2023 Annual Report

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

and

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

State Rehabilitation Council

October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023

New Mexicans with Vision Loss

Updated 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

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 will take effect on July 1, 2024.

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

Urja “Shirley” Lansing, Commission Chairperson - Albuquerque

Dr. Robert Reidy, Commissioner – Santa Fe

Katharine Chavez, Commissioner - Santa Fe

STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

Officers

Peggy Hayes, Chair - Alamogordo

Mario Hooee, Vice-Chair - Zuni Pueblo

Jeff Blair, Secretary – Albuquerque

Bernadine Chavez, Member At-Large - Albuquerque

Paula Seanez, Member At-Large – Navajo Nation

State Rehabilitation Council Members during Federal Fiscal Year 2023

Veronica Alonzo, State Workforce Board - Albuquerque

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

Craig Cooper,\* Business, Industry, and Labor, Alamogordo

Deborah Dominguez-Clark, Business, Industry, and Labor - Albuquerque

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

Note: Members marked with an asterisk went off the SRC in FFY23.

TRIBUTE TO ARTHUR SCHREIBER

Arthur Schreiber stepped down as Commissioner in February of 2023, ending nearly 40 years of official service to the Commission. Mr. Schreiber began his service to the Commission when he was appointed by Governor Toney Anaya to be the first Chairman of the Commission in 1986. He resigned from that position to become the Commission’s second Executive Director in 1995. Governor Gary Johnson Appointed Mr. Schreiber to the State Rehabilitation Council in 2000. He was reappointed by Governor Bill Richardson to the Commission in 2003. Mr. Schreiber is the only individual to serve as Chair of the Commission, Chair of the State Rehabilitation Council, and Executive Director of the Commission.

November 15, 2023

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, 2023 (FFY 23).

One of the Commission’s most significant accomplishments was the opening of a fourplex Apartment Facility at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo, which took place on April 6, 2023. The apartments will enable the Commission to provide enhanced vocational rehabilitation services to persons who are receiving training at the Orientation Center. The Orientation Center was also reaccredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and recertified by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB).

The Commission continues to implement the federal requirement that at least 15 percent of federal vocational rehabilitation funds be spent on the provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students aged 14 to 21. The Commission was able to meet this requirement in FFY 23. The Commission was also able to provide regular vocational rehabilitation services to all eligible New Mexicans who are blind or visually impaired. In doing so, the Commission enabled 30 individuals to become competitively employed.

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

Respectfully,

Shirley “Urja” Lansing

Commission Chairperson

November 16, 2023

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 (Council) of the Commission for the Blind hereby submits its Annual Report for the Federal Fiscal Year ending September 30, 2023 (FFY 23). The Council worked closely with the Commission, including on the federal requirement that 15 percent of vocational rehabilitation funds be reserved and spent on Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). The Commission was able to meet this requirement in FFY 23. The Pre-ETS requirement has resulted in many agencies needing to establish waiting lists for vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. The Commission has been able to avoid a waiting list and has successfully been able to provide VR services to all eligible New Mexicans. The Commission was also able to achieve the goal of having all of its VR counselor positions filled.

One of the Commission’s most significant accomplishments was the opening of a fourplex Apartment Facility at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo. This opening took place during a meeting of the Council on April 6, 2023. The apartments will enable the agency to provide enhanced VR services to persons who are receiving training at the Center. The Center was also reaccredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and recertified by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB).

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 2023

Services Delivered

Vocational Rehabilitation Program - 326

Independent Living / Older Blind Program - 395

Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) - 35

Orientation Center - 17

Skills Center - 24

Technology for Children – 14

Business Enterprise Program - 11

Emergency Eye Care Surgeries - 59

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Following is a summary of New Mexico’s performance on the four applicable federal measures for Program Year (PY) 2022 (See Note 1 on glossary). The state (i.e. DVR and CFB) levels are provided along with the specific level for the Commission. The Performance Assessment is the most critical number, which is the result of the Actual Level divided by the Adjusted Negotiated Level. Performance Assessment must be over 50% to meet performance requirements.

Employment Rate Second Quarter After Exit: Adjusted Negotiated Level 45.3%, NM Actual Level 41.3%, Performance Assessment 91.0%, and NM Blind Actual Level 29.4% (See Note 2).

Median Earnings Second Quarter After Exit: Adjusted Negotiated Level $3,962, NM Actual Level $5,033, Performance Assessment 127.0%, and NM Blind Actual Level $6,854.

Employment Rate Fourth Quarter After Exit: Adjusted Negotiated Level 38.9%, NM Actual Level 40.8%, Performance Assessment 104.8%, and NM Blind Actual Level 31.7% (See Note 2).

Credential Attainment Rate: Adjusted Negotiated Level 36.3%, NM Actual Level 37.6%, Performance Assessment 103.5%, and NM Blind Actual Level 64.3%.

Note 1: For a definition of performance measure terminology see glossary at end of report.

Note 2: The NM Blind Level was lower than the state level for Employment Rates Second and Fourth Quarters After Exit. The Commission’s actual levels are higher, reflecting the need to better track the employment retention rates in the second and fourth quarters after exit.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

The vocational rehabilitation program has a dramatic return on investment. It enables persons with disabilities who receive benefits such as SSI, SSDI, Medicaid, and Medicare to exit from those benefits and become taxpayers. The program began in response to the need to provide rehabilitation services to troops who were wounded in World War I. The result was the Smith-Sears Veterans Rehabilitation Act. It was passed in 1918, and provided for the “vocational rehabilitation and return to civil employment of disabled persons discharged from the military and naval forces of the United States.” The success of the law led to the passage of the Smith-Fess Act in 1920, which expanded vocational rehabilitation services to civilians.

FFY 23 Case Services Expense by Program

Vocational Rehabilitation - $1,742,009

Independent Living - $65,005

Technology for Children Expense - $79,204

FFY 23 Salary and Benefits of Program Staff

Vocational Rehabilitation - $2,801,575

Independent Living - $712,129.88

Other

FFY 23 Social Security Program Income - - $391,792.52

Hand-Held Video Magnifiers - $41,852.95 (purchased 05/22 but distributed in FFY 23).

Emergency Medical Eye Care

Total Medical Provider Expenses - $63,687.59.

Administrative Expense - $62,497.66.

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 2024, the Commission will receive approximately $5,582,296 for Vocational Rehabilitation with a $1,510,838 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 $62,651 for Independent Living with a $6,961 State match.

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 increased 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.

NEW MEXICO COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Vocational Rehabilitation Program

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program serves persons who are statutorily blind or who have 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.” The Commission served 326 VR consumers during the Federal Fiscal Year that ended on September 30, 2023. This was a reduction of one person from the prior year. The Commission placed 30 consumers in employment, an increase of ten individuals from the prior year. An additional 45 persons were in "employment status" at the end of the year and awaiting case closure. The employment status figure is an increase of 14 individuals from the prior year.

The 30 consumers that the Commission placed in employment earned an average starting wage of $23.95 per hour. Of the 30 individuals placed in employment, 29 were placed in competitive and integrated employment, and one individual was placed in self-employment. The figure of 30 consumers placed in employment is particularly notable since the last time the Commission achieved at least thirty rehabilitation closures was in 2011.

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 meeting of the Commission for the Blind State Rehabilitation Council held in Albuquerque on July 20, 2023, the Commission determined that it had the ability to provide the full range of vocational rehabilitation services to all eligible individuals residing in the state.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey

The State Rehabilitation Council met in a virtual 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 reserve and 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 the meeting of the Commission for the Blind State Rehabilitation Council held on July 20, 2023, the Commission forecasted that it had sufficient funds to provide all of the required Pre-ETS activities during Federal Fiscal Year 2024, 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.

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 2023, STEP served a total of 35 blind students ranging in age from 14 to 21. This represents an increase of seven students from the prior year. The residential STEP program at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo resumed its summer STEP program, serving five students. A total of 34 students engaged in work-based learning, an increase of nine students. The Skills Center provided training to ten STEP students. 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. During FFY 23, the Orientation Center was reaccredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and was recertified 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 12 adult consumers in the skills of blindness during the year, and to five students during the STEP program. The Orientation Center also provided 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.

To expand capacity and make training more realistic, the Commission has built a fourplex apartment facility that is adjacent to the Orientation Center. The opening of the Apartments took place during a meeting of the State Rehabilitation Council on April 6, 2023. The apartments will enable the Commission to provide enhanced vocational rehabilitation services to persons who are receiving training at the Orientation Center. The Council has actively participated in the planning for these apartments, making specific recommendations regarding their configuration and design.

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. IN FFY 23, the assistive technology program delivered 49 computers; conducted 144 technology evaluations; provided 23 Braille devices; provided 45 video magnifiers; installed 129 assistive technology applications; provided 1,447 technical support sessions; and provided 410 training sessions to 183 persons. Most of the technological 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. For FFY 23, 11 blind vendors participated in the Business Enterprise Program. Their earnings were $3,448,349, and they paid $217,262 in gross receipt tax. This compares to earnings in the prior year of $3,027,383, and gross receipt tax payments of $188,072.

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 32nd year of operation.

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 2023, the Skills Center provided instruction to ten students participating in the Students in Transition to Employment program, and provided services to an additional 14 VR and IL consumers.

The Skills Center sponsored two events that were provided to students as a part of the Commission’s Pre-Employment Transition Services. The first event was a series of six seminars that took place virtually from June 6 to June 22, 2023. The seminars were focused on the exploration of careers in the fields of music & entertainment, and the presenters included award winning musicians and writers. The six seminars were attended by a total of nine students. The second event was an in-person science camp that focused on an investigation of a mock crime scene using forensic methods. The camp was presented by two scientists who were both blind. The forensic camp took place on September 15 and 16, 2023, and was attended by eight students.

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.

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, which sponsored two seminars on National Certification in Unified English Braille (NCUEB) in FFY 23, with 14 persons attending.

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 (SRC). The goals and priorities were informed by public meetings held on March 9, September 19, September 23, and September 25, 2023. The goals and priorities were also based on the results of the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment approved by the SRC on July 20, 2023, and reviewed by the SRC on August 31 and September 25, 2023. The goals and priorities were reviewed and discussed at meetings of the SRC held on April 6, July 20, August 31, and September 25, 2023.

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

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

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

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

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

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

G. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by using the Orientation Center to provide employment preparation training for adults and transition students, including through the addition of the apartment training facility constructed adjacent to the Center. The apartment facility will increase the capacity of the Orientation Center, will enable the Orientation Center to provide more realistic training, will reduce 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. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by creatively and innovatively using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers and potential vocational rehabilitation consumers, including using it for provision of services to transition students.

I. Increase the number of consumers served through enhanced Outreach Activities; including media outreach, use of paid advertising, through increased collaboration with ophthalmologists and optometrists, and through the use of the Technology for Children program to conduct outreach to school districts, charter schools, private schools, Bureau of Indian Education operated and funded schools, and students who are home schooled.

J. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes of transition consumers by providing enhanced Pre-Employment Transition Services, including assistive technology where appropriate as a part of an Individualized Plan for Employment, by providing assistive technology through the Technology for Children Program, by conducting increased outreach activities, by conducting educational activities to meet the specific needs of transition students, by increasing proficient use of Braille and Braille math, by increasing proficient use of Orientation & Mobility skills, and by providing services designed to mitigate any deficiencies in these areas that may be related to the pandemic.

K. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes achieved by consumers by providing services in a way that genuinely honors the "informed choice" provisions of the Rehabilitation Act, enabling Commission consumers to have the opportunity to obtain employment at higher levels of compensation, focusing on areas in which employees are in highest demand BASED ON Labor market information.

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

M. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers and potential vocational rehabilitation consumers, including using it for provision of services to transition students, including those who attend home, Charter schools, private schools, and Bureau of Indian Education operated and funded schools.

N. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers and potential vocational rehabilitation consumers, including using it for provision of services that are designed to remediate or mitigate any deficiencies in skills that may be related to the pandemic, and to take advantage of new opportunities for remote work.

O. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes through the provision of increased remote employment opportunities, including opportunities in rural portions of the state.

P. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes for consumers who are Deaf-Blind through collaboration and partnership with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, with Vancro Integrated Interpreting Services (VIIS), and with the Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, including through the delivery of assistive technology to consumers who are Deaf-Blind.

Q. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes through the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) by shortening the time required for vendors to complete the required training, including by using the Business Enterprise Licensee Training Program offered by the National Association of Blind Merchants at the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind.

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

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

INDEPENDENT LIVING AND OLDER BLIND

The independent living (IL) program serves a rapidly growing population of persons who are blind or visually impaired. 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 395 consumers during Federal Fiscal Year 2023, an increase of 12 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 FFY 2023, the Commission provided Smartlux hand-held video magnifiers to 69 visually impaired consumers, an increase of 24 consumers from the prior year. A video magnifier can enable a person who is visually impaired to be able to write checks, and read items such as bills, prescription bottles, and food labels.

The IL teachers serve the entire state, often traveling 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 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 using more technology, and the IL 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 59 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 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.

GLOSSARY OF PERFORMANCE MEASURES TERMINOLOGY

1. Employment Rate - 2nd Quarter After Exit: The percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the Vocational Rehabilitation program.

2. Employment Rate - 4th Quarter After Exit: The percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the Vocational Rehabilitation program.

3. Median Earnings - 2nd Quarter After Exit: The median earnings of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the Vocational Rehabilitation program.

4. Credential Attainment Rate: The percentage of those participants enrolled in an education or training program (excluding those in on-the-job training (OJT) and customized training) who attain a recognized postsecondary credential or a secondary school diploma, or its recognized equivalent, during participation in or within one year after exit from the Vocational Rehabilitation program. A participant who has attained a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent is included in the percentage of participants who have attained a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent only if the participant also is employed or is enrolled in an education or training program leading to a recognized postsecondary credential within one year after exit from the program.

5. NM Actual Level: The performance level actually achieved by the State during the program year.

6. NM Blind Actual Level: The performance level actually achieved by the Commission during the program year.

7. Adjusted Negotiated Level: The Negotiated Level plus an adjustment factor. The Negotiated Level is a performance level negotiated between the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and the State, while the Adjustment Factor is provided by RSA to account for changes in economic conditions that occurred during the program year.

8. Performance Assessment: The State’s Actual Level divided by its Adjusted Level. This number must be over 50% to avoid performance failure and potential sanctions.

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 2024, the Commission will receive approximately $5,582,296 for Vocational Rehabilitation with a $1,510,838 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 $62,651 for Independent Living with a $6,961 State match.