber/Lyft ride shares; if that was their preferred choice of transportation. Share a Fare and Give a Lift both allowed participants to use these services to deliver groceries and meals. In the course of the past year, they also provided transportation funding with either a Taxi, Uber, or Lyft so individuals could receive their COVID-19 vaccination.

The Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation is a low vision clinic located in Omaha. NCBVI may provide financial assistance for low vision aids or devices promoting greater independence in the home or on the job, if recommended, subsequent to a low vision evaluation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, NCBVI used a recommended eye chart that counselors shared with consumers, retirement communities, and other organizations. This allowed NCBVI counselors to provide the appropriate magnification device to consumers allowing them to enjoy activities of daily living during this time of social isolation.

There are many other entities, public and private, across Nebraska, which can benefit persons with visual impairments. NCBVI staff network and partner with a wide range of organizations to assure that resources are maximized for blind Nebraskans. In Omaha, all organizations, including NCBVI, that served individuals that are blind and visually impaired collaborated in developing a resource list as well as had a help line that was operated from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. This help line assisted with information and referral services for consumers to additional resources that were of a high priority for them at that time.

Lastly, NCBVI is a Core Partner of WIOA, which means NCBVI is closely linked to the workforce development system, which helps all job seekers accomplish their employment goals.