2019 Annual Report

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

and

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

State Rehabilitation Council

October 1, 2018 to September 30, 2019

New Mexicans with Vision Loss

2016 Statistics

Under 18 - 4,471

18 to 64 - 31,750

65 and Older - 31,092

Male - 32,341

Female - 34,972

Total - 67,313

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

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

Public Law 101-166 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 2019, the Commission received approximately $4,844,950 for Vocational Rehabilitation with a $1,311,276 state match; $55,500 for Supported Employment with a $3,083 state match; $225,000 for Older Blind with a $25,000 state match; and $59,900 for Independent Living with a $6,656 State match.

100TH ANNIVERSARY OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

The public vocational rehabilitation program is in the midst of its 100th anniversary. The Smith-Sears Veterans’ Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 was passed to rehabilitate veterans who were disabled during World War I. The success of the Smith-Sears Act led to the passage of the Smith-Fess Act of 1920, which expanded the vocational rehabilitation program to include civilians.

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) 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.

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 let you know that blindness is not a barrier to leading a full, meaningful, and productive life.”

Greg Trapp, J.D.

Executive Director

Commissioners

Arthur A. Schreiber, Commission Chairman - Albuquerque

Shirley Lansing, Commissioner - Albuquerque

Dr. Robert Reidy, Commissioner - Albuquerque

State Rehabilitation Council Officers Elected October 21, 2019

Thomas P. O’Brien, Chair - Edgewood

Shirley Lansing, Vice-Chair - Albuquerque

Kaitlin Ellis, Secretary - Deming

State Rehabilitation Council Members during Federal Fiscal Year 2019

Lucy Birbiglia, Business, Industry, and Labor - Albuquerque

Bernadine Chavez, Client Assistance Program - Albuquerque

Kaitlin Ellis, Current or Former Recipient of VR Services - Deming

Christine Hall, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor - Albuquerque

Shirley Lansing, Blind Advocacy Group - Albuquerque

Coby Livingstone, Statewide Independent Living Council - Albuquerque

Paul Luttrell, Community Rehabilitation Program - Albuquerque

Lila Martinez, Parent Training and Information Center - Las Cruces

Yolanda Montoya-Cordova, State Workforce Board - Albuquerque

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

Paula Seanez, American Indian VR Services - Navajo Nation

Greg Trapp, Director of Designated State Unit - Albuquerque

December 29, 2019

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:

In accordance with 28-7-17(H) NMSA 1978, and with 34 CFR 361.17(h)(5), the Commission for the Blind hereby submits its Annual Report for the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2019.

The most significant development during 2019 is the ongoing implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). One of the major provisions under WIOA is the requirement that at least 15 percent of our federal vocational rehabilitation funds be reserved and spent on provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students aged 14 to 21. While increasing spending on specified transition services, the Pre-ETS requirement significantly reduces the amount of funds that are available to serve adults. The Pre-ETS requirement also reduces the funds that are available for transition services that are not allowed under Pre-ETS. Despite this additional requirement, the Commission is serving all eligible individuals, and did not have to implement a waiting list for services.

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

Respectfully,

Arthur A. Schreiber

Commission Chairman

Greg D. Trapp, J.D.

Executive Director

December 29, 2019

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, 2019. The Council worked closely with the Commission during the year, including to implement the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requirement that 15 percent of vocational rehabilitation funds be reserved and spent on provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). While the Commission for the Blind has not been forced to implement a waiting list for services, the Federal Pre-ETS mandate has resulted in many agencies needing to go on to an Order of Selection. This is an area of critical concern, which the Council will continue to focus on in the coming year.

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

Respectfully,

Thomas P. O’Brien, Chair

State Rehabilitation Council

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. Public meetings were held to gather comments in Hobbs on October 16, in Clovis on October 17, in Santa Fe on November 25, in Albuquerque on November 27, in Las Cruces on December 2, and in Alamogordo on December 3. The Goals and Priorities were reviewed and discussed at a regular meeting of the State Rehabilitation Council held in Santa Fe on October 21, 2019, and approved at a special meeting of the Council held in Albuquerque on December 16, 2019.

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

Agency Response: There is a national shortage of qualified vocational rehabilitation counselors, and the agency is engaging in maximum efforts to recruit, hire, and retain qualified vocational rehabilitation counselors.

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

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

Agency Response: The Commission recognizes that maintaining a healthy lifestyle can be conducive to obtaining and retaining an employment outcome, and will provide services designed to support healthy lifestyles when such services are necessary to obtaining and retaining employment.

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.

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

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

Agency Response: The agency has been participating in monthly partner meetings that have enhanced the coordination between the Commission and the partners. The Commission will continue to work cooperatively with the partners by designating specific points of contact, by providing appropriate information, and by entering into cooperative agreements where appropriate.

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

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

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

Agency Response: The proposed apartment project has been fully funded with state appropriations, and construction should start during calendar year 2020.

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

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

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

Agency Response: The agency will continue to work to increase services to Pre-Employment Transition Students using the identified methods. The agency already seeks to be involved in Individualized Education Plan meetings for transition consumers starting at age 14, and the agency operates the Students in Transition to Employment Program in Albuquerque and in Alamogordo. On February 2, 2019, the agency sponsored a workshop on Unified English Braille, and the agency will continue to sponsor Unified English Braille workshops and National Certification in Unified English Braille exams. The agency is also renewing agreements with state and local educational officials.

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

Agency Response: The agency continues to provide services in a way that enables consumers to set and obtain high employment goals. For the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2019, the average starting wage for consumers was $16.47.

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

Agency Response: The agency is committed to providing a quality Newsline service. The agency will continue to sponsor NFB-Newsline in New Mexico, which provides access to over 400 national publications.

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

Agency Response: The agency is committed to using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers, and especially consumers receiving Pre-Employment Transition Services. As a result, the agency used the Skills Center to provide training to participants in the Students in Transition to Employment Program, as well as student and Braille seminars. The Skills Center was also used to provide training to individual students, and was used as a meeting place for programs related to vocational rehabilitation.

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

Agency Response: The agency has assigned a vocational rehabilitation counselor to take the lead on services related to consumers who are Deaf-Blind. The agency also works with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to coordinate provision of services to persons who are Deaf-Blind. The agency works with a variety of other partners, including the Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Community Outreach Program for the Deaf, the Helen Keller National Center, and the Deaf-Blind Task Force. The agency also participates in the annual Deaf-Blind Awareness Day at the Roundhouse.

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

Agency Response: The agency has adopted the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired as the training provider for BEP vendors, and is working with New Mexico programs to create a local provider so that food preparation and cooking methods can be taught locally.

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

Agency Response: The agency recognizes the need to have strong fiscal programs so as to maximize the receipt of federal funds, and to otherwise provide appropriate vocational rehabilitation services to our consumers. To do this, the agency must have in place a sufficient number of qualified fiscal staff to comply with federal fiscal rules, and to appropriately respond to changing fiscal requirements.

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

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

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

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

Accomplishments Federal fiscal year 2019

Services Delivered

Vocational Rehabilitation Program - 401

Students in Transition to Employment Program - 29

Orientation Center - 15 Adults and 10 STEP

Business Enterprise Program - 17

Persons who participated in the UEB seminar - 16

Technology for Children - 11

Independent Living / Older Blind Program - 422

Emergency Eye Care Surgeries - 11

New Mexico Commission for the Blind Programs and Services

Vocational Rehabilitation Program

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program serves persons who are legally blind and individuals with qualifying visual impairments. The program helps persons who are blind or visually impaired to become employed in ways that are consistent with each individual’s “strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, informed choice, and economic self-sufficiency.” The Commission successfully placed 23 consumers in employment during the federal fiscal year that ended on September 30, 2019, an increase of eight individuals. An additional 32 individuals were in "employment status" at the end of the calendar year and awaiting case closure. For the state fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2019, 19 persons were placed in employment. The Commission also served 401 VR consumers during the year, an increase of 56 persons. Because the VR program serves consumers starting at age 14, it is common for consumers to receive services for many years, especially when the employment goals require college or graduate education. The 23 consumers that the Commission placed in employment in the federal fiscal year earned an average starting hourly wage of $16.47, and the 19 consumers placed during the state fiscal year earned an average starting salary of $15.14.

Despite budget pressures caused by reduced state funds and the federal requirement to spend 15 percent of the vocational rehabilitation grant on Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), the Commission for the Blind served all eligible vocational rehabilitation consumers during the year. Unlike a majority of vocational rehabilitation agencies, the Commission does not anticipate having to implement an Order of Selection (waiting list) for services. At a meeting of the State Rehab Council in Silver City held on August 7 and 8, the Commission determined that it had the ability to provide the full range of vocational rehabilitation services to all eligible individuals.

Transition Services

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires the Commission to spend at least 15 percent of the vocational rehabilitation grant on the provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). The Pre-ETS services include five required activities, four coordination activities, and nine authorized activities. However, WIOA imposes some significant restrictions on how the 15 percent reserve can be spent. For instance, the reserve can only be spent on “students” age 14 to 21, and the reserve cannot be used to pay for administrative costs. There are also restrictions on the purchase of computers, and the reserve cannot be used to pay for tuition and transportation. Finally, the reserve cannot be used for the authorized Pre-ETS activities unless all of the required Pre-ETS activities are provided. At a meeting of the Commission for the Blind on August 29, 2018, the Commission forecasted that it had sufficient funds to provide all of the required Pre-ETS activities during Federal Fiscal Year 2019, enabling the Commission to provide both the required and authorized Pre-ETS activities.

On June 1, 2019, the Commission entered into a Governmental Services Agreement with the New Mexico School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. On July 1, 2019, the Commission expanded an existing agreement with the New Mexico Central Region Educational Cooperative. The purpose of both agreements is to expand the Pre-ETS services that are provided to students in New Mexico.

The Commission’s Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Program Manager, Transition Coordinator, Skills Center Coordinator, and Skills Center teachers all regularly attended Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The Commission seeks to regularly attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings by age 14, and in some cases even earlier. The goal is to provide transition planning and services that facilitates the development and completion of their IEPs, and to thereby enhance the quantity and quality of employment outcomes that will ultimately be achieved by consumers aged 14 to 21.

Students in Transition to Employment Program - (STEP)

The Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) is a concentrated transition experience that provides Commission consumers with a variety of skills instruction and a paid work-based learning experience. Young persons who are blind or visually impaired have traditionally been limited in their ability to engage in such work experiences, depriving them of the important benefits of student employment. During Federal Fiscal Year 2019, STEP served 29 blind students ranging in age from 14 to 21. Some of these students participated in STEP at the Albuquerque Skills Center, while others participated in the residential STEP program at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo. There were also students who participated in STEP in their home communities.

For a blind student to become successfully employed, he or she must acquire a positive attitude about blindness and learn essential blindness skills. The skills learned include Braille, computer technology, orientation and mobility, personal management, cooking, and industrial arts. The STEP participants engaged in activities designed to reinforce the skills they have learned and to instill positive attitudes about blindness. The activities included rock climbing, water sports, self-defense instruction, hiking, bowling, taking the Sandia Peak Tramway, and excursions to shopping malls. The students also participated in seminars and presentations from successful blind adult role models.

Orientation Center

The Orientation Center is a residential program that serves the Commission’s vocational rehabilitation consumers. The Center helps blind or visually impaired persons acquire the skills needed to become successfully employed. The Center is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and is certified by the National Blindness Professionals Certification Board (NBPCB). The Orientation Center was recertified by both the NBPCB and CARF in 2019. The Commission’s Orientation Center is the only blindness training center in the nation that has both CARF accreditation and NBPCB certification. The Center provided intensive training to 25 consumers in the skills of blindness during the year. Fifteen of those served were adults and there were ten transition students in the summer STEP program. The Center is located in Alamogordo and serves consumers from throughout the state. The adult training typically lasts six to nine months, during which time students usually reside in the Center’s dormitory.

To expand capacity and make training more realistic, the Center is in the process of building an apartment facility on land donated to the Commission. The State Rehabilitation Council has actively participated in the planning for these apartments, making specific recommendations regarding their configuration and design. The apartments were funded by the legislature, and it is expected that construction will be completed in 2020.

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

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

Assistive Technology

The use of assistive technology is a crucial factor in the successful employment of persons who are blind. However, studies consistently show that persons with disabilities are less likely to own a computer and access the Internet. This gap is called the “digital divide.” The Commission’s assistive technology program seeks to close this gap. One of the challenges to doing this is that a blind or visually impaired person must learn the application, as well as the assistive technology that allows access to the application. The 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 conducted 78 technology evaluations; delivered 46 computers; provided 7 Braille devices; provided 48 video magnifiers; installed 103 assistive technology applications; provided 447 training sessions to 229 consumers; and provided 851 technical support sessions.

Business Enterprise Program

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides employment opportunities for legally blind individuals who wish to operate food service facilities. The BEP operates food establishments from routes of vending machines to full cafeterias at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque and at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Artesia. The BEP provides the public and government workers with quality food service that is conveniently located within government buildings and installations. This last year, 17 blind persons participated in the BEP program, and vendor earnings were $3,182,322 with $207,850 paid in gross receipt taxes.

Commission Supports National Defense

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

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

Newsline for the Blind

Newsline is a telephone-based system that allows persons who are blind or visually impaired to access a variety of newspapers and publications. The offerings include the Albuquerque Journal, the New Mexico Magazine, the Gallup Independent, and the Santa Fe New Mexican. Newsline also includes the newsletter of the National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico and the State Library Talking Book Newsletter. Blind or visually impaired readers can use Newsline to access important information such as grocery ads, drug store ads, and legal notices. The service is now in its 28th year of operation.

The Newsline reader uses the buttons of a telephone to select the desired newspaper, and to move within and between publications. The reading is done by approximately 80 trained volunteers. The service is available statewide free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The Commission also sponsors NFB-Newsline, an audio information service developed by the National Federation of the Blind that provides access to over 400 publications. NFB-Newsline users can access state newspapers such as the Farmington Daily Times and Las Cruces Sun News, national newspapers such as USA Today, international newspapers such as The Jerusalem Post, and magazines such as Smithsonian Magazine. NFB-Newsline also provides access to job listings, television schedules, and weather alerts.

Skills Center

The Skills Center helps meet the needs of the Commission’s vocational rehabilitation and independent living consumers. Located in the Albuquerque office, the Skills Center has employees who serve throughout the state. The Skills Center has classrooms designed for specific subject areas such as Braille, technology, cooking, and personal management. It also has a large lecture room that is ideal for group meetings and seminars. In 2019, The Skills Center was used to instruct 13 students participating in the Albuquerque component of the Students in Transition to Employment program.

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 receives funding from the New Mexico Department of Health. The Technology for Children program provided assistive technology to 11 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 students lived in communities such as Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Las Cruces, Alamogordo, Clovis, Hobbs, Pecos, and Las Vegas.

One of the most significant challenges the Commission faces is the need to support Braille proficiency for students who are blind or visually impaired. Meeting this critical need is a priority of the Skills Center. On February 2, 2019, the Skills Center sponsored a workshop on Unified English Braille, with 16 persons participating. The purpose was to prepare teachers for the National Certification in Unified English Braille (NCUEB) exam, to enhance relationships with school districts, and to improve Braille literacy. As a direct result of the Skills Center’s efforts to increase Braille proficiency, there are now 29 persons with NCUEB certification residing in New Mexico. This gives New Mexico the highest number of NCUEB certified teachers in the nation.

New Mexico Commission for the Blind Programs and Services

Independent Living and Older Blind

Independent Living and Older Blind Program

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 independent living program consists of the Part B funds which can be used to serve persons of all ages, and the Older Blind grant, which is limited to persons who are 55 and older. The IL Program provided intensive training to 422 consumers during Federal Fiscal Year 2019.

Independent living services are provided to blind and visually impaired consumers throughout the state, with most persons being served in their own homes. The instruction includes training in Braille, how to travel using a white cane, how to use public transportation, and instruction in personal and home management skills. The training also includes provision of basic assistive technology devices such as white canes, hand-held video magnifiers, optical magnification devices, Braille writing equipment, and Braille or talking watches. During Federal Fiscal Year 2019, the Commission provided 88 hand-held video magnifiers to visually impaired consumers, enabling those individuals to read items such as prescription labels, bills, and bank statements.

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

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

Emergency Eye Care

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

Expenditures on Consumer Services - Federal Fiscal Year 2019

Vocational Rehabilitation Consumers $1,170,456

Independent Living Consumers $11,283

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 88 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.