2024 ANNUAL REPORT

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

and

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

State Rehabilitation Council

October 1, 2023, to September 30, 2024

Part Of “America’s Job Center New Mexico”

New Mexicans with Vision Loss

Under 18 – 5,946

18 - 64 – 39,842

65 and older – 30,743

Male – 34,559

Female – 41,959

Total – 76,518

According to the 2022 American Community Survey, New Mexico had the third highest number of persons who reported a visual disability, with 3.8% for New Mexico, compared to 4.0% for West Virginia and 4.7% for Mississippi. The national average was 2.5 percent.

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, 2022 American Community Survey

INTRODUCTION

The Commission for the Blind provides vocational rehabilitation and independent living services to persons who are blind or have low vision, enabling them to participate and contribute in society. Persons who are blind or have low vision 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 have low vision about their own potential, and to educate society about the capabilities of persons who are blind or have low vision.

The Commission believes persons who are blind or have low vision 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 have low vision 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. 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, 2024.

MISSION STATEMENT

Our mission is to enable persons who are blind or have low vision 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 or low vision 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 or has low vision due to a genetic condition, a person who is a senior with age-related macular degeneration, or whether your blindness or low vision 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 or low vision is not a barrier to leading a full, meaningful, and productive life.”

Greg Trapp, JD

Executive Director

COMMISSIONERS

Shirley “Urja” 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

Frank Maestas, Member At-Large – Mora

State Rehabilitation Council Members during Federal Fiscal Year 2024

Veronica Alonzo, State Workforce Board – Albuquerque

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

Jeff Blair, Business, Industry, and Labor – Albuquerque

Dr. Margaret Cage, State Educational Agency – Santa Fe

Bernadine Chavez, Client Assistance Program – Albuquerque

Deborah Dominguez-Clark\*, Business, Industry, and Labor – Albuquerque

Frank Maestas, Current or Former Recipient of VR Services – Mora

Peggy Hayes, Blind Advocacy Group – Alamogordo

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

Coby Livingstone, Current or Former Recipient of VR Services – Albuquerque

Paul Luttrell, Community Rehabilitation Program – Albuquerque

Lila Martinez, Parent Training and Information Center – Las Cruces

Daphne Mitchell, Qualified VR Counselor – Albuquerque

Paula Seanez, American Indian VR Services – Navajo Nation

Greg Trapp, Director of Designated State Unit – Albuquerque

Note: Members marked with an asterisk exited the SRC in FFY24.

 November 19, 2024

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 (SRC) of the Commission for the Blind hereby submits its Annual Report for the Federal Fiscal Year ending September 30, 2024 (FFY 24).

The SRC and Commission jointly developed the Consumer Satisfaction Survey, which was conducted by Research and Polling, Inc. The survey showed that an impressive 91 percent of Commission participants were overall satisfied with Commission services, including 56 percent of participants who were very satisfied with their services. The Commission helped 21 persons who are blind or have low vision to become successfully employed. The Commission placed an additional 50 persons in employment, for a total of 71 persons employed during the year.

A significant SRC accomplishment was the collaboration on the Combined State Plan, under which the Commission provides vocational rehabilitation (VR) services to persons who are blind or have low vision. The Combined State Plan took effect on July 1, 2024.

The following Annual Report details the accomplishments of the Commission for the Blind.

Respectfully,

Peggy Hayes, Chair

State Rehabilitation Council

November 21, 2024

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 report is for the Federal Fiscal Year ending September 30, 2024 (FFY 24).

“The Commission is my eyes, right hand, and heart.” Those are the compelling words of one of the respondents to the Commission’s Consumer Satisfaction Survey. The survey showed that the Commission had an overall satisfaction rate of 91 percent.

The Commission continues to successfully implement the requirement that at least 15 percent of federal VR funds be spent on the provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students aged 14 to 21. The Commission met this requirement for both FFY 23 and FFY 24. The Commission’s SFY 23 audit had no findings.

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

Greg Trapp, JD

Executive Director

ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2024

Services Delivered

Vocational Rehabilitation Program - 331

Independent Living & Older Blind Program - 372

Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) - 41

Orientation Center- 21

Skills Center - 32

Technology for Children - 12

Business Enterprise Program - 11

Emergency Eye Care Surgeries - 17

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Following is a summary of New Mexico’s performance on the four applicable federal measures for Program Year (PY) 2023 (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 48.98%, NM Actual Level 47.5%, Performance Assessment 97.0%, and NM Blind Actual Level 47.0%.

Median Earnings Second Quarter After Exit: Adjusted Negotiated Level $4,339.*13*, NM Actual Level $5,417.98, Performance Assessment 124.86%, and NM Blind Actual Level $11,276.

Employment Rate Fourth Quarter After Exit: Adjusted Negotiated Level 42.5%, NM Actual Level 43.3%, Performance Assessment 101.86%, and NM Blind Actual Level 33.3%.

Credential Attainment Rate: Adjusted Negotiated Level 40.79%, NM Actual Level 40.0%, Performance Assessment 98.1%, and NM Blind Actual Level 53.0%.

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

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 24 Case Services Expense by Program

Vocational Rehabilitation - $1,975,534

Independent Living - $251,572

Technology for Children - $81,602

FFY 24 Salary and Benefits of Program Staff

Vocational Rehabilitation - $3,137,258

Independent Living - $812,039

Other

FFY 24 Social Security Program Income - $404,603

Smartlux Hand-Held Video Magnifiers - $7,140

Topaz EZ Desktop Video Magnifiers - $94,130

Emergency Medical Eye Care

Total Medical Provider Expenses - $52,583

Administrative Expense - $69,979

Stevens Amendment Notice (Public Law 115-141)

The Commission receives federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education and from the Health and Human Services Department. For Federal Fiscal Year 2025, the Commission will receive approximately $5,582,296 for Vocational Rehabilitation with a $1,510,838 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.

NEW MEXICO COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

“Doing a wonderful job with wonderful people”

Quote from consumer satisfaction survey.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program

"I couldn't have done it without them"

Quote from consumer satisfaction survey.

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 have low vision 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 331 VR participants during the Federal Fiscal Year that ended on September 30, 2024. This was an increase of five individuals from the prior year. The Commission placed 21 participants in employment in FFY 24. An additional 50 persons were in "employment status" at the end of the year and awaiting case closure, an increase of five individuals from the prior year. The Commission enabled a total of 71 persons to become employed in FFY 24.

The 21 persons that the Commission placed in employment earned an average starting wage of $40.68 per hour. This number is elevated due to one unusually high wage. The average hourly wage would be $22.71 If the high wage is not included. Of the 21 individuals placed in employment, 20 were placed in competitive and integrated employment, and one person was placed in self-employment.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey

“The Commission is my eyes, right hand, and heart”

Quote from consumer satisfaction survey.

The State Rehabilitation Council met in Albuquerque on May 16, 2024, and approved the consumer satisfaction survey. The results were reported to the Council on September 19, 2024. The survey was conducted by Research and Polling, Inc. The survey showed that 91 percent of persons served by the Commission’s vocational rehabilitation program were satisfied with the services they received. This was an increase of ten percentage points from the 2021 survey. Of the 91 percent who expressed satisfaction, 56 percent were very satisfied with services, and 35 percent were satisfied.

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 a meeting of the Commission for the Blind State Rehabilitation Council held in Alamogordo on September 18, 2024, the Commission forecasted that it had sufficient funds to provide all of the required Pre-ETS activities during Federal Fiscal Year 2025, enabling the Commission to provide both the required and authorized Pre-ETS activities.

The Commission has a signed 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 the time the student is 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 students 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 participants. Young persons who are blind or have low vision 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 2024, STEP served a total of 41 students who were blind or had low vision, ranging in age from 14 to 21. This is an increase of six students from FFY 23. The residential STEP program at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo served nine STEP students, an increase of four students from FFY 23. A total of 40 students engaged in work-based learning, an increase of six students. The Skills Center provided training to nine STEP students. The training at the Skills Center included both in-person and remote instruction. The pandemic has kept many students from receiving instructional services in school, and the Mobility 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 a series of advocacy seminars provided by successful blind adult role models.

Orientation Center

“Alamogordo is a great place to build your confidence”

Quote from consumer satisfaction survey.

The Orientation Center is a residential program that serves the Commission’s vocational rehabilitation participants. It is located in Alamogordo and serves participants from throughout the state. The Orientation Center helps persons who are blind or have low vision to 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 12 adult participants in the skills of blindness during the year, and to nine students during the STEP program. The Orientation Center also provided training to two 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 have enabled 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.

Participants 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 or have low vision. Technology will become even more transformative as artificial intelligence reshapes society. 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 bridge this gap. One of the challenges to doing this is that a person who is blind or has low vision must learn the application as well as the assistive technology that allows access to the application.

The Commission’s technology specialists provided participants with assistive technology such as screen readers, Braille displays, screen magnification programs, video magnifiers, and computerized Braille note takers. In FFY 24, the assistive technology program delivered 59 computers, 29 smartphones and tablets, 20 Braille devices, and 48 video magnifiers. The assistive technology program also conducted 171 technology evaluations, installed 123 assistive technology applications, conducted 1,913 technical support sessions, and provided 535 training sessions to 232 persons.

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 24, 11 blind vendors participated in the Business Enterprise Program. Their earnings were$3,735,903, and they paid $232,449 in gross receipt tax. This compares to earnings in the prior year of $3,448,349, and gross receipt tax payments of $217,262.

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 have low vision 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 Santa Fe New Mexican, the Albuquerque Journal, the Navajo Times, and the Gallup Independent. Newsline also includes the State Library Talking Book Newsletter. Blind or low vision readers can use Newsline to access important information such as grocery ads, drug store ads, and legal notices. The service is now in its 33rd 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 participants. 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 FFY 2024, the Skills Center provided instruction to nine students participating in the Students in Transition to Employment program, and provided services to an additional 23 VR and IL participants.

The Skills Center sponsored the “Advocacy In Action Career Exploration Workshop.” The Career Exploration Workshops were provided to students as a part of the Commission’s Pre-Employment Transition Services. The workshops consisted of a series of five seminar that took place over Zoom in June and September, 2024. The workshops included experts from throughout the country who were working in a variety of advocacy professions. The five workshops were attended by a total of 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 12 children who were blind or had low vision and 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.

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 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 individually discussed and approved at meetings of the SRC held on April 6, July 20, August 31, September 25, and November 16, 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 participants 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 participants, which are becoming an increasing barrier to persons who are blind or have low vision 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 participants.

H. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes by creatively and innovatively using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation participants and potential vocational rehabilitation participants, including using it for provision of services to transition students.

I. Increase the number of participants 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 participants 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 participants by providing services in a way that genuinely honors the "informed choice" provisions of the Rehabilitation Act, enabling Commission participants 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 participants by providing a quality and expanding Newsline system that gives participants 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 participants and potential vocational rehabilitation participants, 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 participants and potential vocational rehabilitation participants, 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 participants 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 participants 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 participants, and by making the public and medical community more aware of Commission services.

S. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes for participants 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 have low vision. 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 372 participants during Federal Fiscal Year 24, a decrease of 23 persons from the prior year.

Independent living services are provided to persons who are blind or have low vision 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 ride sharing services, how to use public transportation, how to use a smart phone, how to use Braille, and instruction in personal and home management skills. The training also includes provision of assistive technology devices such as white canes, desktop video magnifiers, hand-held video magnifiers, optical magnification devices, Braille writing equipment, and Braille or talking watches. During FFY 24, the Commission provided Smartlux hand-held video magnifiers to 49 participants with low vision. The Commission also purchased 40 Topaz EZ desktop video magnifiers. After an initial period of configuration and training, the Commission has begun to distribute these new video magnifiers, with three deliveries taking place as of the end of the federal fiscal year. The Topaz EZ video magnifiers represent a significant technology upgrade, and will help many individuals who were not benefited by the smaller hand-held video magnifier. A video magnifier can enable a person with low vision 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 participant 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 many individuals who are also participating in the Commission’s vocational rehabilitation program.

Most of the IL participants 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 seniors who are blind or have low vision. This senior population is also using more technology, and the IL program is seeing more participants 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 17 emergency eye surgeries to 14 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.