

Iowa Department for the Blind

Strategic Plan

Updated June 2024

Mission Statement:

Empower blind Iowans to be gainfully employed and live independently.

Vision Statement

To be the world's leader in blind rehabilitation services.

Guiding Principles

We value blind Iowans therefore:

- We believe in each individual's ability to be independent
- We act with a sense of urgency and responsiveness in serving every individual
- We support each individual's right to informed choices
- We value engagement and independence for individuals of all ages
- We promote a positive attitude toward blindness
- We expect blind persons to achieve their full potential
- We provide opportunities for blind persons to be fully contributing members of their communities

All staff are valued and expected to demonstrate:

- Passion for what we do everyday
- Commitment to make positive differences in the lives of blind Iowans
- Respect for the contributions of each staff member
- Ethical behavior, honesty, integrity and trustworthiness
- Innovative and proactive approaches in serving each client
- Progressive and professional leadership
- Collaboration and teamwork that benefits each individual we serve
- Collaboration with community, local, state and federal partners

Our Culture:

We use a client-centric approach to empower clients to achieve successful outcomes.

The Iowa Department for the Blind (IDB) maintains belief in its overall mission and understands that, in order to realize this mission, it must continuously modify its programs to meet the needs of its customers and changing socioeconomic conditions. The goals and strategies of this plan reflect these efforts. In making these continuous modifications, the Department must take care not to jeopardize its positive philosophy of blindness and the cohesiveness this philosophy generates among its customers and staff. Through this philosophy, the Iowa Department for the Blind has developed a set of values and principles by which its programs operate. The Department affirms:

- That the Department operates on the established and well-demonstrated truth that blindness need not be a barrier to leading a full life as a first-class citizen in society.
- That blind people have the same rights and responsibilities as all other citizens to self-determination, including the right to enjoy full integration in all aspects of society.
- That blind people constitute a minority group who must overcome the misconceptions and discriminations that result from this status.
- That all staff of the Department will be qualified individuals trained in the delivery of services based on the agency's philosophy.
- That the Department shall provide the widest range of pre-vocational training, vocational rehabilitation training, independent living training, library services, and other ancillary services so that all customers have as much opportunity as possible to make informed plans and choices concerning life goals.
- That the Department in its staffing policy be cognizant of the value and importance of hiring qualified people who may be blind and actively and intentionally do so.

Core Functions

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) services assist persons who are blind in preparing for, obtaining, and retaining employment. Applicants are made eligible based upon their visual disability, their need for VR services, and their intent-to work. The VR counselor and the eligible individual jointly identify a vocational goal and the services needed to achieve that goal through the creation of an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). A complete list of VR services can be found at: <https://blind.iowa.gov/vocational-rehabilitation-services-descriptions>.

Crucial among these services are disability related skills training, counseling and guidance, and rehabilitation technology. Disability related skills training gives blind people the alternative techniques that they need to be able to perform tasks typically performed using vision. These skills include reading and writing braille, using a long white cane to travel independently from place to place, using technology with a screen reader, braille output and/or magnification, and techniques for cooking and cleaning safely and effectively. This service is provided in our Blindness Empowerment and Independence Center, Young Adult Transition Program, summer youth program, in client's homes, schools, or worksites by field teachers, or in small group community-based trainings held periodically throughout the state.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors work with each individual client to help them to overcome their barriers to employment and find a career that fits their strengths, preferences, and skills. A lot of people believe that blindness severely limits a person's career options, however, there are blind people working as doctors, lawyers, carpenters, scientists, teachers, package handlers, and so many other types of jobs. Counselors help clients to overcome these misconceptions, develop a positive attitude toward themselves and their potential, and figure out alternative techniques that can be used to perform specific job duties.

Rehabilitation technology includes such services as job site assessment, procurement of access technology, and training in the use of adaptive equipment. With proper training and tools, blind employees can perform their jobs competitively and efficiently. Clients explore various types of access technology and receive an evaluation of their needs, skills, and resources so that they can make informed choices about which options are best for them. They can borrow equipment from the Department's loaner pool to help determine which items meet their training and employment needs. Rehabilitation technology specialists work with employers and clients to find and install the access technology that the client needs for their particular job.

Services to Employers

In order to affirm our agency wide commitment to serving the needs of business, in December 2019, the Iowa Commission for the Blind Board passed a business engagement policy. This policy can be found at: <https://blind.iowa.gov/business-engagement-policy>

VR staff provide services to employers and partner agencies. These include but are not limited to:

- Participation in job fairs, technology expos, and speakers' bureaus.
- Provision of information and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); assessment of job sites, recommendations for accessibility, and referral to appropriate vendors.
- Through our library, assistance to employers in producing employee manuals and training materials in such alternative formats (Braille, Large Print, Electronic Text, and Audio).
- Partnership with other training and employment programs to facilitate the recruitment of qualified blind employees.
- Provision of guidance and training to information technology staff of public agencies and programs so that web sites available to the general public are also accessible to blind persons.

Business Enterprise Program

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides entrepreneurial opportunities to blind Iowans. Under the Randolph Shepherd Act and Iowa Code 2016(D), the BEP has priority to provide vending services in federal and state buildings. This program provides the locations, equipment, starting inventory, training, and technical assistance to blind individuals who own and operate their own sole proprietorship or LLC. The ultimate goal of the program is to give the operators the skill, capital, and self-confidence to expand their business beyond the program, create jobs, and expand opportunities for current and future program participants.

Library for the Blind and Print Disabled

The Department's Library for the Blind and Print Disabled provides reading materials free of charge to Iowans who cannot use standard print because of blindness, physical disability, or reading disability.

The library's instructional materials center (IMC) produces, transcribes or otherwise makes accessible textbooks and other educational materials for Iowa's PreK-12 and college students who cannot use standard print. The library and IMC staff provide training and assistance to educators, paraeducators, and families. The library creates virtual and in person trainings for youth and families to promote braille literacy and a love of reading, STEM, and learning. The IMC also locates job-related materials for employed Iowans for whom standard print is not an option.

The library circulates books and magazines in audio, braille, and large print to eligible borrowers throughout the state. The library maintains a collection of over 150,000 book titles and makes available to its borrowers over 120 different magazines. Because the library is a regional library of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS), its borrowers have access to all NLS services. The library provides independent access to the library's collection through the on-line public access catalog (OPAC) and Braille and audio reading download (BARD).

The library administers the NFB Newsline program in the state of Iowa. This gives Iowans with print disabilities access to local and national newspapers and magazines via the telephone or internet.

The library transcribes print materials into braille, large print and audio formats including employment-related, educational, and leisure materials. IDB also provides financial support to the Iowa Reading Information Service (IRIS) to support greater access to local newspapers and audio described cultural events for blind Iowans.

Independent Living Rehabilitation Services

While the majority of those we serve are of retirement age and experiencing age-related vision loss. IDB offers independent living services to lowans of all ages who are not participating in our VR program. Through the independent living (IL) rehabilitation program, clients learn the skills they need to live independently and participate actively in family and community life. By learning the alternative techniques of blindness, they can choose the privacy and independence of living in their own homes over moving into expensive care centers. IL teachers and service coordinators travel throughout the state to provide a variety of services, including:

- Instruction in the alternative skills of blindness in homes and local communities. .
- Individual and group training in travel with the long white cane, Braille, keyboarding, cooking, cleaning, shopping, and leisure activities.
- Provision of in-service training: IL staff members give instruction in blindness techniques to community service providers so that they, in turn, can provide this training to the blind individuals they serve.

Assessment

The Department completes several internal and external activities to assess its impact on lowans and to determine whether the services provided meet the needs of blind lowans.

- IDB reports vocational rehabilitation service measures quarterly and independent living measures annually to our federal funding agencies. The Director and Program Administrators continuously review this data and make program adjustments.
- IDB's VR program completes a comprehensive statewide needs assessment every three years. This assessment was completed in 2022 and will be completed again in 2025. identified the vocational rehabilitation needs of blind lowans who are minorities, who may be un-served or underserved by the Department, who are served through other components of the work force system or by community rehabilitation providers. We continue to use this information to revise our goals and strategies each year.
- Customer input is solicited continuously. Each year, representatives from the Iowa Department for the Blind meet with members of the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa and the Iowa Council of the United Blind at their annual state conventions. The Director also meets with consumer organization affiliate presidents on a bi-monthly basis.
- The Independent Living Program hosts a quarterly IL Forum to engage stakeholders and obtain feedback on programs and services.
- The Independent Living Director meets with the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) to receive their specific input.
- Independent Living staff members continue to meet with customer support groups and when opportunities arise at gatherings in local communities in Iowa as well as actively seek public input.
- Monthly meetings are organized by the Business Enterprise Program State Committee of Blind Vendors.
- The library has an active Library Consumer Advisory Committee that provides feedback to the library on patrons services and programs at a local and national level.
- Our agency participates quarterly in the Olmstead Consumer Taskforce. Their activities support the full inclusion of people with disabilities in housing, employment, transportation, healthcare, independent living and other areas.

- The Director serves on the State Workforce Development Board and is able to get direct input from business leaders regarding their needs.
- Significant guidance is provided, and major policy initiatives are approved by the Iowa Commission for the Blind. The Commission is comprised of three former IDB clients and receives input from all stakeholders at their quarterly meetings.
- Each month, the agency director hosts an open forum where stakeholders can ask questions and receive updates on agency programs and initiatives.

Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: Elevating Education for Every Student

Strategy 1.1: Improving braille literacy among blind Youth

The Iowa Library for the Blind & Print Disabled is creating programs to improve literacy among blind and low vision children. “Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is the main predictor of a child’s likelihood to graduate high school,

“Research shows that braille literacy directly correlates with academic achievement and employment. The majority of working-age blind people are unemployed (74 percent) and depend on support such as disability income benefits. It is estimated that the lost productivity due to blindness and eye diseases is \$8.0 billion per year in the United States. Of the 26 percent of blind people who are employed, the majority of them are braille readers. The correlation is clear - braille is an extremely important tool for blind people to become literate, and it is a critical component that supports educational advancement and increases employment prospects. Despite the link between braille literacy and employment, braille literacy rates for school-age blind children have declined from greater than 50 percent (40 years ago) to only 12 percent today. Part of the reason for this decline can be attributed to the mainstreaming of blind students into the public school system, where significantly less time is available for learning braille. Another factor is that many people believed that talking computers would replace the need to learn braille. However, listening alone is not enough. Research shows that braille provides a critical advantage for students to learn grammar, language, math, and science.” (National Braille Press, <https://www.nbp.org/ic/nbp/braille/needforbraille.html>)

Action Steps:

- Promote Instructional Materials Center (IMC) services to other state agencies and school districts to raise awareness of accessible educational material resources for students. (Library Staff)
- Promote and expand virtual and in person family programming including after school programs, story times, Makerspace Mondays, Braille Babies, Braille Bits and other literacy and STEM programming for youth. (Youth Librarian)
- Expand and continue to promote outreach programs to communities, public libraries, schools and other organizations in rural and urban areas across Iowa. (Library Staff)

Strategy 1.2: Provide innovative and proactive pre-employment transition services

We employ eight Vocational Rehabilitation Teachers who travel the state to meet with transition age youth and provide training in braille, daily living skills, and travel with the long white cane. While these services are being provided to some youth through IESBVI, AEAs, and LEAs, we are finding that most students do not have the basic blindness skills required to attend college and obtain employment. These instructors, along with our Rehabilitation Technology Specialists, will continue to work to close the skills gap.

In addition to building and re-enforcing basic blindness skills, our summer program and weekend retreats include activities to build self-confidence, problem solving skills, social skills, and other essential skills so crucial for success in the workplace.

In addition to services provided by IDB staff, we are continuing contracts with four additional service providers. These providers will expand our capacity to provide soft skills training, self-advocacy training, and high-quality work-based learning opportunities.

Action Steps:

- Increase participation in weekend retreats and LEAP summer program. (VR Teams)
- Introduce additional short-term trainings to improve client essential skills and self-confidence. (VRTeams,)

Strategy 1.3: Ensure students receive timely and accurate educational materials in alternative formats

Having accurate and timely textbooks, workbooks, charts, maps, diagrams, and other educational materials in alternative formats is a key component of a free and appropriate public education. Our Library's Instructional Materials Center is continually striving to make this process more effective for students and cost-effective for taxpayers.

Action Steps:

- Continue to provide training to para-educators, TVIs, special education teachers, and other educators in braille and braille standards and increase the number of educators trained and/or certified in braille transcription. (Library Staff with Braille Transcriber Certifications)
- Catalog and provide access to accessible educational materials to educators via online searching and ordering platforms. (Librarians)* Increase awareness within state agencies, school districts and the public of accessibility concerns and promote universal design and inclusion in the selection and utilization of databases and learning management systems. (Library Staff)

Measures for Goal 1:

- Total number of materials in the library cataloged available for circulation to patrons/students and school districts.
- Total number of school districts with signed memorandum of understandings enacted with the Instructional Materials Center (IMC).
- Total number of visits (viewership and readership) to the library's online resources (blogs, online catalog, online courses).
- Total requests filled for alternative media materials from the library's instructional materials center. (IMC)
- Increase in the number of Pre-Employment Transition Services provided. (Library)
- Total number of educators participating in braille education courses offered by the library. (Library)

Goal 2: Supporting Health and Well-Being

Strategy 2.1: Ensure that older individuals who are losing vision have the skills and tools they need to remain independent in their homes

One of the many lessons of the pandemic has been that living in nursing homes or other congregate settings can have a human cost that exceeds even the financial cost of institutional care. At IDB, we are determined that no lowan should enter a nursing home or care center just because they are losing vision. Individuals who lose their vision later in life may also have medical conditions that require that they live in a long-term care facility, but vision loss need never be the reason that a person cannot live safely in their own home. Our Independent Living Teachers (ILTs) teach older adults losing vision how to cook, clean, get around their house and community, access their phones and tablets, and do other tasks of daily life without depending on their failing vision. Teachers mark appliances with raised dots, provide talking watches or thermometers, check writing guides, labeling devices, and other tools needed to perform daily tasks. Teachers connect these individuals with peer support, advocacy groups, and community resources to reduce isolation and maintain community involvement. The teachers help their clients to come to realize that they don't need eyesight to live a full, happy, and independent life.

Throughout the pandemic, our library continued to send out books in braille, large print, and on audio cartridge to patrons. The library also introduced a service where patrons could listen to a book being read over the phone and engage in discussion. We were one of a very few libraries across the country who maintained book circulation and our patrons greatly appreciated the commitment and effort demonstrated by our library staff.

Action Steps:

- Continue and expand outreach efforts to raise awareness of older blind services throughout the state. (Director/IL Director)
- Increase participation in community-based trainings among IL clients to promote stronger community integration and support networks. (IL Director)
- Continue to innovate by leveraging technology, the use of different communication methods and programming to increase patron access to information and opportunities for connection. (Library Director)

Measures for Goal 2:

- Number of individuals successfully completing their training objectives and exiting the program. (IL Director)
- Number of new referrals. (IL Director)
- Number of library programs being offered for older adults focusing on library services and programs using different formats to deliver the programs.

Goal 3: Preparing the Next-Gen Workforce

Strategy 3.1: Bringing forward an underutilized pool of talented and motivated workers.

With proper training and opportunity, blind people can do nearly every job available. However, misconceptions and lack of understanding often make employers wary of hiring blind people. At the same time, employers report that they struggle to find employees who are motivated and possess good problem-solving skills. We work with employers to overcome these concerns and get any assistive technology that they might need. We help these employers find the quality workers they need to grow their business.

Action Steps:

- Increase employer awareness of the capabilities of blind workers through networking, presentations, community events, and other employer engagement activities. (VR Program Administrator/CIO)
- Promote the capabilities of blind workers through State Workforce Development Board participation. (Director)
- Develop opportunities for blind workers to enter registered apprenticeships and industry recognized apprenticeship programs. (VR Program Administrator)

Strategy 3.2: Working with WIOA partners to make America's Job Centers accessible to blind and otherwise disabled job seekers

We have worked with IWD's thin client support team to make a free screen reader available on any America's Job Center training station. We are also participating in Disability Access Committees on the state and regional level to help ensure that everyone can benefit from all one-stop center services.

Action Steps:

- Continue and expand education and advocacy around systems and programmatic accessibility. (Director)
- Participate in local workforce board activities including disability access committees to develop partnerships that both connect clients with high-quality jobs and help local businesses meet their staffing needs. (VR Teams)

Strategy 3.3: Improving blind lowans' ability to adapt to technological change in the workplace.

We provide assistive technology training that teaches the underlying concepts rather than forcing students to follow step-by-step directions. We teach them how to teach themselves new programs and devices and focus on developing the ability to troubleshoot common problems. This helps our clients deal with the ever-increasing rate of change that will define the workplace of the future.

Action Steps:

- Increase capacity for technology training by continuing to train and upskill Vocational Rehabilitation teachers to provide basic technology training and better leverage Rehabilitation Technology Specialist time and expertise. (IBEIC & Field Training Director)

Strategy 3.4: Increase number of clients participating in post-secondary education and training

A recent study determined that one of the three factors most likely to predict attainment of gainful employment for blind adults is education beyond the secondary level ("Rehabilitation and Employment Outcomes for Adults Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired: An Updated Report", Bell & Silverman 2018). In March 2018, IDB revised its policies surrounding sponsorship of post-secondary training in order to encourage more blind lowans to complete education and training beyond high school. This initiative is also in alignment with the goals of the Governor's "Future Ready Iowa" programs.

Action Steps:

- Use CSNA, survey, and other sources to identify current client barriers. (VR Director)
- Use O&M, technology, and literacy assessments to determine client skills gaps and provide disability related skills training to eliminate these gaps. (IBEIC & Field Training Director)

Measures for Goal 2:

- Average hourly wage at exit.
- Number of clients exiting in employment (this includes only clients exiting after being determined eligible for services).
- Number of measurable skill gains achieved by clients.
- Number of clients participating in post-secondary education or training.

Key Performance Indicators

1. VR client Average hourly wage at exit.
2. Number of youth program participants in all programs expressed as a percentage of eligible students with disabilities.
3. Number of Independent Living Older Blind Clients reporting that they are able to maintain their living situation and independence within their homes and communities.