2017 Annual Report

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

And

New Mexico Commission for the Blind

State Rehabilitation Council

October 1, 2016 to September 30, 2017

**New Mexicans with Vision Loss**

Number of persons in New Mexico who are blind or who have serious difficulty seeing

Male - 30,176

Female - 35,432

Total = 65,608

Under 18 - 3,320

18 to 64 - 31,583

65 and Older - 30,705

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, 2015 American Community Survey (Census)

1-Year Estimate/Updated January 2017

**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, which is now Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. The SRC works in close partnership with the Commission by helping to formulate vocational rehabilitation policies and priorities. The primary product of this partnership is the Commission’s portion of the Combined State Plan, which is 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, an individual who has been in an accident and has become blind as a result, a person who is a senior with age-related macular degeneration, or whether you have any one of a number of other conditions that might have caused your blindness, 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

Dallas Allen, Commissioner - Albuquerque

Jim Babb, Commissioner - Albuquerque

**State Rehabilitation Council Members, Commission for the Blind**

For the Federal Fiscal Year October 1, 2016 through September 30, 2017

**Council Members**

Thomas P. O’Brien, Chair - Edgewood

Coby Livingstone, Vice-Chair - Albuquerque

Lila Martinez, Secretary - Las Cruces

Urja Lansing, Executive Committee - Albuquerque

Lucy Birbiglia, Executive Committee - Albuquerque

Bernadine Chavez, Client Assistance Program - Albuquerque

Paula Seanez, 121 Project - Navajo Nation

Peggy Chong - Albuquerque

Christine Hall - Albuquerque

Brianne Kotschwar - Albuquerque

Greg Trapp, Executive Director, ex officio – Albuquerque

December 29, 2017

The Honorable Susana Martinez

Governor of the State of New Mexico

State Capitol, Fourth Floor

Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503

Dear Governor Martinez:

In accordance with 28-7-17(H) NMSA 1978, the Commission for the Blind hereby submits its Annual Report for the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2017.

The most significant development during this last year is the ongoing implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which replaced the Workforce Investment Act. According to the final set of “Standards and Indicators” issued under the Workforce Investment Act, the Commission ranked 1st in the nation for clients who primarily rely on their own earnings after receiving services, and 8th for the starting wage compared to the average state wage. One of the most significant changes under WIOA is the requirement that 15 percent of our federal vocational rehabilitation funds be spent on provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students aged 14 to 21. While increasing spending on some transition services, this requirement reduces the funds that are available for other types of transition services that are not allowed under Pre-ETS. The requirement to spend 15 percent on Pre-ETS also reduces the amount of funds that are available to serve adults. Despite this additional requirement, the Commission is serving all eligible consumers.

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,

Greg D. Trapp, J.D.

Executive Director

Arthur A. Schreiber

Commission Chairman

December 29, 2017

The Honorable Susana Martinez

Governor of the State of New Mexico

State Capitol, Fourth Floor

Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503

Dear Governor Martinez:

Pursuant to Section 105(c)(5) of the Rehabilitation Act, the State Rehabilitation Council hereby submits its Annual Report for the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2017. The Council worked closely with the Commission to implement the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, including significant areas of change such as the strengthening of relationships with partner agencies, and the requirement that 15 percent of vocational rehabilitation funds be reserved for provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). Our accomplishments include:

* The Council helped the Commission determine that it had sufficient funds to provide all of the required Pre-ETS services
* The Council made recommendations that resulted in revisions to agency policies.
* The Council made recommendations for the construction of an apartment facility at the Orientation Center in Alamogordo.

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

**State Rehabilitation Council, Goals and Priorities**

The State Rehabilitation Council met on February 22, 2016, and adopted the following Goals and Priorities as a part of the Combined Plan that was submitted pursuant to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act:

a. 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 will work cooperatively with the identified partner entities by designating specific liaisons and points of contact, by providing information, and by entering into cooperative agreements where appropriate.

b. 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 liaisons and 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.

c. 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 delayed by a significant state budget deficit that has resulted in reduced funds for new construction. The agency will work to obtain necessary approvals to construct the proposed apartment facility once funding is available. The agency has obtained architectural drawings of the proposed apartments, and is working with the Facilities Management Division with the goal of obtaining funding for construction.

d. 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 outreach methods. On August 18 and 19, 2017, the Commission partnered with the National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico to sponsor Living the Life You Want as a Blind or Visually Impaired Individual, a two-day workshop in Farmington. On October 1, 2017, the agency was featured in Opening Doors: New Tools for Blind, Visually Impaired People; a two-page feature that ran in the Life in New Mexico supplement to the Albuquerque Journal. On July 5, 2017, KRQE ran a news story featuring an agency consumer who participated in the Students in Transition to Employment Program in Albuquerque.

e. 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 and outreach 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 Alamogordo. On February 11, 2017, the agency sponsored a workshop on Unified English Braille. The Commission also sponsored a National Certification in Unified English Braille exam in Albuquerque on October 22, 2016, an exam in Albuquerque on April 22, 2017, and an exam in Alamogordo on April 29, 2017.

f. 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. This has been reflected by strong performance on Indicator 1.5, which measured the average starting salary of consumers against the average state wage. While this Indicator is no longer in place under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the agency will continue to provide services that will enable our consumers to obtain high starting wages. For instance, for the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2017, the average starting wage for consumers was $19.79.

g. 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.

Agency Response: The agency is committed to providing a quality Newsline service. The agency has added additional publications, including the Gallup Independent and CNN News in Spanish. The agency will continue to sponsor NFB-Newsline in New Mexico, which provides access to over 400 national publications.

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

Agency Response: The agency is committed to using the Skills Center to meet the needs of vocational rehabilitation consumers. As a result, the agency used the Skills Center to provide training to the Students in Transition to Employment Program, as well as student seminars, Braille seminars, and college prep workshops. 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.

i. Enhance the number and quality of employment outcomes through the provision of independent living training to vocational rehabilitation consumers, including through the proposed apartment training facility at the Orientation Center.

Agency Response: The agency continues to refer vocational rehabilitation consumers to receive independent living services, recognizing the need for consumers to be able to function independently to become employed. The agency recognizes the benefit of providing training at the Orientation Center that is realistic and appropriate to the individual needs of consumers, and is actively seeking to build apartments that can be used to provide more realistic and appropriate training. The agency also hosted independent living trainings at the Skills Center.

j. 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.

k. 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 School for the Blind.

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.

l. 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.

m. 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. On August 18 and 19, 2017, the agency partnered with the National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico to sponsor Living the Life You Want as a Blind or Visually Impaired Individual, a two-day workshop in Farmington. On October 1, 2017, the agency was featured in Opening Doors: New Tools for Blind, Visually Impaired People; a two-page feature that ran in the Life in New Mexico supplement to the Albuquerque Journal.

n. 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 the New Mexico Legal Aid Society. The agency has also provided training on benefits to vocational rehabilitation counselors and consumers.

**Accomplishments Federal fiscal year 2017**

**Services Delivered**

Vocational Rehabilitation Program - 342

Students in Transition to Employment Program - 24

Orientation Center - 21

Business Enterprise Program - 20

Persons who took the NCUEB exam - 19

Independent Living / Older Blind Program - 480

Emergency Eye Care Program - 15

**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 to become employed in ways that are appropriate to each individual’s strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice. Despite the lingering impact of the Great Recession, the Commission placed 18 consumers in employment during the federal fiscal year that ended on September 30, 2017, and 25 in employment during the state fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2017. The Commission also served 342 VR consumers. 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 18 consumers that the Commission placed in employment in the federal fiscal year earned an average starting hourly wage of $19.79, and the 25 consumers placed during the state fiscal year earned an average starting salary of $22.94.

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 is serving all eligible vocational rehabilitation consumers. Unlike a majority of vocational rehabilitation agencies, the Commission does not anticipate having to implement a waiting list for services.

“Feel free to come to us and we can develop a plan of services: We can provide the technology, we can provide training, we can pay for tuition – whatever is necessary for you to achieve that career we can work with you.”

Jim Salas, Deputy Director

Vocational Rehabilitation Program

**Technology for Children**

The Commission’s 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 program is designed to help blind and visually impaired children achieve the Commission’s ultimate goal of becoming successfully employed. The program does this by providing these children with needed assistive technology, by helping the Commission build and strengthen relationships with local school districts, by identifying eligible students, and by providing information about transition and other vocational rehabilitation services. The Technology for Children program is administered in partnership with the New Mexico School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The program receives funding from the New Mexico Department of Health.

Kelly Burma, Skills Center Coordinator

**Transition Services**

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act made significant changes in the area of transition services, most especially the requirement that 15 percent of the Commission’s vocational rehabilitation funds be spent on provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) on students’ age 14 to 21. This requirement to spend 15 percent of our vocational rehabilitation grant on Pre-ETS means that the Commission must spend $693,000 on Pre-ETS or risk federal sanctions. The Pre-ETS services include five required activities, four coordination activities, and nine authorized activities. The Rehabilitation Services Administration issued regulations on June 30, 2016, allowing both high school and college students to be served under Pre-ETS. However, the regulations also prohibited using Pre-ETS funds for tuition and most technology purchases. On January 10, 2017, the Rehabilitation Services Administration issued a guidance statement clarifying that assistive technology could be purchased using Pre-ETS funds if the technology constituted "auxiliary aids and services needed by a student with a disability to access or participate in pre-employment transition services." Anything that is not an auxiliary aid or service will need to be paid for with regular vocational rehabilitation funds.

The Commission provided a wide range of transition services to blind and visually impaired students during the year. The goal was to enhance the quantity and quality of employment outcomes that would eventually be achieved by consumers aged 14 to 21. The Commission’s VR Counselors, VR Program Manager, Transition Coordinator, and Skills Center Coordinator all routinely attended Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. This practice helps with the coordination of resources and information. The Commission’s goal is to attend IEP meetings by age 14, and in some cases even earlier.

One of the most significant challenges the Commission faces in the area of transition is a decreasing rate of Braille proficiency in students who are blind or visually impaired. Complicating the challenge is the transition to Unified English Braille, which is a new Braille code that took effect in 2016. On February 11, 2017, the Commission sponsored a workshop on Unified English Braille presented by the Institute on Blindness, with 22 persons participating. The Commission sponsored a National Certification in Unified English Braille (NCUEB) exam in Albuquerque on October 22, 2016, an exam in Albuquerque on April 22, 2017, and an exam in Alamogordo on April 29, 2017. A total of 19 persons took the NCUEB exams. The purpose was to increase the Braille proficiency of Commission staff, to build relationships with school districts, and to improve Braille literacy. As a result of the Commission's efforts to increase Braille proficiency, there are 27 persons with NCUEB certification residing in New Mexico. New Mexico also has the highest number of NCUEB certified teachers in the nation, and approximately 20 percent of all NCUEB teachers reside in New Mexico.

**Students in Transition to Employment Program - (STEP)**

The Students in Transition to Employment Program (STEP) is a summer training program that provides Commission consumers with a variety of skills instruction and a paid workplace 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. STEP served 24 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, and others participated in STEP in their home communities.

For a blind person to become successfully employed, he or she must acquire a positive attitude about blindness and learn essential blindness skills. The skills learned include Braille, orientation and mobility, cooking, and computer technology. The STEP participants engaged in activities designed to reinforce the skills they have learned and to instill positive attitudes about blindness. The activities included tandem cycling, water sports at Elephant Butte, hiking, 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 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 21 consumers in the skills of blindness during the year. Thirteen of those served were adults and there were eight transition students in the summer STEP program. The Center is located in Alamogordo and serves consumers from throughout the state. The 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 planning on 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. It is hoped that construction can start in 2018 or 2019.

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 large conference room where seminars are held. The Center also has an exercise gym that is equipped with state-of-the-art equipment that helps students improve their fitness level and increase their stamina.

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.

Lucy Alexander, Deputy Director

Orientation Center

**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 significantly less likely to own a computer and access the Internet, including one study that showed that only 54 percent of persons with disabilities access the Internet, compared to 81 percent for persons who do not have disabilities. 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 Braille note takers. The assistive technology program conducted technology evaluations; delivered computers, scanners, printers, and video magnifiers; performed hardware or software upgrades; and provided software or hardware repairs. Technical assistance was also provided.

“Mastery of technology is essential for competing in the digital age. It’s great when it works--frustrating and debilitating when it doesn’t. With appropriate training, motivation, and opportunity, assistive technology can be empowering, exciting, and life-changing. We can help to maximize the gain and minimize the pain.”

Curtis Chong, Manager

Assistive Technology

**Business Enterprise Program**

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides employment opportunities for legally blind individuals who wish to operate food service facilities. The BEP has food establishments from small stands, to vending routes, to a full military cafeteria at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque. The BEP provides public and government employees with quality food service that is conveniently located within government buildings. This last year, 20 blind persons participated in the BEP program, and vendor earnings were $3,139,448, with $201,841 paid in gross receipt taxes.

“What makes the Business Enterprise Program unique and different from other programs is that we give blind individuals an opportunity to work for themselves, to be entrepreneurs, own their own business, manage their employees, and fully execute their passion for food service as a business owner.”

Diana Martinez, Manager

Business Enterprise Program

**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 91 federal agencies, as well as to 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, Consumer Reports, 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 27th year of operation. This past year Newsline added the Gallup Independent, as well as the Spanish edition of CNN News.

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.

Krista Mireles, Coordinator

Newsline

**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 classrooms 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. The Skills Center was used to teach young students participating in the STEP program, to provide a venue for the Unified English Braille trainings and certification exams, a college prep workshop, and to instruct many other persons who were attending different events and seminars.

Photo of Don and Nancy Burns presenting at the monthly Creating Options meeting at the Skills Center.

**New Mexico Commission for the Blind Programs and Services**

**Independent Living and Older Blind**

**Independent Living and Older Blind Program**

The purpose of the Independent Living (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 provided intensive training to 480 consumers, and basic services to hundreds more. Most of these consumers were 55 and older, or “Older Blind.”

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, magnification devices, Braille writing equipment, talking calculators, and Braille or talking watches.

The Independent Living and Older Blind (IL) program serves a rapidly growing population of persons who are blind or visually impaired. The independent living teachers serve the entire state, often traveling over long distances to reach consumer homes in rural areas. The teachers engage in frequent outreach to senior centers, and work with many blind seniors who are living in assisted living facilities and nursing homes. The teachers also serve consumers who are newly blinded and participating in the Commission’s vocational rehabilitation program. Approximately 3.5 percent of the population over 65 is legally blind, and the aging of the population is resulting in a dramatic increase of seniors who are blind or visually impaired.

The senior population is rapidly becoming more technologically literate, and the IL program is seeing more consumers who have needs related to computers and other technologies.

**Emergency Eye Care**

The Emergency Eye Care Program seeks to prevent blindness and restore vision through medical intervention. The program provided 15 emergency eye surgeries to qualifying New Mexico residents 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 2017**

Vocational Rehabilitation Consumers $1,424,299

Independent Living Consumers $126,538

Note: The foregoing figures reflect the cost of items and services that are actually purchased for vocational rehabilitation and independent living consumers. They do not reflect the costs associated with attendance at the Orientation Center; training provided directly by Independent Living teachers or Technology specialists; counseling and guidance provided by Vocational Rehabilitation counselors; participation in the Business Enterprise Program; use of Newsline for the Blind; services through Technology for Children; or services through Emergency Eye Care. They also reflect the much higher portion of federal funds that are mandated for use only on behalf of vocational rehabilitation consumers, and the very small amount of federal funds that the commission receives for independent living services.