

## **BSPC April 2024 Meeting**

### **Bureau of Customer and Community Blind Services Report to the Illinois Blind Services Planning Council**

**Report Date:** April 8, 2024

**Report Prepared by:** Kim Borowicz, Bureau Chief – Bureau of Customer and Community Blind Services (BCCBS)

#### **Updates on Hiring in BCCBS**

- BCCBS Field VR
  - The Assistant Bureau Chief, Ingrid Halvorsen, retired in December after many years of diligent service.
  - In January, eight O&M positions were posted in Aurora, Belleville, Champaign, Chicago, Mt. Vernon, Rock Island, Rockford, and Rolling Meadows.
- ICRE Wood Training Center
  - The Superintendent, Derrick Phillips, retired in December after many years of diligent service.
  - Current open positions at the training center are a morning Residential Care Worker and front desk receptionist. We are currently working on job descriptions to possibly post two additional O&M Instructor and four additional Rehabilitation Instructor positions. A Health & Wellness RI and Assistive Technology RI are currently at the training center under contract, and we are working on posting these two positions as well.
- Business Enterprise Program for the Blind (BEPB)
  - All positions in BEPB have been filled except the Administrative Assistant position, which will be posted soon.
  - On February 1<sup>st</sup> a new Budget & Contract Specialist started and on March 1<sup>st</sup> a new Business Consultant started, both in Springfield.
- Grants
  - A Grants Project Officer started on December 1<sup>st</sup>.

#### **Highlights**

- Business Enterprise Program for the Blind (BEPB) staff and the Illinois Committee of Blind Vendors (ICBV) held an in-person quarterly meeting on March 14th in Springfield, IL. Ms. Borowicz continues to be the Acting BEPB Program Administrator and meets with members of the ICBV weekly. Beginning in January the ICBV and BEPB started a workgroup that meets weekly to revise the Illinois Administrative Code rules for the blind vending program.
- The new Grants Project Officer attended a national conference in New Mexico in February for all States that receive Older Individual Blind grant funding.

- The Illinois Center for Rehabilitation and Education Wood Street (ICRE) held its graduation in December 2023 and welcomed new customers in January 2024. There are currently 19 commuter students, 7 staying in the dorm, 1 job retention student, and a Deaf Blind student attending ICRE Wood. A customer was recently hired by a drug store chain, another customer is being interviewed for a job with the State, and another customer was recently hired by a company providing virtual diversity trainings. The next graduation is Thursday, April 25<sup>th</sup> at 10:30am.
- The Bureau is working diligently on IT issues in the Bureau. The Bureau is also working on improving the accessibility of our documents and forms so they work with screenreading software and can be converted into Braille. DRS hired a Disability Assistance Accessibility Program Manager who is helping tremendously in these efforts.
- The Bureau Chief attending the Illinois Council of the Blind Conference in April and spoke at the Chicago chapter of the American Council of the Blind in January. She will also attend the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind in Bethesda, Maryland in April.

## **Division of Rehabilitation Services – Bureau Customer and Community Blind Services**

### **Field Service Report**

#### Field Service Staffing:

Since January 1, 2024, field positions are being filled:

- All Rehabilitation Counselor positions and Rehabilitation Case Coordinator positions in Region 1 have been filled. Region 1 has two Rehab Counselors who transferred from Bureau of Customer and Community Field Services (Rolling Meadows and Wood Street). There are two new Rehab Case Coordinators (Avalon Park and Wood Street). The two Wood Street staff are Spanish Speaking.
- All Rehabilitation Counselor positions and Rehabilitation Case Coordinator positions in Region 2 have been filled. Region 2 has two Rehab Case Coordinators who have transferred from Bureau of Customer and Community Field Services (Rockford and Waukegan). One Orientation and Mobility Specialist (Rockford). The two recently hired staff in Waukegan are Spanish Speaking.
- In Region 3, all Rehabilitation Counselor positions, and Rehabilitation Case Coordinator positions are filled.
- In Region 4 two previous Rehab Counselors have returned on a 75 day (Jacksonville), a new Rehab Counselor (Jacksonville) and one Rehab Case Coordinator (Springfield)

- Region 5 consists of three Rehab Counselors, two Rehab Coordinators, and one Rehab Instructor.
- Overall, BCCBS continues to work with Personnel to fill field vacancies.

General:

- This fiscal year, BCCBS VR is currently serving 1,579 customers and have successfully closed 82 people into competitive integrated employment.
- Timeliness from application to Eligibility, for this fiscal year, is 74% and from Eligibility to Plan status is 90%.
- A total of 79 customers have received 145 blind skill training services have been provided this FY.
- “Blindness 101” training is being provided on a weekly basis to newly hired BCCBS VR field staff. The training includes education and information of the causes of blindness and low vision, various assistive technology devices and items, and how to address the multiple components of the Vocational Rehabilitation process in serving our customers.

Acknowledgments:

- The Bureau of Customer and Community Blind Services recognizes and applauds the Illinois Council of the Blind in awarding Ms. Judy West, Rehabilitation Instructor in Region 3, the Victor Buttram Lifetime Achievement Award. This award reads as follows: “For a lifetime of successful implementation of needed vocational and educational programs that were crucial and helping blind and visually impaired persons obtain gainful employment and provided them with the necessary skills to lead a productive and meaningful lifestyle.” Ms. West provides a vast array of services, resources, information, training and instruction to individuals and community members which assist people in obtaining independence, strong self-esteem, and self-sufficiency.

### **BSPC Report from Illinois Council of the Blind**

Sharon attended the convention of the Illinois Council of the Blind in Springfield from April 5-7 at the President Abraham Lincoln Hotel. A number of individuals presented including staff from the Illinois School for the Visually Impaired (ISVI) and Stephen McMinn, the new director of the Illinois State Library Talking Book and Braille Service. I had hoped to introduced myself to them at the exhibit session held on Saturday, April 6 and to invite them to a future BSPC meeting;

however, the ISVI staff were unable to attend and I do not know if Mr. McMinn was able to make it either. I will keep their names for future contacts and hope to invite them to a future meeting. Kim Borowicz updated the group on BBS issues, and Colby Garrison from the national American Council of the Blind (ACB) office updated the group on ACB's initiatives.

We also received a presentation concerning the high speed rail project which has created a good deal of construction in downtown Springfield. Another topic for the afternoon session was Accessible Pharmacy which provides services to individuals with any disability.

Saturday April 6 was the evening of the annual banquet. Several awards were presented including one to Senator Tammy Duckworth. Rehab instructor Judy West from Champaign received an award for her teaching service and your own Sharon Howerton received the Thomas D. Bledsoe award for her many years of dedicated service to the blind and visually impaired community of the State of Illinois.

Some internal elections were held on Sunday morning April 7. The hottest topic of that session was discussion concerning the convention to be held in 2025. The membership voted for a hybrid convention with location to be determined.

The 2024 convention was hybrid with approximately 45 people in attendance in person and perhaps ten on Zoom. Those numbers are guesstimates.

Respectfully submitted,  
Sharon Howerton, ICB representative

### **National Federation of the Blind of Illinois BSPC Report for April 2024**

NFB of Illinois State Convention

The 2024 NFB of Illinois State Convention will take place on October 18th - 20th at the Chicago Marriott Naperville Hotel in Naperville, Illinois.

Keep an eye out for more information regarding the NFBI state convention in the coming months.

NFBI Bell Academy

The National Federation of the Blind of Illinois (NFBI) is sponsoring its 2024 BELL (Braille Enrichment for Literacy & Learning) Academies.

The NFB BELL Academy—which stands for National Federation of the Blind Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning®—helps blind and low-vision children, ages four through twelve, develop the literacy skills that will empower them to achieve their academic goals and live the lives they want. Students

receive Braille instruction and other nonvisual blindness skills through fun, hands-on learning. Take advantage of this opportunity for your child to connect with blind role models, students, and more!

If you know a student who may be interested in participating in the BELL Academy, visit <https://www.nfbofillinois.org/education-programs> for more information.

### State Scholarships

Visit [www.nfbofillinois.org/scholarships](http://www.nfbofillinois.org/scholarships) for information regarding our state scholarship program. Our scholarship program is a great opportunity for blind and low vision students to win funds to help pursue their educational goals.

Applications for the National Federation of the Blind State Scholarship Program ends on April 30th.

### Voting Rights

The NFB of Illinois, Access Living Chicago, Equip for Equality, Illinois Council of the Blind, Tusk Philanthropies, Secure Family Initiative and Reform for Illinois began meeting in August to secure the right for blind Illinoisians to vote privately and independently in the 2024 general election.

For more information, please contact Denise Avant at [davant1958@gmail.com](mailto:davant1958@gmail.com)

### Washington Seminar

The National Federation of the Blind annual Washington Seminar started with the Great Gathering on Monday, January 29, 2024, with meetings happening through February 2, 2024. Washington Seminar is an annual event where hundreds of blind people advocate for issues that impact blind and low vision Americans.

The Illinois delegation had meetings with all the members of congress in Illinois and both Senators.

### Federal Legislation

There are bills on the congress floor that the NFB of Illinois is seeking co-sponsorship for:

Medical Device Nonvisual Accessibility Act H.R. 1328  
Transformation to Competitive and Integrated Employment Act H.R. 1263  
Transformation to Competitive and Integrated Employment Act S. 533  
Access Technology Affordability Act H.R. 3702  
Access Technology Affordability Act S. 1467  
AV Accessibility Act: H.R.7126

Contact NFB of Illinois federal legislation co-chairs Denise Avant,

[davant1958@gmail.com](mailto:davant1958@gmail.com) or Dustin Cather, [cather.dustin@gmail.com](mailto:cather.dustin@gmail.com) to learn more about the legislative priorities of the National Federation of the Blind.