

IOWA DEPARTMENT FOR THE BLIND  
STATE STRATEGIC PLAN  
JULY 1, 2011 – JUNE 30, 2014

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## MISSION

The Iowa Department for the Blind is the means for persons who are blind to obtain for themselves universal accessibility and full participation as citizens in whatever roles they may choose, including roles that increase family income, create jobs, improve educational outcomes, and reduce reliance on public services.

## VISION

**It's okay to be blind.**

## PHILOSOPHY, VALUES, AND PRINCIPLES

The programs of the Iowa Department for the Blind are based on the belief that the real problems of blindness do not lie in the physical loss of eyesight but rather in the misconceptions about blindness held so widely by the general public and by many blind persons themselves. The Department for the Blind maintains:

- That these misconceptions have given rise to forms of discrimination that have denied blind persons first-class citizenship.
- That programs and services enabling blind persons to deal with problems arising from the physical loss of sight must be based on a belief in the competence of persons who happen to be blind.
- That blind persons constitute a cross-section of the population and that the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business, given proper training and opportunity.
- That persons who are blind, both as individuals and in organized groups, must take the lead in determining the kinds of services they may need to empower themselves more fully.

State and federal legislative mandates and the expressed needs of customers form the basis for the Department's mission. To fulfill these commitments, the Department functions in four main areas essential to meeting the needs of blind Iowans: Vocational Rehabilitation, Independent Living Rehabilitation, Business Enterprises Program, and Library and Information Services. The Department strives to maintain customer input for all facets of these core services.

The Department 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 persons 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 the blind constitute a minority group who must overcome the misconceptions and discriminations that result from this status.
- That agencies and programs for the blind should assist blind persons and their organizations to succeed in fulfilling their aspirations.
- 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 persons who may be blind.

## ASSESSMENT

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

Department staff define annual outcomes and review progress toward defined outcomes quarterly. In addition, the Department completes a Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment every three years as mandated by federal law. This assessment seeks to identify the vocational rehabilitation needs of blind and visually impaired Iowans who are minorities, who may be un-served or underserved by the Department, who are served through other components of the Workforce Investment System or by Community Rehabilitation Providers.

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 the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) to receive their specific input.

Staff members also continue to meet with customer support groups when opportunities arise at gatherings in local communities in Iowa and actively seek input. Input has also come from meetings of the Department's Independent Living Advisory Committee, the Library Consumer Advisory Committee, and the Business Enterprises Program State Committee of Blind Vendors.

Department staff members solicit recommendations from the 100% consumer controlled Iowa Commission for the Blind.



## INTERNAL STRENGTHS

### ***Guiding Philosophy***

All staff have a strong sense of mission, values, and philosophy. Through staff trainings, the Department has maintained a work culture that adheres to and believes in its mission and guiding philosophy of blindness. The Department provides services and training to clients based on this philosophy because it is effective.

### ***Qualified - Motivated Staff***

Department staff are dedicated and highly qualified. They bring a variety of educational and life experiences that allow them to address the unique needs of blind lowans and other stakeholders. In addition, they retain their skills by seeking out and taking advantage of new approaches or technology and adapting them to our approach.

Staff are consistently responsive to our clients', stakeholders', and partners' needs. Staff are deeply committed to providing individualized and direct line service to lowans who are blind or visually impaired. Internal rules and procedures are defined by customer and staffing needs, rather than the reverse.

### ***Collaboration***

Each division views itself as an integral part of the Department's work. Further, collaboration among the different programs is strong with staff working together to reinforce the services provided by each other.

The Department works to maintain interagency collaborations and participates in activities to promote statewide services to lowans with disabilities.

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## INTERNAL CHALLENGES

### ***Staffing Changes***

In the next five years, thirty percent of the staff will be eligible for retirement. The loss of experience and knowledge will require the Department to invest time and resources into training. The Department will likely encounter competition in hiring as the number of workers retiring will not be unique to this agency.

As funding levels stagnate and costs rise, the Department faces the challenge of providing significant and meaningful services with fewer resources to do so.

Staffing levels have declined in recent years and this is likely to continue. Matching service needs to staff capacity is likely to become a greater issue over the next five years.

The demographics of Iowa's blind population are changing. We are encountering more individuals with additional significant disabilities, disruptive home lives, and addictions. This change in demographics requires field staff to provide more intensive services. Further, Iowa has a large older blind population. The need for the provision of training in independent living skills is greater than the resources allocated for this purpose.



New work rules will have an impact on the ability of field staff to provide timely services.

To address these challenges, management staff are developing a workforce plan based on an analysis of current and future staffing needs. The plan will guide hiring and training decisions to ensure the Department has staff with the knowledge and skills needed to achieve its strategic and performance goals.

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## EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

### ***More with Less***

Federal appropriations for vocational rehabilitation programs have not significantly increased in several years. Vocational rehabilitation programs nationwide receive only annual increases based on the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPIU). Further, the allocation formula, which is based on per capita income and population, results in uneven distribution of funds.

Simultaneously, costs for providing services have increased significantly. Annual salary and benefits increases have been implemented by the state legislature, other agencies, and unions without additional funding available to cover these costs. Rising fuel costs greatly increase travel costs. High travel costs can have an impact on the Department's ability to provide the direct line and timely services that are so highly valued here. Other costs, such as technology, have outpaced the annual cost of living increases.

### ***Social Attitudes***

Misconceptions about the abilities of blind and visually impaired individuals remain pervasive. Societal attitudes are a severe impediment to placing individuals in employment, encouraging blind lowans to participate in their communities, and to remain independent in their home life.

Our society does not see the value in government helping others become self-sufficient. Instead, public assistance programs are or are viewed as reinforcing dependence. For instance, Social Security work rules can still be a barrier to working at self-sufficiency.

### ***Technology***

The use of information technology in the workforce poses unique challenges for people who are blind or visually impaired. While nonvisual access technology (which can deliver information in Braille, speech, or through video magnification) has broadened opportunities for blind individuals, many computer programs and data systems used by employers are either difficult or impossible to use with nonvisual access technology, thereby curtailing job opportunities.

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## EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITIES

### ***Technology***

Advancements in several technology areas have improved independent access to information. While challenges remain, improvements to adaptive technology have given blind and visually impaired individuals access to sophisticated workplace and communication technologies. Further, the conversion to digital media has made audio information easier to access and use.

### **Consumer Organizations**

Iowa's blind consumer groups are organized and motivated to retain high quality services and VR programs. In addition, members of these organizations serve as role models and sources of support for those Iowans who have recently experienced significant vision loss.

## **CORE FUNCTIONS**

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### **LIBRARY FOR THE BLIND AND PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED**

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

- Circulates books and magazines on cassette tape, in Braille, and in large print to eligible borrowers throughout the state. The Library maintains a collection of over 88,000 book titles and makes available to its borrowers over 120 different magazines. Because the Library is a cooperating member of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), its borrowers have access to all NLS services.
- Transcribes print materials into Braille and recorded formats. Employment-related, educational, and leisure materials not already available in alternative media are transcribed upon request. The Library also transcribes other magazines and books appropriate for its collection and acquires instructional and employment materials for students and workers. The Library's Instructional Materials Center (IMC) locates textbooks and other educational materials for Iowa's K-12 and college students who cannot use standard print. The IMC also locates job-related materials for employed Iowans for whom standard print is not an option.
- Maintains a Career Resource Center which houses career related books and employment guides in a variety of formats including Braille, cassette and E-file. The Center also includes an Internet connected computer used by clients to research employment opportunities and to apply for positions on-line. The computer features a refreshable Braille display, screen access software, and a scanner for turning print resources into voice.
- Provides independent access to the Library's collection through the On-Line Public Access Catalog (OPAC). Linked to the Department's web site, OPAC allows borrowers to search the Library's collection, select books, and put them on reserve.
- Circulates descriptive videos enhanced with audio descriptions. These videos range in subject from popular movies to documentaries for audiences of all ages.
- Maintains 11,000 playback machines and accessories for borrowers to listen to recorded media.

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## 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 it. Services may include:

- **Training:** Training to help individuals achieve the vocational goals they have selected. Individuals may need training to acquire the skills of blindness and vocational training or post-secondary education.
- **Rehabilitation technology services:** Through such services as job site assessment, procurement of access technology, and training in the use of adaptive equipment, blind employees can perform their jobs competitively and efficiently. Individuals can 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 adapted equipment from the Department's loaner pool to help determine which items meet their training and employment needs.
- **Job placement services:** VR Counselors help job seekers develop a job-search plan, write a resume, practice interviewing, and locate job-search and placement resources.
- **Rehabilitation technology services:** Through such services as job-site assessment, procurement of appropriate access technology devices, and training in the use of adaptive equipment, blind employees can perform their jobs competitively and efficiently.
- **Post-employment follow-up:** After individuals have achieved their employment goals, VR Counselors can continue to serve as a resource to both employees and employers. Individuals can receive benefits counseling, and employers can receive assistance in recruiting, training, and retaining employees who are blind.

VR staff members also participate in a variety of outreach activities. These include:

- 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.
- Assistance to employers in producing employee manuals and training materials in such alternative formats as Braille, cassette tape, and electronic text.
- 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.

## INDEPENDENT LIVING REHABILITATION SERVICES

Through the Independent Living (IL) Rehabilitation Program, elderly or multiply disabled persons who are blind 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, IL staff members provide individual and group training in travel with the long white cane, Braille, keyboarding, cooking, cleaning, shopping, and leisure activities.
- Coordination of community services: IL staff members help locate and coordinate community-based services that allow blind individuals to remain independent.
- 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.

The Department provides specialized services to lowans who are deaf-blind so that they, like other blind persons, can benefit from the Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living Rehabilitation services that will enable them to live and work as full members of their communities. Staff members help procure adaptive equipment, make assessments, and arrange for educational and employment opportunities.

## GOALS AND STRATEGIES

### GOAL 1: INCREASE THE FAMILY INCOME OF BLIND IOWANS BY PROVIDING THE SKILLS AND SERVICES THEY NEED TO WORK COMPETITIVELY IN IOWA'S ECONOMY.

*Strategy 1.1:* Provide transition services to blind youth ages 14 and older who are beginning to exit the K-12 educational system.

*Strategy 1.2:* Develop and promote relationships with employers in all sectors to enhance opportunities of blind lowans to achieve fulltime employment.

*Strategy 1.3:* Develop a comprehensive, statewide network of independent contractors to provide training in the use of access technology for consumers and work with employers on worksite issues related to information technology.

*Strategy 1.4:* Use a variety of outreach activities to educate lowans, including employers and those who are newly blind or visually impaired, about the Department's services and about the capabilities of blind lowans.

#### Measures for Department Goal 1:

A. Percentage of transition students obtaining part-time employment.



- B. Ratio of average VR wage to average state wage as a percentage.
- C. Percentage of individuals with employment outcomes.
- D. Percentage of Orientation Center students who self-report an improvement in skills and attitude after Center training.

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## GOAL 2: INCREASE THE ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLIND IOWANS.

*Strategy 2.1:* Evaluate all aspects of the Business Enterprises Program (B.E.P.) to broaden opportunities, increase average incomes, and serve more blind Iowans.

*Strategy 2.2:* Maintain and expand the number of individuals hired by blind business owners by increasing and expanding business opportunities.

*Strategy 2.3:* Explore opportunities for training and internships for blind Iowans within and outside of the B.E.P. framework.

### Measures for Department Goal 2.

- A. Number of individuals participating in the B.E.P. program.
- B. Number of employees hired by B.E.P. managers.
- C. Average income of B.E.P. managers.

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## GOAL 3: IMPROVE THE EDUCATION OF BLIND IOWANS THROUGH INDEPENDENT ACCESS TO INFORMATION.

*Strategy 3.1:* Utilize public service announcements, newsletters and other outreach activities to market the wide variety of materials available through the Iowa Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

*Strategy 3.2:* Work closely with Iowa schools and area education agency personnel to fill requests for students' textbooks and educational materials in alternative media.

*Strategy 3.3:* Utilize new digital technologies, volunteers, and prison workers to ensure timeliness in responses to requests from students of all ages and employed persons for educational and professional materials in alternative formats.

### Measures for Department Goal 3:

- A. Total Library Readership
- B. Number of Volumes Circulated
- C. Total Applications for Library Services
- D. Total Requests Filled for Alternative Media Materials from the Library's Instructional Materials Center (IMC)



**GOAL 4: INCREASE THE INDEPENDENCE OF BLIND IOWANS AND THEREBY DECREASE DEPENDENCE ON STATE SERVICES AND PRESERVE FAMILY INCOME.**

*Strategy 4.1:* Provide skills training and related Independent Living (IL) services.

*Strategy 4.2:* Provide increased opportunities for peer interaction to help individuals develop a positive attitude about blindness and their abilities.

*Strategy 4.3:* Increase the capacity of community-based service providers to meet the needs of older individuals who are blind.

Measures for Department Goal 4:

A. Percentage of Independent Living clients indicating they have a more positive attitude about their blindness and their abilities after training.

B. Number of providers indicating they have a better understanding of the needs of older blind Iowans and how to utilize the Department's services.