

Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Public Meeting, Saturday, February 5, 2022
Video Conference/Zoom

Minutes

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

Mark Bulger, Chair of the Board of Commissioners, called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m. The meeting began with introductions.

Commissioners present: Mark Bulger, Chairperson, Designee of the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska, Omaha; Kimberly Scherbarth, Vice Chairperson, Designee of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska, Kearney; Brent Heyen, Executive Secretary, Lincoln; Cheryl Livingston, Lincoln; Linda Mentink, Columbus.

Staff present: Carlos Serván, Executive Director; Carol Jenkins, Deputy Director of Services; Connie Daly, Lincoln District Supervisor; Kat Carroll, Deputy Director of Finance; Nancy Flearl, Omaha District Supervisor; Jessica Bartenbach, Center Supervisor; Eric Buckwalter, NBE Coordinator; Dave Robinson, NBE Administrative Programs Officer; Kathy Stephens, Administrative Technician.

Public present: Robert Newman, Omaha; Sandy Alvarado, Omaha, Jeremy Richey, Lincoln; Jim Jirak, Omaha; Mikayla Kelly, Omaha; Mackenzie Vielhauer, Omaha; Brianna Baumberger, Omaha.

The Notice of the Meeting was published in the Lincoln Journal Star, the State Government Calendar, NCBVI Website, NFB Newslines® and Radio Talking Book. The Notice was also sent to ACBN, NFBN, and the NCBVI List Serve.

Chair Bulger welcomed NCBVI's two new commissioners to the Board. They are Cheryl Livingston and Linda Mentink. It was noted that NCBVI commissioners are selected by the Governor.

Commissioner Livingston stated that it is a pleasure to serve on the Board of Commissioners. She noted that she worked for NCBVI for 21 years and retired in March 2020. Cheryl noted that she is also a former client of NCBVI. Cheryl stated that she is also very active in the National Federation of the Blind. She serves as the treasurer of the state affiliate and of the Senior Division of NFBN. Cheryl noted that she is not the NCBVI designee of the NFB; that is Kimberly Scherbarth. Cheryl stated that she is here to serve the consumers and help NCBVI do its work.

Commissioner Mentink stated that she is also pleased to serve as a NCBVI commissioner. Linda stated that she currently lives in Columbus, Nebraska, but was born and raised in Wisconsin. She went to the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped. She was born 2 ½ months premature and had a twin sister. Linda noted that she has been blind her entire life. She moved to Nebraska in August 2004 to teach music and work with the choir at Bible Baptist Christian School and Church. She is also a private music teacher. She joined the NFB in 1975 when she was a college student. Since 2005, she has served as the secretary for the NFB in Communities of Faith Division and she is the secretary of the Senior Division in Nebraska. She is also on the State Board and is the president of the NFBN Columbus Area Chapter, which was formed in 2017.

Approval of the November 6, 2021 public meeting minutes.

Commissioner Scherbarth moved to approve the Minutes of the November 6, 2021 Commission Meeting. Commissioner Heyen seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken. All commissioners voted in favor of the motion.

Report from the Commissioners

Kimberly Scherbarth – Kimberly reported that she attended a virtual NFB Braille Literacy and Learning program planning meeting. They are also currently coordinating programs for the Summer programs such as the At-Home Edition which will also be virtual. Kimberly noted that some states are choosing to have their own state programs. Kimberly noted that she works at the University of Kearney in the Disability Services Program. She attended the NFB Fall seminar and talked about NFB Newslines.

Brent Heyen – Brent reported that he works as a blind manager at a hotel and he demonstrates the abilities of a blind person every day. Brent noted that for the past two weeks he has been the Acting General Manager for the hotel.

Mark Bulger – Mark reported that he currently serves as the President of the American Council of the Blind of Nebraska (ACBN). Mark announced that ACB of Nebraska will be the host committee for the ACB National Conference which will be held in Omaha at the Hilton Hotel and the CHI Convention Center. The Conference will be held July 1-8, 2022. Mark noted that there will be individuals from all across the country coming to this Conference so it will be a big event. They have been meeting weekly to prepare. Mark also reported that he serves as the President of the Omaha Association of the Blind and he has been attending monthly virtual meetings. Mark also serves on the Board of Directors for the Share-A-Fare cab subsidy for the visually impaired.

Cheryl Livingston – Cheryl reported that she has been active in the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) since 1975 and that she has held a lot of positions within the Federation. She has been the Treasurer since 1988. She attended the virtual Quarterly Board meeting in January and gave a Treasurer's Report. Cheryl stated that she is also a member of the Lincoln Chapter of NFB. Their next meeting will be in February. She is a member of the NFB Senior Division and serves as Treasurer. Cheryl reported that she retired from NCBVI and she currently works at the CAT House as a volunteer. Cheryl noted that she has three foster cats.

Linda Mentink – Linda reported that she is the Vice President of the Friends of the Commission. They had a meeting last Tuesday and they held elections. The Treasurer is Joe Buda, the President is Robert Newman and the Secretary is Christine Boone. The Friends of the Commission is working to get more grants for NCBVI. Linda noted that she is in the process of getting an iPad from NCBVI for doing her work as a NCBVI commissioner.

Focus Topic: Nebraska Business Enterprise Program (Presented by Eric Buckwalter, NBE Coordinator)

Background

Understanding the need for there to be more remunerative employment and self-support options for individuals experiencing blindness; Representative Jennings Randolph (D-WV) and Senator Morris Sheppard (D-TX) championed legislation to make it federal law for blind persons to be given priority to operate vending facilities on federal property. The legislation, still known today as the *Randolph Sheppard Act*, 20 U.S.C. § 107 et seq., passed both houses and was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 20, 1936.

Thirty-eight years later, in 1974, the now Senator Randolph again supported the Act and pushed through many needed updates and amendments. These amendments passed into law on December 7, 1974. Among notable individuals involved in assisting Senator Randolph shape the amendments were Durward McDaniel, American Council for the Blind; Irving Schloss, American Foundation for the Blind; and John Nagle, National Federation of the Blind.

The 1974 amendments shaped the Act we know today and included:

- Expansion of the opportunities for blind vendors.
- Entitlement of blind vendors and State Licensing Agencies (SLA) to income from vending machines on federal property.
- Provides full due process to aggrieved blind vendors, which enables them to resolve disputes with their respective SLAs through hearings, arbitrations, and federal court of appeals.
- Creation of elected committees of blind vendors in each state with a Randolph-Sheppard program; with the responsibility to represent all blind vendors in their state SLA.
- Establishing a priority (rather than a preference that existed previously) for the operation of vending facilities on all federal property by blind vendors.

Today, the Randolph-Sheppard Act is under national management and support from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) under the US Department of Education. Across the nation, there are nearly 2,500 blind individuals who own and operate their own businesses because of the groundwork laid in 1936.

Many states, including Nebraska, that have Randolph-Sheppard Act programs also have state laws, known colloquially as 'Mini Randolph-Sheppard Acts', that give the same priorities offered on federal property to state and local governmental properties. Brought forth during the 2019 legislative session as LB 220 by Senator Anna Wishart (27); Nebraska's 'Mini Randolph-Sheppard Act' was signed into law on May 29, 2019. With the exception of Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and University of Nebraska properties, this gives the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI), Nebraska's SLA, the ability to have priority in providing vending and cafeteria facilities in federal, state, and local governmental properties in Nebraska without being required to bid on contracts.

Nationally, Randolph-Sheppard Act programs are most commonly known as Business Enterprise Programs (BEP). In fact, many states simply use their state name followed by BEP. In Nebraska, NCBVI puts a slight spin on that name and refers to our program as Nebraska Business Enterprises.

Current Status and COVID-19 Implications

At the present time, NBE program has ninety-eight sites containing nearly three hundred vending machines. Of these ninety-eight sites, sixty are operated by fourteen individuals; each operating their own unique small business. Thirteen of these individuals are Licensed Vendors and one is currently in training. For the sake of simplicity, the word Vendor in this report refers to all

individuals, licensed or in training, servicing one or more locations. A list of the locations can be found in Appendix A at the end of this report.

The remaining thirty-eight sites that are held under contract by the NBE program are sub-contracted out for operation and servicing. The NBE program never wants to miss an opportunity to obtain additional vending sites. This means NBE will sub-contract out vending sites in order to hold these sites; until we have a Vendor available to service them.

A recent change in federal regulations by the RSA no longer permits state SLAs to directly sub-contract out sites on federal property. Currently, NBE does sub-contract with several different companies to serve sites on federal property, and this presents a change coming to the NBE program in 2022. For the most part, the sites we sub-contract are smaller sites and/or are in locations where NBE does not currently have a Vendor available to serve them. NBE finds it difficult to fill vacancies in smaller sites, most of which are smaller United States Postal Service (USPS) sites, as the low-volume of sales, coupled with requiring the use of a reader/driver to access, make it less ideal from a profitability standpoint for a Vendor to operate. The sites that NBE currently sub-contracts that are on federal property will be put out for bid to current Vendors in early 2022. There are three possible outcomes once this occurs:

- 1) A Vendor takes over a site(s) and services the site(s) as part of their operation.
- 2) A Vendor takes over a site(s) and sub-contracts the site(s) and receives the commission from these site(s). This is permissible under the new RSA regulations.
- 3) No Vendor takes over these site(s) and NBE relinquishes the contract on the site.

The vending machine and cafeteria businesses run by NBE Vendors are part of what is known as the Convenience Service Industry (CSI). This industry contains any services intended to ease accessibility and save resources for consumers. It can range from on-site vending machines and micro markets, office coffee/pantry service, to full cafeteria services. It should not be too surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic has hit this segment of the economy very hard.

Nationwide, service providers who primarily served locations with essential workers or manufacturing held steady in revenue generated, and in some cases increased total sales. This can be attributed to employees finding it safe to stay in one location, rather than venturing out during breaks. However, operations that serve office locations, professional sites, and public venues saw a significant decrease in revenue. Many federal, state, and private businesses moved their staff to working remotely from home; thereby directly contributing to the fall in sales at vending machines, micro markets, and cafeterias in these buildings. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the Randolph-Sheppard Act, a majority of NBE locations, fell into this category.

As of December 2020, it was reported that nationwide up to 71% of office workers were working from home who had previously been in an office setting. As recently as the summer of 2021, some of these workers were still waiting on word of when their office would return to 'normal' status. This rise in the Delta variant, and now more recently Omicron, led to further delays in of these returns; or places of employment again returning to remote or hybrid-remote work situations. While NBE does not have exact numbers for the federal and state agencies our Vendors service, sales during this time seem to indicate the numbers closely match the nationally reported numbers.

NBE has learned that national data shows that many federal, state, and private businesses are showing success with a remote work setup, leading to some suggestion that an office that is filled with seventy percent of its pre-pandemic workforce should be considered the new one hundred percent. Indeed, the federal Government Services Administration (GSA), the federal agency that

oversees Randolph-Sheppard contracts with federal government agencies, suggested strongly this summer at a nationwide meeting of BEP staff that across the country it should not come as a surprise if federal office spaces were only at sixty percent of the capacity they were at before the pandemic. GSA reported that a remote work situation for federal staff has been something they have been looking at and working towards for several years; the pandemic simply sped up this process.

With a decline in people working from the office and restricted traveling the CSI saw a drop in revenue nationwide from \$24.4 billion in 2019 to just \$13.3 billion in 2020 (2021 numbers have yet to be reported). That is a drop of 54.4% and essentially erased a steady decade long climb in revenue.

With seventy-five percent of CSI operations seeing a decline in 2020 of between ten and seventy percent of their previous years revenue, NBE and the Vendors can be considered fortunate. Total NBE gross revenue from all Vendors in 2019 topped out at just over \$1.1 million dollars. In 2020, revenue fell to just below \$800 thousand dollars; a drop of thirty percent. This places NBE and the Vendors in the lower fifty percent of the scale of percentage of revenue lost. So, while Vendors certainly felt the pinch, it could have been a lot worse. While NBE is currently still figuring out exact totals for 2021, it looks like gross revenue from all Vendors will again be around the \$1.1 million dollar mark.

The single biggest thing that saved NBE and the Vendors from experiencing bigger losses was that fifty percent of Vendors actually saw an increase in sales from 2019 to 2020. This was due to several factors. The first, and biggest contribution, was that NBE was able to bring twelve new sites into the program during this year. Many of these sites were included in the acquisition of many of the Nebraska Department of Corrections (NDOC) facilities across the state. While these sites did not perform as well as could be hoped; due to lack of inmate visitation during the first wave of the pandemic and later on visitation without allowing food and drink, the income from inmates and NDOC employees provided a significant boost to 2020 revenue. Across the industry sixty percent of CSI operations reported losing sites in 2020, while twenty-seven percent reported remaining steady. This placed NBE in the only thirteen percent of operations that gained locations.

The second factor the increased sales, while smaller, is no less significant. New Vendors to the NBE program took over existing sites from retiring or exiting Vendors, and quite frankly just did a better job of managing those sites. The better management practices were easily seen in the increase in sales at these locations, despite less foot traffic in the locations.

The smallest contribution to the increase in sales can be traced to NBE being able to allocate funds to purchase new vending machines for several locations. The machines that were chosen for replacement were in some cases nearing thirty years old. The simple act of replacing aging equipment with new machines enhances the attractiveness of the vending location and can be credited with drawing more customers to them.

New locations, changes in Vendors, and new machines aside; the biggest contribution to the success of making the best of 2020 goes to the Vendors themselves. The NBE Vendors worked hard during 2020 and 2021 to adjust their operational plans and make the best of the situation, always striving to meet the needs of their customers.

More than vending services, contract foodservice suffered in 2020. While a decline in this segment of the market has been a trend for several years, 2020 saw a seventy percent decline from 2019.

This, of course, is due to limited populations in the workplace; or in some cases outright elimination of these services all together. This decrease was certainly felt among the few Vendors who provide contract food and/or cafeteria-style options. Of those who offered this service; one drastically cut back options and three ceased offerings completely. The three who ceased operations of this style of service have yet to restart; and it remains to be seen if they will. The contracts NBE holds for contract foodservice in these locations are separate from the vending contracts; and in many cases are not large profit making ventures.

By The Numbers

In 2020, across the industry, around twenty-four percent of the vending machines in the country were in manufacturing facilities; NBE by contrast had just 3% of our machines in these types of facilities. Industry wide, the next highest percentage of types of facilities served was office locations with just over twenty-two percent of machines. NBE had over half (53%) of our machines in office settings. This is not surprising as NBE holds a majority of our contracts in federal and state office locations. Most manufacturing is in private business, where NBE currently has little presence. NBE also has twenty-two percent of our total machines at rest stops along Interstate 80 (I-80); for which there is no direct category.

Other types of common locations for vending services where NBE has a presence made up smaller portions of our total:

- K-12 Schools: 7.1% (NBE 1%)
- Hospitals: 7.4% (NBE 3%)
- Correctional Facilities: 3.6% (NBE 14%)
- Military Bases: 4.2% (NBE 4%)

In 2021 NBE added its first micro market to our lineup of services. This location is at a DHHS office in Omaha. Currently, this location is being operated by a sub-contractor with commissions going to a Vendor.

While we are only beginning to dip our toes into this segment of the industry there are some exciting trends to be aware of. Overall, micro markets lost less revenue than traditional vending locations in 2020; and a higher percentage gained revenue. Part of this is the result of there being more flexibility with micro markets to provide better options when supplementing or eliminating contract or cafeteria foodservice options. Many in the industry see micro markets as being a way to replace these manual foodservice options; especially at smaller sites where full foodservice is an ever decreasing option. NBE does share this view. NBE has approached several of our sites, where micro markets would make a good fit, with the suggestion that we switch their service to that of a micro market style. Unfortunately, at this time, all of those sites have declined a switch, choosing to stay with their current vending machine model.

By machine type across the industry packaged cold drink vending machines and ambient snack machines were the most widely operated in 2020. The number of coffee, refrigerated, and frozen vending machines continued their several year decline in terms of sales and as a percentage of operations equipment mixes. However, the sales of fresh and frozen food did increase across the nation at micro markets.

Percentage of machine type by operations mix:

- Cold beverage: 41% (NBE 28.6%)
- Ambient snack: 40.8% (NBE 38.9%)
- Refrigerated food: 11.4% (NBE 24%)

- Hot beverage: 2.4% (NBE 5.9%)
- Frozen food: 2.6% (NBE 2.4%)

NBE's percentage of cold beverage machines does skew a little lower than the industry average. A significant percentage of NBE machines are inside the NDOC system; where we hold the snack/food vending machine contract; but do not yet hold the beverage contract. This does help to explain some of the gap.

The percentage of refrigerated machines in our mix is almost twice the industry average. But, it is important to note that again many of these machines are inside the NDCO system, where a captive audience makes these types of machines more ideal. Twenty of these types of machines are also used as ambient snack machines along I-80; where they are needed to keep items from melting in the summer. Due to the small size of some NBE sites; cold food machines are used occasionally as combo machines for ambient snacks and cold beverages dispensing from the same machine. That being said, NBE is aware of the discrepancy in the number of cold machines in our mix compared to the average and will be exploring the efficacy of this.

Across the industry, cold beverage sales accounted for twenty-three percent of vending machine sales and ambient snack machines made up around forty percent. Hot beverages totaled just under four percent of sales, while frozen food made up just under two percent. A catch all category of 'other' made up around seventeen percent.

While NBE does not currently track sales at this level, we do know Vendor sales of hot beverages, frozen items, and cold food items are low and have been decreasing in recent years. These trends show that slow sales of these items is not isolated to our program. It is not a big secret that the SLA receives the most complaints from Vendors about these types of machines; and perhaps it is justified. While in most cases, NBE is contractually obligated to provide these types of machines; this is something the SLA can work on evaluating going forward when negotiating new contracts and renegotiating existing contracts. For example, one location recently gave the okay to remove the coffee vending machine from their facility, as they recognized it was not being utilized. In the meantime, the SLA will continue to look for ways to assist Vendors in making these machines as profitable as possible.

One thing the SLA has chosen to do recently as an experiment to try and help this situation is to purchase a type of coffee vending machine that we have not had before. In the past, NBE has only purchased coffee vending machines that use freeze dried coffee product. These machines are traditionally cheaper, product is cheaper, and they are slightly easier to maintain. During our recent round of machine purchases we bought a state-of-the-art fresh ground coffee vending machine for the State Capitol. This machine features a twenty-one inch touchscreen, more options for 'fancy' coffee drinks, and uses fresh ground coffee. The SLA connected the Vendor with a local coffee roasting company to provide the fresh ground coffee; making the 'buy local' connection with the machine as well. The coffee in this machine, while more expensive for both the Vendor and the customer, is of higher quality and it shows in the drinks the machine produces. While it has only been in service for a few weeks the response from customers seems to be positive. The Vendor has reported selling almost as much coffee in the past few weeks as they did in the past six months.

Expansion and Growth

Currently, the NBE program is in a position to expand. In addition to the new sites opened in 2020, NBE opened five new sites in 2021. In 2022 we have already opened one new site at the new

Drug Enforcement Administration office in Omaha. The SLA is also tracking the possibility of new sites in Lincoln City office locations in 2022, as their current contract is coming up for bid in the fall. Looking further in the future, the SLA is already talking to GSA about the new USDA office that will be opening in Lincoln in 2023.

With the seeming trend of federal and state agencies to being open to moving to having more of their employees working from home; advice from leaders in the BEP community stress that state SLAs should not be beholden to the traditional model of working solely with federal and state agencies covered by Randolph-Sheppard laws. That the future of successful BEPs lay in being open to working with more private industries. Currently, NBE works with only four private businesses; The Atrium Building in Lincoln; Wilson Trailer, OnTrac Messenger Service, and American Fence, all in Grand Island.

NBE is very interested in expanding into working with more private businesses. However, this will require some changes in mindset from which we have traditionally operated. First, many private businesses are used to receiving a commission on vending sales in their buildings; something our Vendors are not used to paying. Second, competition is higher in the private sector, especially in the Lincoln and Omaha areas where large national operations have a strong foothold. Neither of these barriers are insurmountable with strategic planning. The third, and possibly biggest barrier, is the number of Vendors currently in the program. The average age of our current Vendors skew to the older side of the workforce; with quite a few looking at retirement in the next five to ten years. NBE needs to attract young, entrepreneurially minded consumers to move into the program in order to grow; and even, quite frankly, in order to maintain what we are currently doing. The problem of finding young talent to join BEPs is not isolated to Nebraska, across the country other programs are facing the same issue.

At the end of 2021 NBE was chosen as a part of the agency that would be allowed to use a vacant staff position to grow our full-time staff to three. The two current full-time staff members are extremely excited to welcome a third member to our team. This new role, classified as an Orientation Counselor II, will allow us to grow our program and to better serve our Vendors. Among other things, adding this third person will allow NBE to:

- Bring more machine repairs in house; saving money on contracted repairs and speeding up the efficiency and timeliness of machine repairs.
- Expand efforts by NBE staff to work one-on-one with Vendors on small business management to increase the efficiency and profitability of their businesses.
- Devote more time to generating conversations with federal and state agencies, as well as private businesses on bringing our services to their employees; including the possibility of increasing our service offerings to micro markets, Office Coffee Service (OCS), and Office Pantry Service (OPS), and other segments of the industry.
- Increase our efforts to train Vendors on servicing and maintaining their own machines; teaching best practices on making sure machines are clean and well maintained.
- Increase our efforts to keep and improve Vendor and SLA relations by holding more formal and informal training and conversations around the state of NBE and the state of the industry as a whole; allowing Vendors to grow their businesses as they learn from one another.
- Improve upon the training and service documentation we provide to Vendors.
- Increase our outreach to younger consumers; introducing them to the NBE program and possibilities they have to thrive owning their own businesses.

- Spend more time focusing on data driven metrics, allowing NBE staff to see and make informed decisions about machine placement, negotiation of contracts, and providing information to Vendors on good choices for product placement in machines.

New in 2020/2021

In 2021 NBE was able to purchase sixty-five new vending machines. Included in this purchase was a replacement for every single snack machine at all of our I-80 rest area sites, twenty machines in total. With this replacement very few, if any, of our vending machines are older than five years. This means that NBE should be expending less money on major repair and maintenance costs for the next five to ten years. This acquisition also means that the SLA staff will be placing a higher emphasis on Vendors to keep machines clean and well maintained. New vending machines are a large investment. Keeping machines clean and well maintained increases their longevity. This is secondary to a clean and well maintained machine being more attractive to customers.

The replacement of so many machines also means that NBE is no longer using as many machines owned by third parties. Up until this purchase, NBE was using machines in several places owned by either Coca-Cola or Pepsi. These companies were providing us the machines to use free of charge, in exchange for purchasing product directly from them, and not placing competing products in the machine. Moving away from third party machines gives Vendors more freedom and control over what products go into a machine. This is beneficial as several products from each major manufacturer are more sought after by customers. Depending on the manufacturer non-soda products; tea, coffee beverages, etc., are also more cost effective. NBE will continue at this time to use third party machines provided by Coca-Cola at I-80 rest areas and for a majority of the machines at the STRATCOM building on Offutt Air Force Base.

Another large project in 2020 and 2021 by the SLA was to attach credit card readers to almost every machine where they are permitted and appropriate. The few remaining machines that are appropriate for credit card readers but do not yet have them will receive them in 2022. This places NBE into what has quickly become an industry necessity, where almost ninety percent of operations across the country have some form of cashless transactions available on their machines. Cashless transactions at CSI locations now make up over fifty percent of sales; and that number is on the rise – especially since COVID-19 has made even more customers less apt to use cash and coin.

Future work with our credit card processing company includes bringing all of the devices in the program under a master agreement (currently while all devices are owned by NCBVI, each is registered to a unique Vendor). This will give NBE staff the ability to assign and reassign credit card devices ourselves, saving transfer fees; a costly and time consuming process. It will also give NBE staff access to valuable financial and sales data to allow us to see how well sites are performing and what we might be able to do to support a Vendor in those locations. The credit card devices also can let NBE staff see what errors a machine is showing; allowing better planning for repairs before heading to the location.

Another major component the SLA will be exploring in 2022 is the use of Vending Management Systems (VMS). This is a quickly growing trend that nearly forty percent of the industry is already utilizing to some capacity. Although there is an additional cost per month that would be incurred, a VMS would allow Vendors (and SLA staff), to see how much of an individual product has sold in their machine(s) between visits from their computer or phone. This would allow them to plan and place orders; helping with inventory management. For Vendors who do not have onsite storage at a location, it would also allow them to package, or pre-kit as it is referred to in the industry, the

proper amount of product before visiting a site. Saving time and money by decreasing the amount of trips to a site, or taking excess product with them when traveling.

Into the Future

The current SLA staff is very comfortable with how our program sits compared to national trends and industry data; as well as our relationship with NBE's Elected Committee of Blind Vendors. While we are comfortable, we are always looking for ways to grow and to improve. The Convenience Service Industry is growing and changing at a rapid pace. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the industry to adapt; things that will probably never go back to what was normal. It is the SLAs goal to change and adapt too; working with Vendors to provide top of the line service to customers. The following are just some items that SLA staff are thinking about as we move toward a 'new normal':

- How do we engage and retain customers in the digital age?
- How do we meet the rising consumer expectations?
- In a time of seemingly unlimited options, how do Vendors build loyalty to their machines and other services?
 - o Society is now more connected than ever, breakrooms are no longer the captive audiences they once were; what can be done to stay relevant?
- How do we make transactions as "frictionless as possible"?:
 - o Once a consumer has experienced frictionless transactions one place, they expect it everywhere,
- How can Vendors fill their machines with as little overhead as possible?
- How do we engage with private sector businesses and convince them to use NBE services?
- How do we bring young, engaged, and capable young consumers into the NBE program?

The past two years have been incredibly challenging for the NBE program; first and foremost for our Vendors. They all are to be commended for their effort and dedication to their craft. It is with their hard work that NBE was able to maintain, preserve, and suffer as little as we did during this time.

Appendix A

Sites by Location

Columbus Locations

Nebraska DHHS	State	Sub-Contracted
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Geneva Locations

Nebraska DHHS	State	Licensed Vendor
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Grand Island Locations

American Fence Company	Private	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska Law Enforcement Training Center	State	Sub-Contracted
OnTrac Messenger Service	Private	Sub-Contracted
USDA Farm Services	Federal	Sub-Contracted
USPS Grand Island Main	Federal	Sub-Contracted
Wilson Trailer	Private	Sub-Contracted

Hastings Locations

USPS Hastings Main	Federal	Sub-Contracted
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Interstate 80 Locations

Brady East/West Rest Areas	State	Vendor Trainee
Cozad East/West Rest Areas	State	Vendor Trainee
Goehner West Truck Parking Area	State	Vendor Trainee
Grand Island East/West Rest Areas	State	Sub-Contracted
Kearney East/West Rest Areas	State	Sub-Contracted
Melia Hill West Rest Area	State	Licensed Vendor
Milford East Rest Area	State	Licensed Vendor
Ogallala East/West Rest Areas	State	Vendor Trainee
Platte River East Rest Area	State	Licensed Vendor
Sidney East/West Rest Areas	State	Vendor Trainee
Sutherland East/West Rest Areas	State	Vendor Trainee
York East/West Rest Areas	State	Licensed Vendor

Lincoln Locations

501 Building	State	Licensed Vendor
The Atrium Building; Basement	Private	Licensed Vendor
Denny Federal Building	Federal	Licensed Vendor
Executive Building	State	Licensed Vendor
National Guard Base; Joint Forces	Federal	Licensed Vendor
National Guard Base; Warehouse	Federal	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska Dept. Administrative Services; 1526 K St.	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska Dept. Environment and Energy	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DHHS Whitehall Administration Building	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DHHS Whitehall Call Center	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DOC Administration Building	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DOC Community Corrections	State	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska DOC Correction Center	State	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska DOC Cornhusker State Industries	State	Licensed Vendor

Nebraska DOC Diagnostic and Evaluation Center	State	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska DOC Staff Training Academy	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DOC State Penitentiary; CERT	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DOC State Penitentiary; Front Entrance, Warehouse	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DOC State Penitentiary; Visiting, Staff Dining, RTC	State	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska DOT; 1500 Building	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DOT; "The Hill" Building	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DOT; Materials and Testing Lab	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska Public Service Commission	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska State Capitol Building	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska State Lab Services	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska State Office Building	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska State Patrol Administration Building	State	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska Transportation Services Bureau Building	State	Licensed Vendor
USCIS Government Office	Federal	Licensed Vendor
USCIS Nebraska Immigration Services Center	Federal	Licensed Vendor
USPS Bair Ave.	Federal	Sub-Contracted
USPS Calvert St.	Federal	Sub-Contracted
USPS Main Post Office	Federal	Licensed Vendor
USPS Red Rock Ln.	Federal	Sub-Contracted
USPS Van Dorn St.	Federal	Sub-Contracted
Veterans Administration Building	Federal	Licensed Vendor
Veterans Hospital CBOC	Federal	Licensed Vendor

Norfolk Locations

Norfolk Regional Center	State	Licensed Vendor
USPS Norfolk Main	Federal	Licensed Vendor

North Platte Locations

Adams Middle School	State	Sub-Contracted
Federal Building	Federal	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska State Office Building	State	Sub-Contracted
USPS Newberry Regional	Federal	Sub-Contracted

Omaha Locations

Douglas County Civic Center	State	Sub-Contracted
Drug Enforcement Administration	Federal	Licensed Vendor
Hruska Federal Courthouse	Federal	Licensed Vendor
Homeland Security Office	Federal	Licensed Vendor
National Parks Administration	Federal	Licensed Vendor
Nebraska DHHS Intake Center; Micro Market	State	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska DOC Community Corrections	State	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska DOC Correctional Youth Facility	State	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska DOC Correctional Center	State	Sub-Contracted
Nebraska State Office Building	State	Licensed Vendor
USPS Gold Coast Rd.	Federal	Licensed Vendor
USPS Maple St.	Federal	Sub-Contracted
USPS Meredith Ave.	Federal	Sub-Contracted
USPS N 102 nd St.	Federal	Sub-Contracted
USPS N Saddle Creek Rd.	Federal	Sub-Contracted

USPS Omaha Main	Federal	Sub-Contracted
USPS S 51 st St.	Federal	Sub-Contracted
Veterans Hospital; ACC	Federal	Licensed Vendor
Zorinsky Federal Building	Federal	Licensed Vendor

York Locations

Nebraska DOC Correctional Center for Women	State	Sub-Contracted
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Note

The data in this report that compares NBE figures to national figures and trends comes from the *Annual Report: State of the Industry* by Vending Market Watch (vendingmarketwatch.com), the publisher of *Automatic Merchandiser* magazine. For ease of comparison, the SLA calculated our figures by taking Vendor numbers as a whole. *Automatic Merchandiser's* stated methodology: "Data in *Automatic Merchandiser's* State of Industry report is compiled from a survey sent to operators in the spring. It collects responses from vending and micro market providers, as well as snack and soda operations. The State of the Industry report looks at performance results in major product categories."

Commissioner Livingston asked what a Micro Market is.

Eric Buckwalter noted that a Micro Market is a new trend in vending and they are similar to a small convenience store. Items are displayed on a rack and cold food items and drinks are stored in a cooler. Customers can pick out items and check out themselves, similar to a self-checkout at a store. With a Micro Market you can have a wider selection of items and you can have larger products for sale. Micro Markets are a little cheaper than using vending machines, but they have more service costs such as cameras.

Commissioner Scherbarth asked if there is a time period in which we can use a sub-contractor and not have a blind vendor operating a vending site.

Eric Buckwalter reported that when NBE subcontracts a site they usually do it for a one to two year period. After that, if NBE has a vendor who wants to operate the site, we will give it to them. Eric noted that NBE can no longer directly subcontract federal sites; however, a vendor can subcontract the site and collect a commission. Eric noted that NBE only subcontracts a site when there is not a vendor who is interested in operating it, and NBE wants to keep the site.

Chair Bulger noted that several years ago the Mini Randolph Sheppard law passed in the State of Nebraska. Commissioner Bulger asked if NBE now operates all the State owned buildings in Nebraska.

Eric Buckwalter reported that in Lincoln, NBE has most of the larger vending sites. Having a third NBE staff person will help them seek out the locations that NBE does not have. Eric noted that NBE is looking at some of the City of Lincoln vending sites, which will be open for bid this Fall.

Chair Bulger noted that NBE has some vendors that are fairly new and some that have been around for a while. Chair Bulger asked if NBE is actively seeking new vendors as some are nearing retirement age.

Eric Buckwalter reported NBE is okay at this time. The average age of a NBE vendor does lean towards the older end of the work force age group; and therefore, within the next five to ten years he does think that quite a few vendors may retire. Eric is hoping that some of our younger consumers take an interest in the NBE program so they can get trained and be ready to operate vending sites.

Two NBE vendors, Sandy Alvarado and Jeremy Richey, were present to talk about their experiences in the vending program and the sites they operate. Eric noted that Sandy Alvarado is currently the Chair of the Committee of Blind Vendors. Jeremy Richey is one of the newer vendors

and he began in the Spring of 2020. Eric stated that Jeremy persevered during the pandemic and has become one of NBE's top vendors.

Sandy Alvarado – Sandy reported that she has been in the vending program for approximately 12 years. Sandy stated that when she first started she had about 5 sites and then it went to about 15, all in the Omaha area. She noted that she currently has the site in the USSTRATCOM building at Offutt Air Force Base. At the USSTRATCOM site, there are 22 breakrooms and 42 machines. Sandy reported that her sites at USSTRATCOM do not close. She also has a new site in a Post Office Processing Center in Omaha.

Over the course of time, she went from not being a part of the Committee of Blind Vendors, then she became the secretary and is now the Chair. Sandy stated that she is very active with NCBVI. Sandy noted that during the pandemic, their SLA was very supportive. During the pandemic it was very important to manage inventory in order to avoid having expired product. Sandy stated that being a vendor involves more than just putting product into a vending machine. As a vendor, she needs to be aware of the trends in snacking. Sandy stated that she sometimes sends out surveys to see what type of product her consumers want. Vendors need to keep good records and send in their reports each month. Sandy reported that during their Committee meetings, they always have a training topic. This is beneficial for all the vendors.

Jeremy Richey – Jeremy reported that he currently serves 12 vending sites with about 50 machines. He has been with the vending program since April 2020. Jeremy stated that in a typical week he goes to visit his sites about two or three times. He fills the machines, checks inventory and orders product as needed. When filling machines it is important to follow the "first-in, first-out" rule in order to avoid having expired products in the machines. Jeremy stated that there is a lot of paperwork when completing all the reports.

Chair Bulger asked how much the pandemic affected the vending business. Jeremy stated that at the beginning, the pandemic was a big issue because there were so many unknowns about the virus. Cleaning crews came in a lot to wipe down machines. As more was learned about the virus, things got easier.

Chair Bulger thanked Eric Buckwalter, Dave Robinson, Sandy Alvarado and Jeremy Richey for presenting today.

Break

A break was taken at 10:20 a.m. The meeting resumed at 10:30 a.m.

Public Comment Period

Robert Newman – Robert noted that he is the President of the Friends of the Commission. They currently have three openings for individuals to serve on the Board of the Friends of the Commission and so they are looking to get those positions filled. Robert reported that Jan Brandt, who is a former NCBVI staff member, joined the Friends of the Commission. She brings with her some good research skills. Robert reported that the Friends have received \$71,500 in grants for NCBVI programs such as Project Independence. They are looking to get some grants for blind

adults who are clients, but do not have a vocational goal. They are also looking to get some grants in some other areas.

Report from the Executive Director

I. Administration

I attended the National conferences of CSAVR and NCSAB. Last December I was elected President Elect of NCSAB. I also attended the NCSAB Executive Committee monthly meetings, and the CSAVR Regional quarterly meetings. Furthermore, I attended virtual meetings with the Statewide Special Education Council, the Nebraska Transition Committee, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) partners, the State WIOA Board, the Olmstead State Steering Committee, the Advisory Committee, and the Education and Employment Committee. Modifications to the Combined State Plan are due by the middle of March.

We have received two sets of Grant Award Notifications for our Federal Grants under Continuing Resolution as Congress has not yet passed a budget for this fiscal year. RSA also approved our Late Liquidation Request until May 15.

Senator Vargas introduced LB-1267: a bill which will give Commissions \$500,000 from the Federal American Rescue Plan. The purpose is to "address systemic public health and economic challenges that have contributed to the unequal impact of the pandemic".

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, there are moderate to significant disparities between White residents and those identifying as African American, American Indian, and Hispanic in terms of perceived health status, health coverage, and ability to see a physician, among other reasons.

The section that pertain to us is as follows:

“Sec. 3. (1) There is hereby appropriated \$500,000 from Federal Funds for FY2022-23 to the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired to carry out subsection (2) of this section. The Federal Funds appropriated in this section are from the funds allocated to the State of Nebraska from the federal Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund pursuant to the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Public Law 117-2, Subtitle M, Sec. 9901.”

“(2)(a) The Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired shall employ or contract with a health equity liaison to serve as a liaison between patients, hospitals, the Department of Health and Human Services, and other stakeholders to help identify and address health disparities for the population served by the commission.”

“(b) The commission shall work with the department, the University of Nebraska, and other organizations to collect data and submit a report electronically to the Legislature no later than October 1, 2024, outlining recommendations to address health inequities for the population served by the commission.”

“(c) The commission shall notify the Appropriations Committee of the Legislature by October 1, 2023, if it does not anticipate spending the federal funds appropriated pursuant to this section by December 31, 2024.”

The hearing on LB 1267 is scheduled for February 23, 2022.

We are sub-contracting for the WAGES program with JB&K who has had experience working with transition programs for blind students and they have high expectations.

We continue to work on the corrective action plan for RSA. The second quarterly report was due by the end of January. The team is Julie Buren, Kat Carroll, Carol Jenkins and I.

Erin has worked on the new NCBVI website to have a more user-friendly website. We hope to put it into the live environment within this next quarter.

Kat completed the Federal Fiscal Year End. In addition, most of the several Federal reports were completed.

The 2021 Annual Report was completed and submitted to the Governor and the senators.

It has been challenging being short of staffed in Omaha, Lincoln, the Center and the Business office. However, the agency team helps each other when needed in all areas.

Client Statistics:

Total number of OIB applicants and clients in all statuses served at the end of the period was 320.

Total number of IL applicants and clients in all statuses served at the end of the period was 64.

Total number of VR clients in all statuses served at the end of the period was 415.

This quarter we had clients get jobs as:

Administrative Service Manager, Automotive Service Technician/Mechanic, Eligibility Interviewers/Government Programs, Food Preparation/Service Related Worker, Fundraising Manager, Janitor/Cleaner, and Randolph Sheppard Vendor.

II. Human Resources

John Schmitt announced his retirement effective April 30, 2022. Mike Rains also announced his retirement effective July 15, 2022. Both of them have been long time staff. We are starting the recruitment process to hire for both John and Mike’s positions, as new hires will go through 600 hours of Center training.

We hired Kathy Navrkal for the OC II position in the Norfolk area. Kathy has experience in the education field, especially with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and also worked at Head Start. Kathy started her Center training on January 31.

The Omaha office is hiring Craig Kneifl for the VR position and he will start his Center training on February 28. He has worked with the Ollie Webb Center, Inc. and VODEC, which is a Vocational Development Center. Omaha still has a vacancy for an orientation counselor.

Tammie Dunn was hired on November 8, 2021 as an Accountant II for the Business Office. Tammie previously worked at Peru State College as the Budget Director and was then promoted to Comptroller.

We are still recruiting for the NBE and Technology Manager positions.

Our training on Team Building from State Personnel had to be rescheduled again due to the spike of the pandemic. This training will now be held on April 25. We will start with the Leadership and supervisors, then we will expand this training to all staff. The State Staff meeting is tentatively scheduled for April 26 and 27.

Several field staff will attend the Annual Transition conference in February. We will also be presenting at this conference.

Jessica Bartenbach, the Center supervisor, participated in a panel discussion at the Fall 2021 NCSAB conference to discuss keeping clients safe from misconduct at training centers. She will also participate in the National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute in 2022.

We are looking at the possibility of increasing the wages for most of our staff who are not making enough compared to some of their colleagues. We submitted a request for an increase of our Personnel Service Limitation (PSL), which was approved by the Appropriations Committee. We are working with State Personnel on the request of the in-grade increases.

III. Field Services

Due to a large increase of COVID-19 cases, we started to provide hybrid services. Several staff either were out sick or had family members at home sick, and therefore, were out during the last several weeks. However, they all show the team spirit and support each other.

Staff continues networking with stakeholders all over the State to build trusting relationships, and thus, find training and placement opportunities. Some of them are being part of Project Search, WIOA Local Boards, NCECBVI Vision Partners meetings, retirement homes, clubs, youth programs, and business to mention a few.

The Lincoln district is partnering with Career Services at UNL to provide information to Career advisors and Academic advisors regarding the abilities of blind people. There is a tentative date of April 14 for a Zoom workshop for clients related to job hunting. We will have employers present on different aspects of finding and keeping a job. This will be open to clients of any age. We hope to schedule some group home teaching sessions later this spring. WINNERFEST will take place this Spring and the focus is on STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics). Students will have a chance to do experiments.

The Omaha district has had a number of IEP's for middle school students that will be transitioning to high school next year.

Adrienne is working with the regional transition team and they are looking at the plans for the transition job fair for the spring.

Schools are starting to plan their resource nights for parents to find resources for their children as they are navigating transition and we are working to be a part of these events.

We are working with a Senior Software Engineer of a national company to plan a company-wide training for all staff on accessibility and working in partnership with our agency. The training will include over 500 employees. We are awaiting dates for this training.

The North Platte district has taken time over the last quarter to reflect on our service delivery model since we closed the physical offices in 2019. In all decisions that we make, we keep the clients in the forefront of our minds. While there was a transition period at first, our district has put procedures into place that leave all counselors feeling that we are more efficient in our service delivery than before. When we had physical office locations in Scottsbluff, North Platte, and Kearney, we very seldom had clients come into the office. Between the demographic barriers and majority of our clients not driving, services are typically best provided in their homes. In circumstances when their home is not an appropriate meeting space, counselors find a confidential location that the client agrees to, such as a study room at a public library. In the past three years, we have not had an instance where a client expressed dissatisfaction with the meeting location, and majority express appreciation of our services coming to where they are.

The North Platte district hired two new staff members since we began working remotely, and we spread outside of the three “hub” cities that we were previously located to increase our availability in other communities. For example, we now have a VR counselor in the area of Lexington, and we are able to routinely join the Community Forum group for that community which has created new opportunities.

We analyzed some numbers about the demographics of the clients we are currently serving in our district, and we learned that 72% of our clients live outside of the communities we had previously had offices. This evidence supports that having a physical office for clients to come to would potentially serve a very small number of our clients. In the data analyzation, we also noticed that our district is currently serving 70 more clients than we were one month before the layoffs and budget cuts occurred.

IV. Training Center

During this quarter, two Center students have graduated, and one new student has started training. The Center currently has six students: five VR, one Pre-ETS, and zero OIB clients. There is one student on the waiting list who will begin training once the Center resumes full-time face-to-face classes. The Center worked with one staff trainee who was hired on November 29 and separated from the agency on January 18. Another staff trainee started on January 31.

During this quarter, there were three tours of the Center. There was also one 3-day stay this quarter and that student is waiting to begin training once the Center fully reopens. We had to cancel some tours and three-day stays due to COVID-19. We will reschedule them once COVID numbers decline.

Two activities were completed. Students attended the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska's "Live, Work, Play" seminar held on November 13. Students also traveled by bus to Gateway Mall on December 9 to practice cane travel and learn to use escalators.

Students continue to lead seminars weekly with staff guidance.

Center Staff attended a training and team-building activity hosted by Dr. Edward Bell of the Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness from Louisiana Tech University. NCBVI has a contract with his company, Gemini Research and Training, to provide continuous improvement coaching and professional development to Center staff. Center staff will be working with their counterparts at other Centers approved by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board.

Nancy Coffman and Mike Rains participated in diabetic alternatives training with Mary Davis. The remaining Center staff will also be scheduled to complete this training.

V. Nebraska Business Enterprise

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect vendors. Some sites are again seeing reduced staff due to employees working remotely, or large numbers of employee absences due to illness.

The Drug Enforcement Administration's new office in north Omaha opened for business in the middle of January. It was supposed to start operations last October but the building was not ready. We will have three machines spread across two breakrooms. A blind vendor will be operating it. NBE has also been in communication with GSA about a location that will open in Lincoln in 2023.

After many delays from manufacturers, almost all of the vending machines NBE ordered in late August have now arrived and most of them have been installed.

NBE is in the final stages of setting up a Master Agreement with our credit card provider. This will allow NBE greater flexibility and more control over the readers on our machines.

Commissioner Livingston asked what JB & K stands for; who are they, and what do they do. Director Serván noted that it is Jessica Beechem and Kevan. Jessica is the Program Director at WE Fit Wellness and the President of the National Federation of the Blind Sports Division. She has her Bachelor of Science in Recreation and Leisure Studies with a concentration in Therapeutic Recreation. Jessica also has her Masters of Science in Exercise Science. She has experience in working with blind youth and running programs for blind people. She is from Colorado. NCBVI is contracting with JB & K because we currently do not have a transition coordinator on our staff. They will come to Nebraska to run the WAGES program this summer.

Chair Bulger noted that Senator Vargas is sponsoring a bill to appropriate federal funds in the amount of \$500,000 for health equity liaisons for various state commissions. Chair Bulger stated that he feels that this is a unique opportunity to identify areas that we can do better in now and in the future.

Chair Bulger noted that Director Serván had stated that NCBVI is having a hard time attracting employees. Chair Bulger stated that he feels that part of the reason may be that we are not

offering enough pay. He also stated that he is in favor of increasing the pay for our current staff as he feels this is a great investment.

Chair Bulger stated that he is also in agreement with the decision to continue to have staff work remotely in the North Platte and Norfolk areas. He appreciated all the information received and all the thought that went into this decision.

Newsline® Update

By Kimberly Scherbarth, NFB Newsline Outreach Coordinator for Nebraska

You will notice that a few unused rows were removed from the spreadsheet of data in the 2022 sheet. They were removed after updated information had not been provided by NFB Newsline for the Alexa device, and Podable Deliveries for over one year. Although the data has not been provided, the Alexa skill remains available as an option for accessing NFB Newsline. There have been some issues with accessing the Alexa Skill this quarter, but these issues have now been resolved.

During November 2021, information about NFB Newsline was shared at a one-day conference hosted by the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska.

Also new this quarter, government at-home COVID-19 testing information can be accessed on NFB Newsline .

2021 NFB Newsline Stats

	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Number of Subscribers:	2086	2088	2089	2099	2103	2103	2110	2114	2116	2118	2124	2121
New Subscriptions:	3	2	3	2	4	0	4	5	2	5	2	1

Telephone Usage:

Total calls:	1137	1058	1028	947	976	1023	918	1002	1013	919	801	928
Average call length:	13.45	12.34	11.38	11.74	13.34	12.34	13.63	14.06	13.84	14.21	13.89	13.46
Percent local calls:	49.07	42.15	37.81	42.1	43.36	39.36	37.14	46.52	36.1	36.46	35.69	33.01
Total call minutes:	15287	13060	11702	11113	13019	12622	12514	14091	14023	13062	11125	12488

Online Usage:

Web Sessions:	6258	5284	5719	5422	5454	5247	5381	5426	5441	5765	5629	5309
NFB-NEWSLINE Mobile Sessions:	44	58	44	32	349	399	427	460	438	459	447	526
NFB-NEWSLINE Alexa Sessions:												
In Your Pocket Deliveries:	1820	1674	1885	1763	1931	1516	1796	1611	1491	1429	1326	1266
NLS DTB Deliveries :												
Podable Deliveries:												
Email Deliveries:	568	556	602	581	582	551	591	556	503	451	446	545
Total Online Accesses:	8690	7572	8250	7798	8316	7713	8195	8053	7873	8104	7848	7646

<u>Total Content Accesses:</u>	5341	4967	5472	4975	5549	4951	5150	5184	5124	4751	4541	4775
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Content Frequency:	8.36	8.12	8.16	8.68	8.04	8.73	8.67 minutes	8.61	843	9.4	9.51	9.35
Nebraska Newspapers:	4127	3524	3626	3516	4082	3606	3691	3564	3809	3445	3135	3484
Nebraska Local Channels:	32	15	38	40	24	48	39	28	26	41	32	30
Local Weather and Emergency Alerts:	185	243	259	224	268	243	228	210	176	172	169	246
National Newspapers	1280	1142	1272	1210	1229	1063	1131	1218	1145	1085	1058	1078
International Newspapers:	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	2	2
My Newspaper:	85	66	69	73	76	85	55	74	65	55	59	53

Breaking News Online	102	122	211	129	171	120	106	134	211	202	123	147
Nmagazines:	31	22	41	43	37	49	40	23	43	18	14	39
TV Listings	559	517	508	546	440	523	466	586	515	435	449	479

2022 NFB Newsline Stats

	January
Number of Subscribers:	2123
New Subscriptions:	2

Telephone Usage:

Total calls:	1033
Average call length:	14.41
Percent local calls:	39.8
Total call minutes:	14880

Online Usage:

Web Sessions:	5726
NFB-NEWSLINE Mobile Sessions:	487
In Your Pocket Deliveries:	1474
Email Deliveries:	556
Total Online Accesses:	8243

<u>Total Content Accesses:</u>	5072
Content Access Frequency	8.8
Nebraska Newspapers:	3627
Nebraska Local Channels:	42
Local Weather and Emergency Alerts:	179
National Newspapers	1220
International Newspapers:	0

My Newspaper:	75
Breaking News Online	218
Nmagazines:	33
TV Listings	464

Client Assistance Program (CAP) Complaints or issues

A client from Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCBVI) contacted the Client Assistance Program indicating she received an electronic device that was defective and was requesting a new one. CAP reached out to the office supervisor to gather more information regarding the client's issue. Upon further investigation, it was reported that the electronic device was severely damaged and the manufacturer's warranty would not cover the damages, as the damages were not a defect in the product. NCBVI reconsidered and agreed to help replace the damaged electronic device with a new one. The client was satisfied with this decision and has had no further issues. All issues resolved were in this individual's favor.

New Business

Discussion regarding scheduling an orientation training for new Commissioners

Chairperson Bulger noted that almost every two years NCBVI has a new commissioner(s) added to the Commission Board. The commissioners have felt that it is a good idea to have a new Commissioner Orientation training. This includes training for the new commissioners and going over such items as the history of NCBVI, Commissioner job duties, the role of the Commissioners, and their communications between meetings. Commissioners Livingston and Mentink were appointed to the NCBVI Board of Commissioners on January 7, 2022 and they agreed that training would be beneficial to them.

After discussion, it was decided to conduct the training virtually. The New Commissioner Orientation Training meeting will not be a closed session, but it will be open to the public and former NCBVI Commissioners will be invited to attend. Dates and times for the training were discussed.

Commissioner Livingston moved to schedule a virtual New Commissioner Orientation Training meeting for Saturday, March 12 at 9:00 a.m. Commissioner Scherbarth seconded the motion. All the commissioners voted in favor of the motion.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Final Announcements

The next Quarterly NCBVI Commission Board meeting is scheduled for Saturday, May 7, 2022 in Kearney, Nebraska. There will be no Focus Topic, as the commissioners will conduct the annual evaluation of the executive director.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:48 a.m.

If you have an item that you would like to have placed on the agenda of the May 7, 2022 Commission Board meeting, please email it to the NCBVI Commission Board at ncbvi.commission-board@nebraska.gov.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Stephens, Administrative Technician
NCBVI

Mark Bulger, Chairperson
NCBVI Board of Commissioners

Staff Quarterly Reports for February 5, 2022 Commission Board Meeting

Lincoln District Activity Report – Connie Daly

John Schmitt announced his retirement effective 4/30/2022. John has been a long time counselor. He will be missed. We are recruiting for his replacement. We hired Kathy Navrkal for the OC II position in the Norfolk area. Kathy has experience in the education field especially with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. She will be a great asset to our team. She starts center training on January 31. We have contracted with Larry Mackey to assist with OIB clients in the Norfolk area until Kathy finishes center training.

We met with Career Services at UNL. We are partnering with them to provide information to Career advisors and Academic advisors regarding the abilities of blind people. We have a tentative date of April 14. We are planning a zoom workshop for clients on April 13 related to job hunting. We will have employers present on different aspects of finding and keeping a job. This will be open to clients of any age.

The Winnerfest committee is planning a great program to take place the weekend of March 18. The focus will be STEM careers. We are contracting with Dr. Hoby Wedler to conduct some science experiments with the students.

Kelly E Coleman has been working with Lincoln Parks and Recs to create inclusive playgrounds in Lincoln. They submitted their plan to the Mayor's office.

Charli Saltzman has joined the Coalition for Older Adults Health promotion. This will allow her to learn about other services or initiatives that may be available to our clients.

Lincoln District assisted with coverage in the center due to staff absences. We are also assisting Omaha by taking some new referrals.

We hope to schedule some group home teaching sessions later this spring.

We had two clients get jobs as Stockers, one client got a job as a receptionist and one client got a job in a daycare.

Omaha District Activity Report – Nancy Flearl

Staffing: We have a continuous posting for the VR Counselor II position. We have had very few applicants for this position. We are working with Shared Services to repost the Orientation Counselor II position. We are grateful to the NP and Lincoln District Staff that have been supportive in helping us reach out and meet with referrals. The staff truly exemplify what it means to be a team.

From a staff perspective we are all so ready to be over Covid-19. It has been harder now than at the high point of the pandemic as more staff have been exposed. However, we are committed to keeping services moving forward for consumers.

Work with Schools: We have had a number of IEPs for middle school students that will be transitioning to high school next year. We are starting to hear about IEPs for the end of the year and for those that will be graduating in May. Adrienne is working with the regional transition team and they are looking at the plans for the transition job fair for the spring.

Schools are starting to plan their resource nights for parents to find resources for their children as they are navigating transition. We are doing outreach to be a part of these events. They are all hoping to hold these in person.

Employment: We have had several clients find positions: A pre-school teacher, mail associate, and two as customer service associates.

We are working with a Senior Software Engineer with a national company to plan a company-wide training for all staff on accessibility and working in partnership with our agency. We are awaiting dates for this training; this will include more than 500+ employees.

We are also meeting with the Center for Disability Inclusion to collaborate on employment and have a meeting. We are meeting on February 4 at 9:00 a.m. This is part of our effort in raising awareness with the City of Omaha and Chamber regarding our services and the available untapped workforce.

Tim is working with HWS and other partners on future Job Fairs so that we are active partners with these events. There is one scheduled for January and February. The January's Job Fair is focusing on H3 positions (high wage, high skill, and high demand jobs). February's Job Fair is focusing on Government and Human Service Jobs. Each Monday from 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. there will be a different employer hosting a hiring event. Similar events will be planned for other counties in our area. We will have Omaha District staff participating in each of these events.

Training: We have staff that have registered in February for the Windmills Training. It is a four-part interactive training that empowers and equips employment professionals to understand the business community and help businesses through virtual and in-person training to become more inclusive of individuals with disabilities in the workplace.

North Platte District Activity Report – Erin Brandyberry

The North Platte district has taken time over the last quarter to reflect on our service delivery model since we closed the physical offices in 2019. In all decisions that we make, we keep the clients in the forefront of our minds. While there was a transition period at first, our district has put procedures into place that leave all counselors feeling that we are more efficient than before in our service delivery. When we had physical office locations in Scottsbluff, North Platte, and Kearney, we very seldom had clients come into the office. Between the demographic barriers and the majority of our clients not driving, services are typically best provided in their homes. In circumstances when their home is not an appropriate meeting space, counselors find a confidential location that the client agrees to, such as a study room at a public library. In the past three years, we have not had an instance where a client expressed dissatisfaction with the meeting location, and the majority express appreciation of our services coming to where they are.

The North Platte district hired two new staff members since we began working remotely, and we spread outside of the 3 “hub” cities that we were previously in to increase our availability in other

communities. For example, we now have a VR counselor in the area of Lexington, and we are able to routinely join the Community Forum group for that community which has created new opportunities.

We analyzed some numbers about the demographics of the clients we are currently serving in our district, and we learned that 72% of our clients live outside of the communities we had previously had office locations in. This evidence supports that having a physical office for clients to come to would potentially serve a very small number of our clients. In the data analyzation, we also noticed that our district is currently serving 70 more clients than we were one month before the layoffs and budget cuts occurred. This statistic is proof of the hard work that our counselors have put in on outreach efforts, especially when we realized that in 2019 when we were serving 70 less clients, we had two more full time staff members than we do currently, which is considered fully staffed.

In our reflections this past quarter, our team in the North Platte district has decided that we could benefit from one physical location that is in our district. We would like to have a space that is located in North Platte where we could have staff meetings, a place for storage, and to host group home teaching sessions when we are able to resume those. We have contacted the building manager of the Craft State Office Building, and they are inquiring about the availability of the kitchen area of our old office space. If this space is not available, we will look into other rooms that are available in the building. All staff will continue with working remotely from their homes, and just use the meeting room as needed.

Networking: Cristal has done employer outreach with Grand Island public schools, Hy-Vee Grand Island, Eakes, Comfort Inn, Family Fresh, Heritage, and Countryside. Cristal continues to be active with the Grand Island and Kearney Project Search sites and the Employ Kearney and newly established Employ Grand Island groups. Erin has done employer outreach with Family Fresh, Oak Creek Engineering, ASC Capacitators, and Chase County Nursing Home. Angie and Aaron had employer outreach with Regional West Medical Center. Ashley had employer outreach with KICX radio station and Comfort Inn and Suites. Cristal, Ashley, and Aaron have networked with various staff at Lexington Public schools on several new clients we have started working with. Angie networked with Potter/Dix schools and ESU 13, as well as served as an advisory member at a Minority Health Initiative meeting. Angie also provided a training to workforce staff on the adaptive equipment that is housed in the Scottsbluff and Sidney offices. Erin met with a special education teacher at Brady public schools regarding services NCBVI can provide, and also attended the quarterly meeting with NCECBVI. Fritz provided several presentations at nursing home/assisted living facilities, as well as an interagency meeting.

Projects: Cristal is the co-coordinator of the Employ Kearney meetings, and they met to plan the agenda for the 2022 meetings. Cristal, Ashley, and Erin have been working with a client on a detailed business plan for a new Esthetics business. Aaron has been creating some content for videos featuring introductory information on various pieces of technology for our staff to share with clients as they request interest in technology items. Angie is on the spring Winnerfest planning committee. Fritz has developed a letter to send to eye doctors in our district and has sent out a mass mailing with brochures. Erin completed the RSA 7-OB report with Kat Carroll, and has implemented OIB changes in the system that staffed were trained on in early November. Erin completed the new NCBVI brochure and we have received and distributed them. Erin has worked on the new NCBVI website with the goal of creating a more user-friendly website, and the project is nearing completion with the hopes of putting it into the live environment within this next quarter.

Training: Cristal attended a training on Accessible Pharmacy for the Blind and Diabetes webinar. Aaron has done online trainings for the Orcam My Eye device.

Client Outcomes: Cristal has had two clients take Center tours and one client start Center training. Cristal had one successful closure this quarter as a maintenance employee. Erin worked with a client to grow in her role as a dishwasher to meal prep, which resulted in an increase

Center Activity Report – Jessica Bartenbach

Nancy Coffman went on medical leave on October 18 and was out for six weeks. She returned on November 29. Kelly E. Coleman and Charli Saltzman helped cover some Communications classes while Nancy was out. Their help was very much appreciated.

Nicole Gothier completed three months of additional staff training and resumed teaching Home Management class in December. The Center is very thankful to Jamie Richey, who taught Braille while the position was vacant following Charli Saltzman's move to the Lincoln OC position, and then taught Home Management while Nicole was in training.

Mike Rains, the Shop instructor, received the 2021 Excellence in Leadership award along with Kat Carroll.

The Center had its first outbreak of COVID-19. Out of a total of fifteen people (staff and students), three people tested positive, two declined testing, and ten tested negative using a combination of antigen and PCR tests. The Center started the winter break three days early as a result of the outbreak. No one was hospitalized.

The Center had a second outbreak on January 12. Students were sent to the apartments and spent a week and a half doing remote classes before switching to a hybrid model. Only one person tested positive, with a second test being inconclusive. Due to the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday and decreased availability of testing, the decision was made to isolate everyone rather than require that everyone be tested. No one required hospitalization. The Center had started a hybrid schedule just the day before, and by quickly switching to 100% virtual classes while waiting on test results, the spread of the virus was minimized.

The Center will continue with a hybrid training model until COVID cases have peaked and start to decline. Some Center staff and students are at high risk of severe complications if they contract COVID, and the nature of Center training means that social distancing cannot always be practiced. With the hybrid model, staff will work in the office four days per week, but students will be in person only two days per week and will participate in virtual classes the rest of the week. By having half of the students at the Center at a time, this limits the risk to everyone and also ensures that students continue to receive some in-person instruction.

If Center staff or students are ill or need to isolate due to exposure to someone who tested positive for COVID, they will be able to still participate in classes, but will do so virtually. Staff and students continue to wear masks when they are in the presence of others or are in common areas. Following guidance from LLCHD and CDC, everyone is encouraged to upgrade to N-95 or similar masks, or to wear a cloth mask over a surgical mask. Other mitigation procedures continue to be followed, including washing hands frequently, sanitizing high-touch surfaces, and staying home when sick. The CDC guidelines on quarantining and isolating are also followed.

Since the last Commission Board meeting, two Center students have graduated, and one new student has started training. The Center currently has six students: five VR, one Pre-ETS, and zero OIB clients. There is one student on the waiting list who will begin training once the Center resumes full-time face-to-face classes. In addition, the Center worked with one staff trainee who was hired on November 29 and separated from the agency on January 18. Another staff trainee is expected to begin Center training on January 31. Upon successful completion of training, she will take over the Norfolk Orientation Counselor position.

During this quarter, there were three tours of the Center. Two additional tours were scheduled but these were cancelled due to COVID. One individual who completed a tour is waiting to schedule a 3-day stay once COVID numbers decline.

There was one 3-day stay this quarter and that student is waiting to begin training once the Center fully reopens. Two additional 3-day stays were scheduled in January but have been postponed due to COVID. One of the clients toured this quarter, and the other toured during the summer.

Three mini meals were scheduled, but one was rescheduled twice due to COVID. Two commencement meals were completed in December. While the Center is operating on a hybrid schedule, the mini meals will be prepared at the apartments with to-go containers provided to the other students so that social distancing can be maintained.

Students participated in drops once this quarter. The two students who graduated completed an additional commencement drop. Everyone made it back to the Center successfully.

Three activities were scheduled, and two were completed. Students attended the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska's "Live, Work, Play" seminar held on November 13. Students also traveled by bus to Gateway Mall on December 9 and practiced cane travel and learned to use escalators. They then came back to the Center and decorated a tree and learned to wrap gifts. A holiday meal was scheduled in November, then rescheduled for December and cancelled again due to COVID.

TDL's were held twice this quarter. Students learned to clean stoves and refrigerators.

Students continue to lead seminars weekly with staff assistance in choosing a topic and preparing questions for discussion.

The remaining cabinets were replaced in the Home Management classroom and the painting has been completed.

Center Staff attended a training and team-building activity hosted by Dr. Edward Bell of the Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness from Louisiana Tech University. NCBVI has a contract with his company, Gemini Research and Training, to provide continuous improvement coaching and professional development to Center staff. Center staff will be working with their counterparts at other centers approved by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board.

Nancy Coffman and Mike Rains participated in diabetic alternatives training with Mary Davis. The remaining Center staff will be scheduled to complete this training in the first quarter of 2022.

Jessica Bartenbach, the Center supervisor, participated in a panel discussion at the Fall 2021 National Council of State Agencies for the Blind conference to discuss keeping clients safe from misconduct at training centers. Jessica has also worked with Carol and Carlos to revise the NCBVI confidentiality agreement and disclosure, and adopted an informed consent and agreement for the Center. Jessica continues to attend quarterly Zoom meetings with center directors from across the country to share ideas. She will also participate in the National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute in 2022.

The Center is in the process of contracting with a different grocery store. There have been issues with Russ's Market, mostly caused by staffing shortages, which have resulted in long waits for students needing assistance. Russ's is only able to provide assistance on Mondays and Tuesdays from 10am to noon. We are working on contracting with HyVee at 50th and O but are working with state accounting on logistics. When students have demonstrated that they can travel to the grocery store and shop independently, they are issued a direct payment to cover the cost of apartment groceries, which allows them to be able to shop at a store of their choice and on their own time. This has helped minimize the impact of the staffing issues at Russ's. Students continue to shop at Russ's for Home Management groceries and while they learn to travel and shop nonvisually for apartment groceries.

Once the Center returns to full-time classes in person, the Center will be following a new A/B weekly schedule. During an "A week," students will attend all five classes Monday-Thursday, with Braille and Communications sharing a block. This will result in 8 hours per week of instruction in Travel, Shop, and Home Management, and 4 hours each per week in Braille and Communications. Fridays will be reserved for seminars, TDL's, drops, progress checks, and staff meetings.

During "B weeks," each instructor will have an office day, and students will attend only four of their classes per day, with a total of eight hours per class per week. Staff substitute for absent instructors, plan lessons, continue professional development, write reports, shop for supplies, and work on larger projects with students on their office days. The "B week" schedule was the schedule that the Center followed prior to adopting the A/B schedule in January.

Nebraska Business Enterprise Activity Report – Eric Buckwalter

VENDING SITE UPDATE

Drug Enforcement Administration – Omaha

The site at the new DEA building in Omaha opened last week. This site was supposed to open in mid-October; but the building was not ready until mid-January.

GSA – LINCOLN

NBE has been in communication with GSA about a new USA office that is opening in Lincoln sometime in 2023.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect Vendors. Some sites are again seeing reduced staff due to employees being allowed to work remotely, or large numbers of employee absences due to illness.

NBE LICENSEE UPDATE

There are currently 13 Licensed Vendors operating facilities. There is one trainee in the NBE program who is operating facilities.

VENDING SITE COMPLAINTS

All vending site complaints this past quarter have involved expired product being in machines. The SLA recognizes that the pandemic situation of the past two years has created a situation that is causing product to move slower in machines than Vendors are used to. However, Vendors were reminded that it is never, under any circumstances, acceptable to have expired product in machines. The SLA takes expired product in machines very seriously. Reports of expired product in machines, or expired product found by SLA staff can be cause for a Vendor to be placed on probation; with possible removal from sites for future instances.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

New Machines

After many delays from manufacturers almost all of the vending machines NBE ordered in late August have now arrived. NBE staff along with our distributor have already installed a large portion of these machines. The remaining machines left to install will be placed in the next month or two as schedules can be coordinated.

Credit Card Readers

NBE is in the final stages of setting up a Master Agreement with our credit card provider. This will allow NBE greater flexibility and more control over the readers on our machines. After this process is complete, NBE will look at testing a Vending Management System (VMS) for accessibility and usefulness to the Vendors.

LOOKING AHEAD

NBE is in the process of hiring a third person to join the NBE staff full-time. Interviews for this position will hopefully start soon. Adding a third person will allow NBE staff to work on growing the program and better serve the Vendors.

Business Office Activity Report – Kat Carroll

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

- Updating existing policies and writing new policies in response to the Monitoring visit in September 2020. Submitted our quarterly update and are waiting for RSA to respond. Continue working on the next quarterly update while waiting to see what we need to fix from the first quarter.
- Completed the Federal Fiscal Year End.
- Filled the Accountant II position with Tammie Dunn. Tammie previously worked with me at Peru State College as the Budget Director and was then promoted to Comptroller. She is learning quickly and taking over many of the extra tasks that I have been doing. Training is going very well with her.
- Continue training Cathie Guida and Suzette Casillas on front desk duties.
- Continue to improve the new Internal Budget Report for FFY 2022 that shows budgeted, year to date expenditures, projected fixed expenditures for the remainder of the year, and remaining funds to spend on client services and extras such as vending machines and technology. Present this information to Leadership and Supervisors on a monthly basis to ensure we are planning for the best use of our available funds.
- We have received two sets of Grant Award Notifications for our Federal Grants so far under Continuing Resolution. Congress has not yet passed a budget for the Federal Fiscal Year.

- Work on the RSA 17 quarterly report for the quarter ended 12/31/2021.
- Work on the RSA 15 with the assistance of Dave Robinson and Eric Buckwalter. The deadline of this report has been extended to the end of January due to RSA confusion of where to report the FRPP funds.
- Work on the SF 425 for FFY 2020 which is due 1/31/2022. Work on the Late Liquidation Request for this grant due to continuing work on the AWARE customization projects, the inability to get furniture ordered last summer from Cornhusker State Industries, and the inability to get Vending Machines ordered in July/August. These delays are due mainly to the Global Supply Chain issues.
- Submitted the RSA 2 with the assistance of Erin Brandyberry and Julie Buren. Submitted the RSA 17 for the quarter ended 9/30/2021. Submitted the SF 425's for FFY 2020 (Final) and FFY 2021 OIB. Submitted the SF 425's for both of the SE grants for FFY 2021. Submitted the Final SF 425 for the FRPP funds for NBE since those funds were all distributed to vendors as soon as we received them.
- Implement improvements to client supply inventory tracking.
- Continue work on improving communication between the Business Office team as well as communication between the Business Office and the Field Supervisors.
- Continue work on Team Building with the Business Office Team as well as throughout the Agency.
- Received the Excellence in Leadership award for the Agency, which I very much appreciated!

Kathy Stephens – Highlights

2021 Annual Report was completed and sent to the Governor and the senators. It is on file with the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature.

Worked on updates to the NCBVI Website. Updated NCBVI.commission-board email group.

I am working on surplusung some non-working technology items and some computer tables from the Lincoln office, and workstations and office furniture from the Omaha office.

I worked with staff to sync up the mileage of our TSB leased vehicles GPS systems before the new year. I continue to monitor the maintenance of the vehicles.

Registered Leadership Team for the virtual NCSAB Conference.