

2020 Annual Report
New Mexico Commission for the Blind
and
New Mexico Commission for the Blind
State Rehabilitation Council
October 1, 2019 to September 30, 2020

New Mexicans with Vision Loss

2016 Statistics

Under 18 - 4,471

18 to 64 - 31,750

65 and Older - 31,092

Male - 32,341

Female - 34,972

Total - 67,313

Definition and Scope: The term vision loss refers to individuals who reported they have serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, as well as those who are blind or unable to see at all.

Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 American Community Surveys

“Public Law 115-141 Notice: The Commission receives federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education and from the Health and Human Services Department. For Federal Fiscal Year 2021, the Commission will receive approximately \$5,050,503 for Vocational Rehabilitation with a \$1,366,909 state match; \$55,500 for Supported Employment with a \$3,083 state match; \$225,000 for Older Blind with a \$25,000 state match; and \$59,800 for Independent Living with a \$6,644 State match.”

Introduction

The Commission for the Blind provides vocational rehabilitation and independent living services to persons who are blind or visually impaired, enabling them to participate and contribute in society. Persons who are blind or visually impaired lead normal lives, have families, raise children, participate in community activities, and work in a wide range of jobs. They are social workers, lawyers, teachers, engineers, machinists, scientists, supervisors, and business owners. The real challenge is to educate people who are blind or visually impaired about their own potential, and to educate society about the capabilities of persons who are blind or visually impaired.

The Commission believes persons who are blind or visually impaired are normal, and blindness, in and of itself, is not a barrier to leading a normal and productive life. The Commission provides services that enable persons who are blind or visually impaired to enhance their abilities and assume roles in the community as working, taxpaying, and contributing citizens.

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) of the Commission for the Blind was created pursuant to the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which is now Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The SRC works in close partnership with the Commission by helping to formulate vocational rehabilitation policies and procedures. One of the major activities in this partnership is assistance in the preparation of the Commission's portion of the Combined State Plan, including the Goals and Priorities which are developed jointly between the SRC and the Commission. The Commission and the SRC worked actively together during the year to develop the Commission's portion of the Combined State Plan, which took effect on July 1, 2020.

Mission Statement

Our mission is to enable persons who are blind to achieve vocational, economic, and social equality by providing career preparation, training in the skills of blindness, and above all, promoting and conveying the belief that blindness is not a barrier to successful employment or to living an independent and meaningful life.

"Whether you are the parent of a child diagnosed with a visual impairment, a person who is blind due to a genetic condition, a person who is a senior with age-related macular degeneration, or whether your blindness might have been the result of any one of a number of other circumstances, the New Mexico Commission for the Blind is here to help, and to let you know that blindness is not a barrier to leading a full, meaningful, and productive life."

Greg Trapp, JD
Executive Director

Commissioners

Arthur A. Schreiber, Commission Chairman - Albuquerque

Shirley Lansing, Commissioner - Albuquerque

Dr. Robert Reidy, Commissioner – Santa Fe

State Rehabilitation Council Officers

Thomas O'Brien, Chair - Edgewood

Shirley Lansing, Vice-Chair - Albuquerque

Kaitlin Ellis, Secretary – Deming/Albuquerque

State Rehabilitation Council Members during Federal Fiscal Year 2020

Bernadine Chavez, Client Assistance Program - Albuquerque

Kaitlin Ellis, Current or Former Recipient of VR Services – Deming/Albuquerque

Shirley Lansing, Blind Advocacy Group - Albuquerque

Paul Luttrell, Community Rehabilitation Program - Albuquerque

Lila Martinez, Parent Training and Information Center - Las Cruces

Yolanda Montoya-Cordova, State Workforce Board - Albuquerque

Thomas O'Brien, Business, Industry, and Labor - Edgewood

Greg Trapp, Director of Designated State Unit - Albuquerque

September 30, 2020

The Honorable Michelle Lujan Grisham
Governor of the State of New Mexico
State Capitol, Fourth Floor
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503

Dear Governor Lujan Grisham:

The Commission for the Blind hereby submits its Annual Report pursuant to 28-7-17(H) NMSA 1978, and pursuant to 34 CFR 361.17(h)(5). The Annual Report is for the Federal Fiscal Year ending September 30, 2020, a year that marks the 100th anniversary of the vocational rehabilitation program.

The Commission has continued to serve blind and visually impaired residents of the state of New Mexico during the Coronavirus pandemic. This has primarily been accomplished through the provision of remote services, but the Commission has also provided limited in-person services when appropriate. This was done in consultation with the New Mexico Department of Health, and when necessary to protect the health and safety of persons who are blind or visually impaired.

The Commission also continues to implement the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requirement that at least 15 percent of Federal vocational rehabilitation funds be spent on Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students aged 14 to 21. While the pandemic prevented the Commission from spending all of the 15 Percent Pre-ETS reserve, the Commission was able to provide all of the required and authorized Pre-ETS services. Despite the fact that the Pre-ETS requirement reduces the funds available for adults, the Commission was still able to serve all eligible individuals.

The Commission is dedicated to the goal of helping blind persons become self-supporting and participating members of society. The following report details the ways in which the Commission accomplished this goal.

Respectfully,

Arthur A. Schreiber
Commission Chairman

Greg D. Trapp, JD
Executive Director

September 30, 2020

The Honorable Michelle Lujan Grisham
Governor of the State of New Mexico
State Capitol, Fourth Floor
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503

Dear Governor Lujan Grisham:

Pursuant to 34 CFR 361.17(h)(5), the State Rehabilitation Council of the Commission for the Blind hereby submits its Annual Report for the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2020, the year that marks the 100th anniversary of the vocational rehabilitation program. The Council worked closely with the Commission during the anniversary year, including on the Federal requirement that 15 percent of vocational rehabilitation funds be reserved and spent on provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). The Pre-ETS requirement has resulted in many agencies needing to establish waiting lists for services, but the Commission has been able to successfully serve all eligible individuals.

As with all segments of society, the Coronavirus pandemic has affected Commission services. The pandemic has reduced the Commission's number of vocational rehabilitation closures, and independent living services have been provided remotely.

The pandemic has also impacted the ability of the Commission to spend the 15 percent Pre-ETS reserve. The Pre-ETS impact is primarily due to the closure of schools and the lack of work-based learning experiences. This is a national problem, and the U.S. Department of Education has recommended that the Pre-ETS 15 percent reserve be waived as a result of the pandemic.

The following Annual Report details the accomplishments of the Commission for the Blind and State Rehabilitation Council.

Respectfully,

Thomas P. O'Brien, Chair
State Rehabilitation Council

ACCOMPLISHMENTS for FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2020

Services Delivered

Vocational Rehabilitation Program – 364
Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) – 28
Orientation Center – 16 Adults and 13 STEP
Business Enterprise Program– 15
Technology for Children – 18
Independent Living / Older Blind Program – 407
Coronavirus Pandemic Wellness Checks – 1,500+
Emergency Eye Care Surgeries – 11

ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN IN RESPONSE TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

The first three cases of persons testing positive for SARS-CoV-2 in New Mexico were announced on March 11, 2020. SARS-CoV-2 is the Coronavirus that causes Covid-19. Covid-19 is the illness from infection with SARS-CoV-2. The Commission for the Blind has engaged in numerous actions designed to respond to and mitigate the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on services and programs. This was done in compliance with all applicable program and fiscal rules and regulations.

On March 2, the Commission posed a set of questions to the Office of the Attorney General about how Commission and Council meetings could be conducted telephonically or over the web, noting that “we are looking at the start of community spread of the Coronavirus.”

On March 4, the Commission began to circulate information from the Mayo Clinic about the Coronavirus to Commission employees, noting that the “best way that we can fight Coronavirus is to be sure that we are getting accurate information.”

On March 10, the Commission began posting special Coronavirus updates on Newsline for the Blind, focusing on scientific studies and reports from recognized medical and scientific authorities. The Commission created a special Newsline category (32) dedicated only to reports on the Coronavirus.

On March 11, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham declared that a public health emergency existed in New Mexico, saying that the “Department of Health is urging New Mexicans to exercise caution in visiting relatives in nursing homes.” As a result, on March 11, the Commission issued directions to independent living teachers to “suspend all visits to nursing homes and assistive living facilities.”

On March 12, the Commission distributed an announcement to the National Federation of the Blind about the creation of a special Coronavirus category on Newsline for the Blind.

On March 15, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham directed “state government agencies to minimize face-to-face contact while continuing service delivery,” and to “accelerate remote-work initiatives in the wake of the COVID-19 public health emergency.”

On March 16, Commission employees were directed to “cancel all meetings or trainings” scheduled with consumers, and to “conduct the meeting or training remotely.” Commission employees who were able to perform their work through telework were directed to begin telework on March 17, and essential employees who could not telework were directed to report to the office.

On March 16, the Orientation Center in Alamogordo ceased providing face-to-face training and all remaining students left the Orientation Center to return to their homes. The Orientation Center began to provide virtual training to students on March 19.

On April 2, the Commission began to conduct wellness checks of current independent living and vocational rehabilitation consumers, as well as IL and VR consumers whose cases had been closed within the last five years. The purpose was to insure that these individuals had access to supports and needed services and supplies. Over 1,500 consumers were contacted.

On April 16, the Commission for the Blind board modified its Open Meetings Act Resolution to include procedures for virtual meetings held during times of emergencies. The resolution was updated on June 24, and again on August 26. The August 26 update reflected the fact that the duration of the pandemic would be much longer than expected. The revisions included procedures for the virtual conducting of public meetings under 34 CFR 361.20(b)(2).

On June 8, the Commission began the virtual STEP program, providing limited in-person Orientation & Mobility training while using face masks and in compliance with all applicable public health orders. The provision of in-person Orientation & Mobility instruction was suspended on June 28 when Coronavirus cases began to spike, with exceptions being made by the Executive Director when there were compelling health and safety reasons to justify the training.

On June 23, the State Rehabilitation Council modified its Open Meetings Act Resolution to include procedures for virtual meetings held during times of emergencies. The resolution was further updated on August 6, 2020 to reflect the fact that the duration of the pandemic would be much longer than expected. The revisions included procedures for the virtual conducting of public meetings under 34 CFR 361.20(b)(2).

In June, The Commission Executive Director and Skills Center Coordinator began serving on the leadership team of the Disability, Access and Functional Needs Coordination Group (DAFN). The DAFN Group is coordinated by the New Mexico Department of Health, and meets twice a week to coordinate the pandemic response as it affects persons with disabilities. Some of the issues addressed included the accessibility of virtual meeting platforms, the accessibility of telemedicine platforms, effectively communicating with persons who are blind about the virus and relief response, access to personal protective equipment, access to food distribution networks, and access to testing.

On July 15, the Commission distributed information on how persons who are blind and symptomatic for the Coronavirus can obtain SARS-CoV-2 testing at home. The Commission worked with the DAFN Group to develop the information that was distributed. The Commission has distributed other critical information throughout the pandemic, including public health orders, information on the benefits of wearing masks, information on benefits available through the CARES Act, information on how to obtain food and groceries, and information on medical developments related to the Coronavirus.

On August 6, the Commission began a dialogue with the New Mexico Department of Health on how the Commission can safely reopen services, and obtain Department of Health approval on reopening plans for the agency.

On August 26, the Commission updated its Allowable Cost Policy and Procedure to include a section on operations during times of emergencies.

Throughout the pandemic the Commission has strongly advocated for the use of accessible meeting platforms, working in close partnership with the Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Some virtual meeting platforms are not accessible to persons who use screen readers. These platforms can also be inaccessible to persons who are Deaf or Deaf-blind because they may not include captioning or may not permit an ASL interpreter to be appropriately visible on the screen.

NEW MEXICO COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Vocational Rehabilitation Program

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program serves persons who are legally blind and individuals with qualifying visual impairments. The program helps persons who are blind or visually impaired to become employed in ways that are consistent with each individual's "strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, informed choice, and economic self-sufficiency." The pandemic and the resulting record high levels of unemployment significantly impacted on the ability of the Commission to place consumers in employment. Despite the pandemic, the Commission was still able to successfully place 13 consumers in employment during the federal fiscal year that ended on September 30, 2020, a decrease of 10 individuals. An additional 27 individuals were in "employment status" at the end of the year and awaiting case closure. For the state fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2020, 15 persons were placed in employment. The Commission also served 364 VR consumers during the year, a decrease of 37 persons from the prior year.

The 13 consumers that the Commission placed in employment in the federal fiscal year earned an average starting wage of \$21.68 per hour, and the 15 consumers placed during the state fiscal year earned an average starting wage of \$17.92 per hour.

Despite budget pressures caused by reduced state funds due to the pandemic, and despite the federal requirement to spend 15 percent of the vocational rehabilitation grant on Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), the Commission for the Blind served all eligible vocational rehabilitation consumers during the year. Unlike a majority of vocational rehabilitation agencies, the Commission does not anticipate having to implement an Order of Selection (waiting list) for services. At virtual meetings of the Commission for the Blind held on August 26, 2020, and the State Rehabilitation Council on September 28, 2020, the Commission determined that it had the ability to provide the full range of vocational rehabilitation services to all eligible individuals.

Transition Services

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires the Commission to spend at least 15 percent of the vocational rehabilitation grant on the provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). The Pre-ETS services include five required activities, four coordination activities, and nine authorized activities. However, WIOA imposes some significant restrictions on how the 15 percent reserve can be spent. For instance, the reserve can only be spent on "students" age 14 to 21, and the reserve cannot be used to pay for administrative costs. There are also restrictions on the purchase of computers, and the reserve cannot be used to pay for tuition and most transportation. Finally, the reserve cannot be used for the authorized Pre-ETS activities unless all of the required Pre-ETS activities are provided. At virtual meetings of the Commission for the Blind held on August 26, 2020, and the State Rehabilitation Council held on September 28, 2020, the Commission forecasted that it had

sufficient funds to provide all of the required Pre-ETS activities during Federal Fiscal Year 2020, enabling the Commission to provide both the required and authorized Pre-ETS activities.

On January 28, 2020, the Commission signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED). The MOA establishes a formal interagency agreement as required by 34 CFR 361.22(e). The Agreement provides for methods of coordination between the agency and PED to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from the receipt of educational services, including pre-employment transition services, in school to the receipt of vocational rehabilitation services from the agency. These methods of coordination also facilitate the development and approval of an Individualized Plan for Employment as early as possible.

The Commission has a Governmental Services Agreement with the New Mexico School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and has an intergovernmental agreement with the New Mexico Central Region Educational Cooperative. The purpose of both agreements is to expand the Pre-ETS services that are provided to students in New Mexico.

The Commission's Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Program Manager, Transition Coordinator, Skills Center Coordinator, and Skills Center teachers all regularly attended Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings during the year. The Commission seeks to regularly attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings by age 14, and in some cases even earlier. The goal is to provide transition planning and services that facilitate the development and completion of their IEPs, and to thereby enhance the quantity and quality of employment outcomes that will ultimately be achieved by consumers aged 14 to 21. The pandemic resulted in all IEP meetings being attended virtually, though the Commission had routinely attended IEP meetings through virtual methods.

Students in Transition to Employment Program - (STEP)

The Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) provides an intensive transition experience that gives Commission consumers with a variety of skills instruction and a paid work-based learning experience. Young persons who are blind or visually impaired have traditionally been limited in their ability to engage in such work experiences, depriving them of the important benefits of student employment. Due to public health and safety concerns, the pandemic significantly reduced the number of work-based learning experiences that were available to STEP students.

During Federal Fiscal Year 2020, STEP served 28 blind students ranging in age from 14 to 21. Fifteen of these students participated in STEP through virtual training provided by the Albuquerque Skills Center, with a limited number of students receiving in-person Orientation & Mobility training provided by Skills Center instructors. Because of the pandemic, the residential STEP program at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo provided services virtually, and a total of 13 students received virtual instruction from the Orientation Center.

For a blind student to become successfully employed, he or she must acquire a positive attitude about blindness and learn essential blindness skills. The skills that were taught

virtually included Braille, computer technology, orientation and mobility, personal management, and cooking. The students also participated in seminars and presentations from successful blind adult role models.

Orientation Center

The Orientation Center is a residential program that serves the Commission's vocational rehabilitation consumers. The Center helps blind or visually impaired persons acquire the skills needed to become successfully employed. The Center is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and is certified by the National Blindness Professionals Certification Board (NBPCB). The Commission's Orientation Center is the only blindness training center in the nation that has both CARF accreditation and NBPCB certification. The Center provided intensive training to 30 consumers in the skills of blindness during the year. Sixteen of those served were adults and there were 13 transition students in the summer STEP program. The Center is located in Alamogordo and serves consumers from throughout the state. The adult training typically lasts six to nine months, during which time students usually reside in the Center's dormitory. The Orientation Center began providing training virtually in March.

To expand capacity and make training more realistic, the Center is in the process of building an apartment facility on land donated to the Commission. The State Rehabilitation Council has actively participated in the planning for these apartments, making specific recommendations regarding their configuration and design. The apartments were entirely funded by the state legislature, and construction is scheduled to be completed in November of 2021.

Consumers attending the Center receive intensive training in cane travel, Braille, assistive technology, home management, personal management, physical education, and industrial arts. Most of these students are newly blinded, and require intensive training to successfully participate in the Commission's vocational rehabilitation program and to ultimately become employed. The Center has a computer lab, a classroom with two complete kitchens, a fully-equipped industrial arts shop, and a conference room where seminars are held. The Center also has an exercise room that is equipped with professional gym equipment that helps students improve their fitness level and increase their confidence.

The training is built around the use of "learning shades" to eliminate the student's desire to rely on inadequate or failing vision. By learning effective non-visual techniques, students gain self-confidence and learn how to function as successful blind persons.

Assistive Technology

The use of assistive technology is a crucial factor in the successful employment of persons who are blind. However, studies consistently show that persons with disabilities are less likely to own a computer and access the Internet. This gap is called the "digital divide." The Commission's assistive technology program seeks to close this gap. One of the challenges to doing this is that a blind or visually impaired person must learn the application, as well as the assistive technology that allows access to the application. The digital divide became even

more of an issue during the pandemic because of the need for persons who are blind or visually impaired to access training and services remotely, as well as the need to use the computer or smart phone to shop or have medical appointments. Making matters worse is that some meeting platforms are not accessible, and those that are accessible can be challenging to learn.

The Commission's technology specialists provided consumers with assistive technology such as screen readers, Braille displays, screen magnification programs, video magnifiers, and computerized Braille note takers. The assistive technology program delivered 54 computers; conducted 216 technology evaluations; provided 13 Braille devices; provided 36 video magnifiers; installed 132 assistive technology applications; provided 199 training sessions; and provided 1935 technical support sessions. Most of the technology was delivered using contact-free methods, and most of the technical support was provided virtually.

Business Enterprise Program

The Business Enterprise Program provides employment opportunities for legally blind individuals who wish to operate food service facilities. Authorized by the federal Randolph Sheppard Act, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) performs an essential service by providing cafeteria and food vending services throughout the state, including at Kirtland Air Force Base, Sandia National Laboratories, and Los Alamos National Laboratories. The program also provides food vending services at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Artesia, as well as thirteen locations of the United States Post Office in Albuquerque. In addition, the program operates vending for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration at White Sands, as well as the National Reconnaissance Office and the US Customs and Border Protection in southern New Mexico. The program also operates vending services in Albuquerque for the Social Security Administration, the Indian Health Services, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Department of Agriculture, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Internal Revenue Service, the Transportation Security Administration, the Department of Homeland Security, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The Business Enterprise Program provides government workers and the public with quality food service that is conveniently located within government buildings and installations. This last year, 15 blind persons participated in the Business Enterprise Program, and vendor earnings were \$2,894,216, with \$188,677.18 paid in gross receipt taxes.

Commission Supports National Defense and Homeland Security

A BEP vendor operates the Thunderbird Inn and Dining Facility at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque. The operator of this facility has distinguished himself in competitions for national and international Air Force dining operations, including winning the "Gold Plate," and also winning the even more prestigious "John L. Hennessy" award.

A BEP vendor also serves the food and dining needs at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Artesia, which is capable of serving meals to 1,000 students. The Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) provides training to over 100 different federal law enforcement agencies, as well as local, state, and tribal law enforcement agencies.

Newsline for the Blind

Newsline is a telephone-based system that allows persons who are blind or visually impaired to access a variety of newspapers and publications. The offerings include the Albuquerque Journal, the New Mexico Magazine, the Gallup Independent, and the Santa Fe New Mexican. Newsline also includes the newsletter of the National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico and the State Library Talking Book Newsletter. Blind or visually impaired readers can use Newsline to access important information such as grocery ads, drug store ads, and legal notices. The service is now in its 30th year of operation.

Newsline has created a special category dedicated to news stories related to the Coronavirus, and Newsline has distributed critical information on testing, public health orders, and breaking medical information. Newsline normally functions with volunteer readers recording stories from inside specially built recording booths located in the Newsline office in Albuquerque. Because of the pandemic, volunteer readers started reading from their homes on March 17. The volunteer readers are often retired, so they are at higher risk from severe illness due to Covid-19.

The Newsline reader uses the buttons of a telephone to select the desired newspaper, and to move within and between publications. The reading is done by approximately 75 trained volunteers. The service is available statewide free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The Commission also sponsors NFB-Newsline, an audio information service developed by the National Federation of the Blind that provides access to over 400 publications. NFB-Newsline users can access state newspapers such as the Farmington Daily Times and Las Cruces Sun News, national newspapers such as USA Today, international newspapers such as The Jerusalem Post, and magazines such as Smithsonian Magazine. NFB-Newsline also provides access to job listings, television schedules, and weather alerts.

Skills Center

The Skills Center helps meet the needs of the Commission's vocational rehabilitation and independent living consumers. Located in the Albuquerque office, the Skills Center has employees who serve throughout the state. The Skills Center has classrooms designed for specific subject areas such as Braille, technology, cooking, and personal management. It also has a large lecture room that is ideal for group meetings and seminars. In 2020, the Skills Center provided virtual instruction to 15 students participating in the Students in Transition to Employment program. In addition, Skills Center employees have also provided limited in-person Orientation and Mobility training to students who needed the training due to special health or safety concerns.

The Commission's Technology for Children program is operated by the Skills Center. The Technology for Children program provides children with needed assistive technology, helps the Commission build and strengthen relationships with local school districts, identifies eligible students, and provides information about transition and other vocational rehabilitation services. The Technology for Children program annually receives \$80,000 in funding from the New Mexico Department of Health. The Technology for Children program provided assistive

technology to 18 blind and visually impaired children who were under 18 and could not obtain the technology from other sources. The technology provided ranged from digital book players to more advanced items such as video magnifiers and computerized Braille note takers. The Technology for Children program continued to provide services during the pandemic, with deliveries of technology taking place through contact-free methods. The technology provided has helped blind students participate in the remote instruction being offered by their local school districts, making the Technology for Children program an especially critical service during the pandemic.

One of the most significant challenges the Commission faces is the need to support Braille proficiency for students who are blind or visually impaired. Meeting this critical need is a priority of the Skills Center. As a direct result of the Skills Center's efforts to increase Braille proficiency, there are now 29 persons with NCUEB certification residing in New Mexico. This gives New Mexico the highest number of NCUEB certified teachers in the nation.

New Mexico Commission for the Blind Programs and Services

Independent Living and Older Blind

The independent living (IL) program serves a rapidly growing population of persons who are blind or visually impaired. In an effort to enhance services, the Commission hired an IL Program Manager in January of 2020. The Program Manager brings additional expertise and adds additional capacity to the independent living program.

The independent living program is facing particular challenges because of the pandemic. The large majority of persons served are seniors, and this population is at higher risk of severe illness due to Covid-19. As a result, the Commission suspended visits to nursing homes and assisted living facilities even before these facilities were closed to outside visitors. Since March 17, the Commission has provided IL consumers with remote services and contact-free technology deliveries.

The purpose of the IL Program is to enable persons who are blind or visually impaired to live independently in their own homes and communities. The independent living program consists of "Part B" funds which can be used to serve persons of all ages, and the "Older Individuals who are Blind" funds, which is restricted to persons who are 55 and older. The IL Program provided intensive training to 407 consumers during Federal Fiscal Year 2020.

Independent living services are provided to blind and visually impaired consumers throughout the state, with most persons being served in their own homes. The instruction includes training in Braille, how to travel using a white cane, how to use public transportation, and instruction in personal and home management skills. The training also includes provision of basic assistive technology devices such as white canes, hand-held video magnifiers, optical magnification devices, Braille writing equipment, and Braille or talking watches. During Federal Fiscal Year 2020, the Commission provided 49 hand-held video magnifiers to visually impaired consumers, enabling those individuals to read items such as prescription labels, bills, and bank statements.

The independent living teachers serve the entire state, often traveling over long distances to reach consumers in rural areas. The teachers engage in frequent outreach to senior centers, and work with many seniors who are living in assisted living facilities and nursing homes. The teachers also serve younger consumers who are newly blinded and participating in the Commission's vocational rehabilitation program.

Most of the independent living consumers served by the Commission were seniors who had recently lost vision due to conditions such as age-related macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy. Approximately 3.5 percent of the population over 65 is legally blind, and the aging of the population is resulting in a significant increase of visually impaired seniors. This senior population is also becoming more technologically advanced, and the independent living program is seeing more consumers who have needs related to computers and smart phones.

Emergency Medical Eye Care

The Emergency Medical Eye Care Program seeks to prevent blindness and restore vision through medical intervention. The program provided eleven emergency eye surgeries to New Mexicans who lack the resources to cover the cost of medical eye emergencies. Covered procedures include emergency eye care problems that, if not expeditiously attended to, could result in irreversible vision loss or structural damage to the eye. The majority of procedures are laser treatments, retinal re-attachments, and treatments for acute eye trauma. The program enables patients to receive a continuity of care with an ophthalmologist of his or her own choosing. This program is the only means by which many persons can avoid permanent blindness. The goal is to return those served to their previous activities and prevent the need for expensive medical and rehabilitative services.

Goals and Priorities

The following goals and priorities were jointly developed and agreed to by the Commission for the Blind and the State Rehabilitation Council. The Commission for the Blind conducted a total of ten public meetings to gather input on the Combined State Plan. The public meetings were conducted throughout New Mexico to solicit comments from geographically and ethnically diverse populations. The purpose was to provide the public, including individuals with disabilities, an opportunity to comment on the policies or procedures prior to their adoption. The Council held a special meeting in Albuquerque on December 16, 2019, during which the Council developed and approved the Goals and Priorities. The Council added four new Goals and Priorities. The new Goals and Priorities included one on the hiring and retention of VR Counselors, one concerning the provision of VR services to older workers, one concerning the provision of VR services that maintain healthy lifestyles, and one concerning the provision of VR services that support the development of consumer soft skills.

a. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by proactively working to recruit, hire, and retain qualified vocational rehabilitation counselors, thereby providing greater continuity and consistency in the provision of vocational rehabilitation services.

Agency Response: There is a national shortage of qualified vocational rehabilitation counselors, and the agency is engaging in maximum efforts to recruit, hire, and retain qualified vocational rehabilitation counselors. The agency currently has 75 percent of its VR Counselor positions filled, and is actively working to fill the remaining vacancies.

b. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by providing appropriate vocational rehabilitation services to the growing population of older workers, many of whom will be unable or unwilling to retrain for work in a field different from their current occupations, thereby enabling these older workers to become or remain successfully employed.

Agency Response: The Commission is committed to serve the increasing population of older workers. The aging population has resulted in an aging workforce, and 50 percent of workers report that they plan on working beyond age 65. In addition, 25 percent of workers do not plan on retiring. These older workers will require an increasing amount of VR services to remain or become employed, and especially assistive technology services.

c. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by providing appropriate vocational rehabilitation services that support the maintaining of a healthy lifestyle that is conducive to becoming and remaining successfully employed, thereby enabling a greater portion of agency consumers to become and remain successfully employed.

Agency Response: The Commission recognizes that maintaining a healthy lifestyle can be conducive to obtaining and retaining an employment outcome, and will provide services designed to support healthy lifestyles when such services are necessary to obtaining and retaining employment. Healthy lifestyles are also essential during the pandemic, and the Commission will support consumers to make healthy decisions.

d. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by providing vocational rehabilitation training and counseling that is designed to enhance and improve the soft skills of consumers, which are becoming an increasing barrier to agency consumers becoming and remaining successfully employed.

Agency Response: The Commission recognizes that having appropriate soft skills is essential to obtaining and retaining employment, and that an increasing portion of consumers are deficient in their soft skills. The Commission will continue to use the Orientation Center and Skills Center to provide instruction in the area of soft skills, and will explore additional ways to enhance instruction in soft skills as a part of Pre-Employment Transition Services.

e. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by partnering and working with community colleges and One-Stop centers to more effectively utilize services available through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Adult, Dislocated Worker, Youth, and Wagner-Peyser programs.

Agency Response: The agency recognizes the benefits of partnering and working with community colleges and One-Stop centers. The agency has been participating in monthly Workforce partner meetings that have enhanced the coordination between the Commission

and the partners. The Commission will continue to work cooperatively with the partners by designating specific points of contact, by providing appropriate information, and by entering into cooperative agreements where appropriate.

f. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by working cooperatively with the New Mexico Department of Health so as to develop opportunities for competitive and integrated employment for persons who are blind or visually impaired, which will be accomplished by working in partnership with the Medical Assistance Division, the Developmental Disabilities Supports Division, and the Behavioral Health Services Division.

Agency Response: The agency will work cooperatively with the Department of Health, with the Medical Assistance Division, with the Developmental Disabilities Supports Division, and with the Behavioral Health Services Division. The agency will designate specific points of contact for each of these entities, will provide information as appropriate, and will enter into a cooperative agreement with the Department of Health.

g. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by using the Orientation Center to provide employment preparation training for adults and transition students, including through the addition of an apartment training facility to be constructed adjacent to the Center. The proposed apartment facility will increase the capacity of the Orientation Center, will enable the Orientation Center to provide more realistic training, will eliminate the need to rent costly and less appropriate private apartments, and will reduce the number of instances in which costly out-of-state training will be necessary to meet the needs of consumers.

Agency Response: Construction of the apartment complex was delayed by the pandemic, but construction has begun, and the apartment complex is scheduled to be completed in November of 2021.

h. Increase the number of consumers served through enhanced Outreach Activities; including media outreach, use of paid advertising, through increased collaboration with ophthalmologists and optometrists, and through the use of the Technology for Children program to conduct outreach to school districts.

Agency Response: The agency will continue to work to increase and enhance outreach to the identified groups using the recommended methods.

i. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes of transition consumers by providing enhanced Pre-Employment Transition Services, including assistive technology where appropriate as a part of an Individualized Plan for Employment, by providing assistive technology through the Technology for Children Program, by conducting increased outreach activities, by conducting educational activities to meet the specific needs of transition students, and by increasing proficient use of Braille and Braille math.

Agency Response: The agency will continue to work to increase services to Pre-Employment Transition Students. On January 28, 2020, the agency signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED). The MOA establishes a

formal interagency agreement as required by 34 CFR 361.22(e). The Agreement provides for methods of coordination between the agency and PED to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from the receipt of educational services, including pre-employment transition services, in school to the receipt of vocational rehabilitation services from the agency. These methods of coordination also facilitate the development and approval of an Individualized Plan for Employment as early as possible. The agency is also renewing its cooperative agreements with state and local educational officials. In addition, the agency has entered into a Governmental Services Agreement with the New Mexico School for the Blind and Visually Impaired to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services, and has entered into an Intergovernmental Agreement with the New Mexico Central Region Educational Cooperative to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services. These cooperative agreements will assist the agency to provide enhanced Pre-Employment Transition Services.

j. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes achieved by consumers by providing services in a way that genuinely honors the "informed choice" provisions of the Rehabilitation Act, enabling Commission consumers to have the opportunity to obtain employment at higher levels of compensation.

Agency Response: The agency continues to provide services in a way that enables consumers to set and obtain high employment goals. This often includes supporting consumers in the attainment of advanced degrees. For the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2020, the average starting hourly wage for agency consumers was \$21.68.

k. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes achieved by consumers by providing a quality and expanding Newsline system that gives consumers access to employment listings, business news, and other important information, including through both local Newsline and through NFB-Newsline.

Agency Response: The agency is committed to providing a quality Newsline service, including both local Newsline and NFB-Newsline. The agency will continue to sponsor NFB-Newsline in New Mexico, which provides access to over 400 national publications. The agency will also continue to support local Newsline, which provides access to newspaper information that is not available on NFB-Newsline.

l. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by innovatively using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers and potential vocational rehabilitation consumers, including using it for provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services.

Agency Response: The agency is committed to using the Skills Center to meet the statewide needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers, and especially consumers receiving Pre-Employment Transition Services. As a result, the agency used the Skills Center to provide virtual and limited in-person Orientation & Mobility training to participants in the Students in Transition to Employment Program. The Skills Center was used during the year to provide training to individual students, and was used as a meeting place for programs related to

vocational rehabilitation. The agency will continue to use the Skills Center to provide these services, including a virtual Unified English Braille workshop later in 2020.

m. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes for consumers who are Deaf-Blind through collaboration and partnership with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, with the Community Outreach Programs for the Deaf, and with the Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, including through the delivery of assistive technology to consumers who are Deaf-Blind.

Agency Response: The agency has a vocational rehabilitation counselor who takes the lead on services related to consumers who are Deaf-Blind. The agency also works with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to coordinate provision of services to persons who are Deaf-Blind. The agency works with a variety of other partners, including the Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Community Outreach Program for the Deaf, the Helen Keller National Center, and the Deaf-Blind Task Force. The agency has worked on communication access issues with the Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing during the pandemic, and will continue this close partnership.

n. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes through the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) by shortening the time required for vendors to complete the required training, including by using Randolph-Sheppard Act training offered by the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Agency Response: The agency has opened the Business Enterprise Program to new vendors. The agency also has adopted the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired as the training provider for BEP vendors. The Business Enterprise Program has been hit especially hard by the pandemic, and the agency is hoping that the state and national economy will improve and allow for additional opportunities in the Business Enterprise Program.

o. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by strengthening administrative services so as to timely and accurately submit federal reports, to assure compliance with all applicable fiscal regulations, and to comply with all applicable accounting standards.

Agency Response: The agency recognizes the need to have strong fiscal programs so as to maximize the receipt of federal funds, and to otherwise provide appropriate vocational rehabilitation services to our consumers. The agency proactively works to make sure that the agency is in compliance with applicable fiscal regulations, including through the adoption of the agency Allowable Cost Policy and Procedure. As a result of the pandemic, the agency has added a new section to the Allowable Cost Policy and Procedure on operations during times of emergency.

p. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by enhancing overall performance and productivity by engaging in activities designed to mitigate and ameliorate the impacts of blindness and visual impairment, and by engaging in outreach and other activities designed to identify additional potential consumers, and by making the public and medical community more aware of Commission services.

Agency Response: The agency is engaging in new and innovative approaches to provide services and conduct outreach. The agency is in the process of redesigning its web page, and will include provisions for referrals to be made by health care professionals, and the web page enables members of the public to sign up to automatically be emailed meeting notices, agendas, and minutes.

q. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes for consumers by providing enhanced benefits counseling and guidance to reduce concerns related to the loss or reduction of benefits.

Agency Response: The Commission continues to provide benefits counseling and guidance through the New Mexico Legal Aid Society. The agency has also provided training on benefits to vocational rehabilitation counselors and consumers.

100TH ANNIVERSARY OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

The year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the public vocational rehabilitation program. The following article appeared as a Guest Column in the Albuquerque Journal on June 29, 2020:

NM ready for next 100 years of vocational rehabilitation By Greg Trapp / Executive Director, New Mexico Commission for the Blind and Diane Mourning Brown / Executive Director, New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

The month of June marks the 100th anniversary of the public vocational rehabilitation program. The vocational rehabilitation program is a state and federal partnership that provides services to enable individuals with disabilities to become or remain employed. Vocational rehabilitation services in New Mexico are provided by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and by the Commission for the Blind. Each year, over 7,000 New Mexicans with disabilities become employed as a result of receiving vocational rehabilitation services, enabling these individuals to obtain employment that is consistent with their "unique strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests and informed choice. The first vocational rehabilitation laws were passed during World War I and designed to provide vocational rehabilitation services to wounded soldiers and sailors. The most significant of these laws was the Smith-Sears Veterans Rehabilitation Act, which was passed in 1918. These laws were very successful, and two years later Congress expanded the vocational rehabilitation program to include civilians. The result was the National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act, which President Woodrow Wilson signed on June 2, 1920. In the ensuing 100 years, the vocational rehabilitation program has grown to become an inclusive program that has transformed the lives of millions of Americans with disabilities. While the National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act was a momentous step forward, it only included persons with physical disabilities. The law did not include persons with mental health impairments, and it did not include persons who were blind. The exclusion of persons who were blind is especially ironic because World War I saw large numbers of soldiers blinded by bursting shells as they peered over their trenches, or by mustard or chlorine gas. The attitude prevailing at the time was that persons who were blind were too disabled to be able to benefit from vocational rehabilitation services. It was not until World War II that Congress expanded the law to include individuals who were blind or had mental health impairments. As we are seeing with other parts of our society, the vocational rehabilitation program has also struggled with the consequences of systemic and institutional racism. According to a 1938 study, African-Americans were less likely to be accepted for vocational rehabilitation services and less likely to be successfully employed. These results have been replicated in studies in the '80s and '90s, and in even more recent studies that have shown African-Americans and other minority groups were less likely to be accepted for services than persons from non-minority backgrounds. Because of this history, the vocational rehabilitation program conducts comprehensive assessments of the needs of "individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the vocational rehabilitation program. The goal is to make sure that the vocational rehabilitation program is an inclusive and empowering program for all persons, including people of color. Because of this, providing services that are inclusive

to people of color is a high priority for the vocational rehabilitation program here in New Mexico. When the National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act was passed, the nation was still recovering from the ravages of the 1918 flu. Just as certainly as the state recovered from that flu, New Mexico will also recover from the coronavirus. The vocational rehabilitation program will be an essential partner in the recovery as we will be serving individuals with disabilities who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Some individuals who have recovered may also incur a disability due to COVID-19, and require vocational rehabilitation services to regain employment. Fortunately, the proactive efforts of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham have reduced the number of persons infected with coronavirus. As we move into our next hundred years, the vocational rehabilitation program will continue to grow and improve, and will empower all persons with disabilities to reach their full potential.

Expenditures on Consumer Services - Federal Fiscal Year 2020

Vocational Rehabilitation Consumers \$1,045,696

Independent Living Consumers \$56,467

Note: The foregoing amounts reflect the cost of items and services that are purchased for vocational rehabilitation and independent living consumers. They also reflect the relatively small amount of Federal independent living funds that the commission receives. They also do not reflect the costs associated with attendance at the Orientation Center; training provided by Independent Living Teachers; training provided by Technology Specialists; counseling and guidance provided by Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors; technology provided by the Technology for Children program; participation in the Business Enterprise Program; or use of Newsline for the Blind. Finally, the independent living amount does not include the 49 video magnifiers provided during the year, which are the most expensive assistive technology item provided by the IL program. The video magnifiers are purchased in bulk to reduce costs.