2022 Annual Report

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

and

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

State Rehabilitation Council

October 1, 2021 to September 30, 2022

New Mexicans with Vision Loss

Revised September of 2020

Under 18 - 6,358

18 to 64 - 36,886

65 and Older - 32,864

Male - 36,319

Female - 39,789

Total - 76,108

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, 2019 American Community Survey

“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 2023, the Commission will receive approximately $5,252,643 for Vocational Rehabilitation with a $1,421,618 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 $60,969.06 for Independent Living with a $6,774 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 to modify 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

Peggy Hayes, Chair - Alamogordo

Jim Babb, Vice-Chair - Albuquerque

Katharine Chavez, Secretary - Santa Fe

Bernadine Chavez, Member At-Large - Albuquerque

Mario Hooee, Member At-Large - Zuni Pueblo

State Rehabilitation Council Members during Federal Fiscal Year 2022

Jim Babb, Current or Former Recipient of VR Services - Albuquerque

Jeff Blair, Business, Industry, and Labor - Albuquerque

Bernadine Chavez, Client Assistance Program - Albuquerque

Katharine Chavez, Business, Industry, and Labor - Santa Fe

Deborah Clark, State Education Agency - Santa Fe

Craig Cooper, Business, Industry, and Labor, Alamogordo

Kaity Ellis, Representative of Individual who is Blind with Multiple Disabilities - Albuquerque

Peggy Hayes, Blind Advocacy Group - Alamogordo

Mario Hooee, Business, Industry, and Labor - Zuni Pueblo

Paul Luttrell, Community Rehabilitation Program - Albuquerque

Lila Martinez, Parent Training and Information Center - Las Cruces

Daphne Mitchell, Qualified VR Counselor - Albuquerque

Yolanda Montoya-Cordova, State Workforce Board - Albuquerque

Paula Seanez, American Indian VR Services - Navajo Nation

Greg Trapp, Director of Designated State Unit - Albuquerque

November 17, 2022

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, 2022. This will be my last report as Chair of the Commission for the Blind, and it has been a sincere privilege to serve the blind citizens of New Mexico.

One of the Commission’s most significant accomplishments during the year is the building of a fourplex Apartment Facility at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo. The apartments will be ready for occupancy in early 2023, and will enable the Commission to provide increased independent living training to persons who are newly blinded.

The Commission 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. Although the pandemic has impacted the Commission’s ability to spend all of the 15 percent Pre-ETS reserve, the Commission was able to provide all of the required Pre-ETS services. The Commission was also able to provide regular vocational rehabilitation services to all eligible adult New Mexicans.

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

November 10, 2022

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, 2022. The Council worked closely with the Commission, 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. The Commission has been able to avoid a waiting list and has successfully served all eligible New Mexicans.

Reductions in the spread of the Coronavirus and increased rates of vaccination enabled the Commission to return to the provision of in-person services. This has enabled the Commission to increase services in areas such as Orientation & Mobility and home management training, which had been severely limited by the pandemic.

One of the most significant accomplishments during the year is the building of a fourplex Apartment Facility at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo. The apartments will be ready for occupancy in early 2023, and will enable the Commission to provide enhanced independent living training to more persons who are newly blinded.

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

Respectfully,

Peggy Hayes, Chair

State Rehabilitation Council

ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2022

Services Delivered

Vocational Rehabilitation Program - 327

Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) - 28

Orientation Center - 12

Business Enterprise Program - 13

Technology for Children – 14

Independent Living / Older Blind Program - 383

Emergency Eye Care Surgeries - 27

COVID-19 REPORT

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of services to persons who are blind and visually impaired, as well as causing a likely future increase in the number of persons who have visual impairments.

Incidence of Visual Impairments

The anticipated increase in the incidence of visual impairments is primarily due to the following four factors: (1) COVID is causing additional new cases of diabetes which will result in increased numbers of persons with diabetic retinopathy; (2) the pandemic interrupted medical care for some persons with eye conditions such as diabetic retinopathy or glaucoma; (3) COVID causes strokes which can effect vision; and (4) COVID has contributed to a significant increase in the rate of premature births.

Of these four factors, the most significant will likely be the increase incidence of diabetes due to COVID. Diabetic retinopathy is a leading cause of blindness in individuals of working age. About one third of persons with diabetes will eventually develop diabetic retinopathy. Persons who contract diabetes before the age of 40 are even more likely to develop diabetic retinopathy. According to a study of more than 27 million Americans, persons with COVID were 42 percent more likely to develop type 1 diabetes than those who were not infected. A study out of Norway showed that young people who contracted COVID were 60 percent more likely to develop type 1 diabetes after infection compared to those who were not infected. Another study out of the UK showed that COVID patients had 81 percent more cases of diabetes in the first month after diagnosis with COVID and that their risk of diabetes was 27 percent greater in the three months following infection. Perhaps most concerning is a study out of Germany, which showed that in mild cases of COVID, the relative risk of developing type 2 diabetes was 28 percent higher than in a comparison group of persons with acute upper respiratory tract infections.

COVID will likely also increase the incidence of visual impairments in ways other than diabetes. For instance, women who have COVID and are pregnant have a 40 percent higher risk of giving birth prematurely, which will cause more cases of retinopathy of prematurity (ROP). The rate of premature births in the United States is now at 10.5 percent, the highest level in 15 years. About 25 percent of persons who have strokes also have vision loss, and persons who have COVID are more than eight times more likely to suffer a stroke than persons with the flu. A study of more than 1,900 patients with COVID at New York City hospitals showed that 1.6 percent suffered a stroke, compared to 0.2 percent of 1,500 patients seriously ill with the flu. Another factor is the interruption of patient care that was caused by the pandemic. According to a study published in JAMA Ophthalmology, in-person outpatient visits dropped by 83.3 percent across specialties at the onset of shelter-in-place orders, while at the same time ophthalmology had the lowest use of telehealth visits.

Delivery of Services

The pandemic had a very significant impact on the ability of the Commission and schools to deliver services. Even under normal circumstances schools struggle to provide adequate Braille and cane travel instruction, but cane travel and Braille instruction were especially difficult to provide through remote means. In addition, state data showed that 21.8 percent of students did not have internet access at home. Accordingly, the Commission prioritized the delivery of computer equipment that enabled students to connect to the internet. However, according to the Albuquerque Journal, "a survey of thousands of teachers showed that fewer than half of students were participating in distance learning by the end of the year." The Legislative Finance Committee also found that students received less than half of the recommended instructional time during the first school year of the pandemic, with kindergarten and first grade students receiving 10.4 percent of recommended instructional time, and second and third grade students receiving 13.9 percent of recommended instructional time. The Commission will, for many years to come, need to provide services that will remediate the skills deficits that will have been caused by the pandemic.

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 VR 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.” Despite the pandemic, the Commission was able to serve 327 VR consumers during the Federal Fiscal Year that ended on September 30, 2022. This was a reduction of 41 persons from the prior year, reflecting reduced applications caused by the pandemic. The Commission was also able to successfully place 20 consumers in employment, a decrease of three individuals from the prior year. An additional 31 persons were in "employment status" at the end of the year and awaiting case closure. For the state fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2022, 19 persons were placed in employment.

The 20 consumers that the Commission placed in employment in the Federal Fiscal Year earned an average starting wage of $24.24 per hour, and the 19 consumers placed during the state fiscal year earned an average starting wage of $23.19 per hour.

Despite pressures and restrictions caused by the pandemic, the Commission was able to serve all eligible vocational rehabilitation consumers during the year. The Commission does not anticipate having to implement an order of selection (waiting list) for services. At a virtual meeting of the Commission for the Blind State Rehabilitation Council held on September 8, 2022, the Commission determined that it had the ability to provide the full range of vocational rehabilitation services to all eligible individuals.

On September 3, 2021, the Commission signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Department of Health, Developmental Disabilities Supports Division. The purpose of the MOA is to establish a cooperative agreement with the state agency with primary responsibility for providing services and supports for individuals with intellectual disabilities and individuals with developmental disabilities. The MOA will help the Commission better serve persons who are eligible for home and community-based waiver programs.

On March 9, 2022, the Commission’s Vocational Rehabilitation Program Manager, the Skills Center Coordinator, and the Supported Employment Lead at the Department of Health’s Developmental Disabilities Support Services (DDSD presented to a monthly virtual workshop, known as Connect and Collaborate, a service of the New Mexico Association of Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (NMAER). This presentation focused on how the two agencies collaborate to provide supported employment services, especially to students with disabilities and youth.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey

The State Rehabilitation Council met in a special meeting on March 26, 2021, and approved a survey to assess the satisfaction of vocational rehabilitation consumers. The results were reported to the Council on June 22, 2021. The survey showed that 81 percent of persons served by the Commission were satisfied with the services they received.

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. 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. Finally, the reserve cannot be used for the authorized Pre-ETS activities unless all of the required Pre-ETS activities are provided. At a virtual meeting of the Commission for the Blind State Rehabilitation Council held on September 8, 2022, the Commission forecasted that it had sufficient funds to provide all of the required Pre-ETS activities during Federal Fiscal Year 2023, 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 Commission and PED to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from the receipt of educational services in school to the receipt of vocational rehabilitation services from the Commission. These methods of coordination also facilitate the development and approval of Individualized Plans 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 provide additional Pre-ETS services 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 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 student 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 has resulted in IEP meetings being attended virtually.

Students in Transition to Employment Program - (STEP)

The Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) provides paid work-based learning experiences and skills instruction to Commission consumers. Young persons who are blind or visually impaired have traditionally been limited in their ability to engage in such early work experiences, depriving them of the important benefits of student employment.

During Federal Fiscal Year 2022, STEP served a total of 28 blind students ranging in age from 14 to 21. The pandemic prevented operation of the residential STEP program at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo. Twenty-five students engaged in work-based learning, and 17 students received training provided by the Skills Center. The Skills Center training included both in-person and remote instruction. The pandemic has kept many students from receiving Orientation & Mobility training, and The Skills Center made it a priority to provide Orientation & Mobility training and Braille instruction to these students.

For a blind student to become successfully employed, the student must acquire a positive attitude about blindness and learn essential blindness skills. The skills that were taught included Braille, computer technology, orientation and mobility, personal management, and cooking. The students also participated in seminars and presentations provided by successful blind adult role models.

Orientation Center

The Orientation Center is a residential program that serves the Commission’s vocational rehabilitation consumers. It is located in Alamogordo and serves consumers from throughout the state. The Orientation Center helps blind or visually impaired persons acquire the skills needed to become successfully employed. The Orientation Center is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and is certified by the National Blindness Professionals Certification Board (NBPCB). The Orientation Center is the only blindness training center in the nation that has both CARF accreditation and NBPCB certification. The Orientation Center provided intensive training to seven consumers in the skills of blindness during the year, along with training to five staff persons. 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 of 2020, and returned to in-person training in June of 2021. Because of the pandemic, the Orientation Center only provided in-person services to adults.

To expand capacity and make training more realistic, the Commission has built an apartment fourplex that is adjacent to the Orientation Center. The State Rehabilitation Council has actively participated in the planning for these apartments, making specific recommendations regarding their configuration and design. Construction had been delayed by the pandemic, but has now been completed and the apartments will be ready for occupancy early in 2023.

Consumers attending the Orientation Center receive intensive training in cane travel, Braille, assistive technology, home management, personal management, 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 Orientation 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 Orientation 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 49 computers; conducted 162 technology evaluations; provided 12 Braille devices; provided 51 video magnifiers; installed 113 assistive technology applications; provided 547 training sessions to 210 persons; and provided 2,137 technical support sessions. Most of the technology equipment was delivered in-person using safety precautions recommended by the CDC, 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 United States Post Office locations 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, 13 blind persons participated in the Business Enterprise Program, and vendor earnings were $3,027,383, with $188,072 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 prior 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. Newsline readers use 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 offerings include the Albuquerque Journal, the New Mexico Magazine, the Navajo Times, the Gallup Independent, and the Santa Fe New Mexican. Newsline also includes 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 31st year of operation.

Newsline created a special category dedicated to pandemic news stories, and Newsline distributed critical information on testing, public health orders, and breaking medical information. Newsline normally operates with volunteers reading stories from inside recording booths located in the Newsline office in Albuquerque. Because of the pandemic, volunteer readers started reading from their homes on March 17, 2020, and return to reading in the office starting in July of 2021.

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 newspapers such as the Albuquerque Journal, Navajo Times, Deming Headlight, Farmington Daily Times, and Las Cruces Sun News. Readers can also access national newspapers such as USA Today, international newspapers such as the London Telegraph, 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 provide services 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 used for group meetings and seminars. In Federal Fiscal Year 2022, the Skills Center provided instruction to 17 students participating in the Students in Transition to Employment program, and provided services to an additional 15 VR and IL consumers.

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 14 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 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 beneficial service during the pandemic.

One of the most significant challenges the Commission faces is the need to support Braille literacy 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 who possess National Certification in Unified English Braille (NCUEB) in New Mexico. This gives New Mexico the highest number of NCUEB certified teachers in the nation.

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 assistive technology capacity to the independent living program.

The independent living (IL) program has been especially challenged by the pandemic. The large majority of persons served by the IL program are seniors, and seniors are at higher risk of severe illness due to COVID. As a result, the Commission suspended visits to nursing homes and assisted living facilities even before these facilities were closed to outside visitors. Starting on March 17, 2020, the Commission began providing IL consumers with remote services and contact-free technology deliveries, with in-person services provided when necessary to protect the health or safety of a consumer. Starting in July of 2021, the Commission began providing regular in-person services.

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 IL 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 are restricted to persons who are 55 and older. The IL Program provided intensive training to 383 consumers during Federal Fiscal Year 2022, an increase of 9 persons from the prior year.

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 how to travel using a white cane, how to use public transportation, how to use Braille, 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 2022, the Commission provided 45 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 IL consumers served by the Commission were seniors who had recently lost vision due to conditions such as age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, 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 27 emergency eye surgeries to 16 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 conducted a total of five virtual public meetings to gather input on modifications to the Combined State Plan. The Council also held virtual meetings on August 10, 2021, and on September 14, 2021, during which the Council developed and approved the Goals and Priorities. The Council added new Goals and Priorities related to the provision of services designed to compensate for reduced services caused by the pandemic, and added goals and priorities designed to encourage greater access to telework.

The goals and priorities are intended to enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by:

a. Proactively working to recruit, hire, and retain qualified vocational rehabilitation counselors, including in a way that is inclusive and culturally competent, thereby providing for greater continuity and consistency in the provision of vocational rehabilitation services.

b. 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.

c. 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.

d. 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.

e. 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.

f. 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.

g. 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.

h. Using the Orientation Center to provide training for adults and transition students to compensate for any deficiencies in skills that may have been caused by their inability to receive training or services during the pandemic, and to prepare them for new telework opportunities by providing them with enhanced technology training.

i. Increasing 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.

j. Providing transition consumers with 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, by increasing proficient use of Braille and Braille math, and by providing services designed to compensate for any deficiencies in these areas that may have been caused by their inability to receive training or services during the pandemic.

k. 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.

l. 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.

m. 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.

n. Using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers and potential vocational rehabilitation consumers, including using it to provide them with training to compensate for any deficiencies in skills that may have been caused by their inability to receive training or services during the pandemic, and to prepare them for new telework opportunities by providing them with enhanced technology training.

o. Providing independent living training to vocational rehabilitation consumers, including through the apartment training facility at the Orientation Center.

p. Providing increased telework employment opportunities, including opportunities in rural portions of the state.

q. Enhancing 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.

r. Enhancing 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.

EXPENDITURES ON CONSUMER SERVICES – FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2022

Vocational Rehabilitation Consumers $1,362,820

Independent Living Consumers $55,540

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 45 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.