Board Meeting Reports

March 12, 2024

## Director's Report – Emily Wharton

IDB held quarterly All Staff meetings from February 13-16. During this time, we did quite a bit of training on our incoming IL and VR case management system. We greatly appreciated the staff's willingness to work through this significant change. We have had our prior system for about 20 years and while it has served us well, we are excited by the efficiencies that a more modern system will provide. We are looking to move to the new system in late March.

On February 19, Sarah Willeford and I presented to the Education Appropriation Committee at the Iowa State Capitol. We shared information about IDB programs and services. We have noticed that since realignment last year, there has been a bit of confusion about who IDB is, where we are located, and the services we provide. We took this opportunity to clear this up and give the Senators and Representatives a more complete understanding of how all our programs and services fit together to empower blind Iowans to be gainfully employed and live independently. The presentation was well received, and we were happy to hear a story from one of the representatives about how one of his constituents was helped by IDB services.

I am very pleased to share that after many years of serving in this capacity unofficially, on February 2nd, Sarah Willeford officially accepted the position of Deputy Director / Library Director. This is an important piece of ensuring solid continuance of governance and operations within our agency. Her leadership and management skills are excellent and have continued to grow over her ten years at IDB.

# CFO – Cheri Myers

## Federal Grant Update:

Enclosed Grant Report as of 1/31/2024.

## Budget Report:

Enclosed is the budget report on State FY24 through 1/31/2024. The report included compares year to date to the annual budget based on state fiscal year. The Gifts and Bequests report is at the bottom of the FY24 Budget report.

## Iowa Advantage Conversion:

The State of Iowa is moving to a new cloud-based version of I/3, the state accounting system called Iowa Advantage. The new Iowa Advantage will go live 3/18/2024. The IDB accounting department is working on training and processing all documents before the old system is closed on 3/8/2024. The week of conversion will be spent in training on Iowa Advantage and the new case management system and on verifying data pulled from I/3 to Iowa Advantage.

We are waiting to hear from the Legislature on the FY25 budget.

## State Fiscal Year End:

The accounting team is already working on and planning for State Fiscal Year End on 6/30/2024. We are cleaning up outstanding authorization payments, contacting vendors for invoices, verifying date of obligation on all transactions, etc.

## Other:

Jonna Modde has been hired as an Accounting Technician 2. Jonna has over 18 years of Accounts Payable experience.

# Communication – Connie Mendenhall

I am happy to report that all RTS positions have been filled. Wayne Turner and Reza Setayesch are currently completing Center training. Both new staff members bring many years of experience in Accessible Technology knowledge with them from their previous employment and will be excellent assets to the agency.

Currently we are working on building a curriculum that will include individual, community based and agency onsite trainings. The RTS’s ultimate goal is to provide the best client experience while providing the skills needed to become empowered, independent individuals so they can meet their VR goals.

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An I.T. Support Ticket system has been implemented across the agency to maximize our Computer Specialist and Data Analyst workload. Staff members now submit a Help ticket through Slack and our I.T. staff resolve the individuals’ issues. This system not only streamlines the staff members’ workload but also enables us to track and identify systemic problems and our training issues.

Outreach for the months of January and February has been very successful. We have had four tours come through the building with approximately 40 people attending.

DSM magazine has reached out to IDB and will be publishing an article about how we train blind Iowans to navigate the world. I have been invited to IMT Insurance and Merchants Bonding Company to give presentations on what IDB does and how to include blind people into the workforce. I was asked to present to DMU to discuss how to work with a Blind patient. The three presentations combined had an audience total of over 300 people. We spent our day at the Capitol where Keri Osterhaus, Sarah Willeford, Leland Smith, and I spoke with various people about the various programs and services at IDB and the importance of Braille and its connection to literacy.

I am working with Ambrose to partner with various members of our community, currently the Des Moines Science Center and Art Center are planning a tour of the building and working on ways to partner with ID and the blind community.

# Education and Training – Ambrose Fowler-Harney

In the past quarter the Education and Training Team (ETT) has been working on preparing for LEAP and wrapping up the Spring Semester of YATP. Currently in YATP there are two students, both of whom have begun to participate in job shadowing, job workshop, mock interviews, and job skill development opportunities both at IDB and out in the larger community. The ETT teachers as well as career counselors have done an excellent job of pivoting their daily lessons to incorporate more career preparation and readiness. One student will age out of YATP at the end of this semester, however preliminary reports from counselors show that there are three students who will very possibly be attending YATP next year which would bring our total student population to four. Three new Youth Service Workers (YSW’s) have been hired with 2 of them in their center training and the third starting mid-March. This will assist with the transition of current YSW’s to new job roles at IDB. LEAP progress has gone well with the usual 40-hour weekend training being moved to take place over a week prior to students arriving in May due to scheduling and efficacy reasons. Most training has been outlined and planned as well as most of the preliminary activities for the Summer. Half of the projected necessary staff for LEAP have been hired as well.

# Independent Living Program - Kimberley Walford

## Multisector Plan for Aging Steering Committee

Director Emily Wharton appointed me to represent the Department for the Blind on the Multisector Plan for Aging (MPA) Steering Committee a Division on Aging and Disability Services under the State of Iowa Department of Health and Human Services. Approximately 44 meeting participants were invited to the first meeting which was scheduled for Wednesday, February 28. Attendees are a cross-section of professionals from all areas of State of Iowa government divisions and departments, private sectors, and non-profit organizations who in some way work with individuals who age with disability or simply aging in their home and community.

The MPA is a focused plan that is supposed to address challenges Iowans face accessing services throughout their lifespan and within the setting of their choice. The Steering Committee is a short-term, focused effort and as mentioned starts its first meeting in February. The Committee’s key priorities include:

1. To provide oversight and guidance on MPA subcommittee, membership, timeline, and process.
2. Determine topical areas to form subcommittee discussions around.
3. Gather input from subcommittees on priority issues, needs, and gaps related to each topic area.
4. Formulate recommendations on priority issues to address within the MPA.

During the MPA’s first meeting, they covered these objectives:

* Introduce the Multisector Plan for Aging (MPA) and highlight Iowa’s overall approach for the MPA.
* Establish understanding of MPA Steering Committee roles and responsibilities.
* Review Steering Committee timelines, deliverables, and next their steps.

## Independent Living Integration Training

Our Independent Living (IL) Division and Iowa Blindness Empowerment and Independence Center partners each year to host IL Integration. Our next training program will be March 24 - 29, 2024. We have three new participants who have been selected to attend training and one returning participant who has agreed to be our mentor during our March training event. Historically, mentors who are chosen to participate have gone out of their way to help new participants adjust, learn, and enjoy their new experience.

When an IL Integration mentor commits to assist during training, these are their key responsibilities:

* Provide general peer support to all IL Integration participants (answer questions, provide encouragement, share personal experiences, etc.),
* Be a good role model for the proper use of learning shades and the long, white cane,
* Be a liaison between participants and staff to ensure there is good communication among all,
* Assist participants in knowing the schedule for each day and keeping them on schedule,
* Promote IDB’s positive philosophy towards blindness,

Once again, we are pleased to share that the Iowa Council of the United Blind (ICUB), Des Moines Chapter, and the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa, Des Moines Chapter, has agreed to sponsor one evening each where they will meet with the IL Integration participants, provide a meal, and share their own program. We appreciate their collaboration and the positive outcome it generates for those served.

## OIB-TAC Conference Training

The Older Individuals who are Blind-Technical Assistance Center (OIB-TAC) held there 2024 annual conference for program managers in Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 28 and 29. The conference theme was “Continual Improvement.” During the OIB-TAC Conference we had opportunities to learn in the following areas:

* A variety of models of OIB service,
* Services from a national perspective,
* Participate in interactive discussions with peers,
* Meeting with the Rehabilitation Services Administration OIB liaison, and
* Consider different approaches and strategies for managing an OIB program.

## Update Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)

On December 8, 2023, Amy Robasse, the SILC Executive Director (ED), resigned from her position. Currently they are planning to expand their search for a new Executive Director given they did not have an adequate pool of job candidates.

## Independent Living Client Stories

First story:

A 61-year-old female and new Independent Living client, wanted to participate in a Community-Based Training (CBT) so that she could receive intensive blindness skills training before she traveled to her winter home in Arizona. She found everyday tasks becoming increasingly challenging and frustrating due to her rare hereditary eye condition. She reported that she did not want to depend on her husband for everything in her life. Her goals were to be able to cook meals, do the laundry, clean the house, and go shopping all on her own. Even though she has been around many blind family members for years, when she came to the Iowa Department for the Blind building for training it brought on intense emotions for her. She said, “It really hit me.” She had to face her blindness head-on and could no longer push the fact aside. Meeting the other participants was one of the things, ultimately, she enjoyed most from the experience. They shared with each other stories of dealing with their blindness; everything from interactions with family members, effects on self-esteem, mental health, and their desire for independence. She left the Department with a new perspective about her own blindness. She learned that she is not alone in her situation. After preparing a meal at this training while wearing learning shades, she had more hope for her future. She realizes what blind people can accomplish with training.

Second Story:

A younger blind male client who worked professionally painting cars and boat trailers didn’t think he could non-visually paint. His IL teacher encouraged him to start with small canvas paintings. Working with his daughter to select colors, he painted a horizontal 8x10 canvas with colors of bright orange, light orange and yellow blended to create a sunset at the bottom of the canvas toward the top edge, stopping in the middle. In the center of the canvas stands a leafless tree with various sized branches extending from the trunk. Next, he plans to use scented paints or texture added to paint to independently identify and select the paint colors. He was very pleased with his work and now finds a level of joy to return to his passion.

# Iowa Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped Report and Statistics – Sarah Willeford

## Library Updates

On Saturday, February 24th the Library hosted the Iowa Regional Braille Challenge at the Department. This year’s theme was *Braille is Beautiful*. Over 85 attended the different activities happening throughout the day. 13 students participated in the Braille Challenge. The library also held a Braille and Tactile Workshop for 34 parents, educators, braille transcribers, and librarians providing hands-on learning activities and information about accessible educational materials.

Our library staff worked with the National Library Service to transition all magazine circulation to our library. As of February 1st, magazine subscriptions that were previously sent to patrons by NLS will now be sent to patrons directly from our library. Our library is the first Regional Library in the county to switch to this magazine circulation model and we look forward to being able to provide more flexibility to our patrons who subscribe to library magazines.

The Instructional Material Center (IMC) Team continues to work with school districts on ordering and procurement of accessible educational materials including training on production tracking software called Athena to place orders. The IMC is also working with vendors and contractors providing braille and large print transcription in setting up their access to Athena. This will provide everyone involved in ordering, procuring, assigning, and producing student materials with the ability to track order statuses. To date, during the 2023/2024 school year the IMC saved school districts over $200,000 in current and future costs through the library collection.

The IMC continues to offer Braille Transcriber courses for Educators. There are currently two groups of participants taking the first course covering Lessons 1- 12 in the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled *Instruction Manual for Braille Transcribing*. It introduces braille and transcription. Our certified braille transcribers on staff are serving as mentors as the participants work through the lessons in the manual and in the online class and resources the IMC Team created to go along with the manual. Participants who complete Course 1 will be invited to continue to Course 2 which covers Lessons 13- 20 in the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled *Instruction Manual for Braille Transcribing*.  This course also includes the submission of the final manuscript to be reviewed for certification.  22 participants are currently enrolled in Course 1 or Couse 2.

We would like to welcome two new staff members to the library. In February, Brena Barton started as our Systems Librarian and Emily Zensen started as Receptionist.

## Library Programs and Outreach

Youth Programming:

* Fall programming began in September and includes weekly virtual story times, Crafting Your Story, and monthly Makerspace Monday programming that will be held in-person and virtually.
* The Story Box Program continues throughout the year. A box of activities, crafts, books, and book lists is sent each month around a theme to connect youth patrons with our collection and fun learning activities.
* Youth Service Librarian, Denise Bean and will be visiting school and public libraries this fall to provide the program, When Storytime Comes to You, focusing on the story of Louis Braille, braille, and hands on activities.

Adult Programming:

* The *Peek-a-Box Program* will continue in 2024 for patrons, ages 18 years and older. Each month patrons in the program receive a special box filled with books – audio or braille or large print – and goodies as we follow Interstate 80 from the west coast to the east coast reading books about or set in each state we pass through. Participants will also receive a tactile map of the United States with I-80 featured. Patrons who opt for audiobooks will receive a cartridge with 10-20 books dedicated to the theme of the month.  Patrons who choose to get braille or large print will receive 1-3 books around the theme.
* The Elizabeth Perowsky Volunteer Workshop and Luncheon will be held on Friday, April 19th at the Iowa Department for the Blind. We are excited to recognize all the wonderful volunteers and the hard work they have done in the past year.

## Online and Social Media

Library Blogs

* Turning the Pages Library Blog. Find information on library services, programs, and resources. <http://iowalibrary.blog>
* Instructional Materials Center Blog. For educators and transcribers. Information on accessible educational materials, braille transcription, universal design and more. <http://idbimclibrary.blog>

Podcasts

* Library News. A monthly podcast by library staff about upcoming library events, programs, latest books and more.
* Library Chat. A monthly podcast by library staff where we review books and podcasts on all types of subjects.
* Braille Bits. A podcast reviewing each Braille Bits lesson and a discussion with a special guest about braille.

# Iowa Blindness Empowerment and Independence Center Report – Karly Prinds

The Center has been busy this current quarter with teaching not only Center students, but staff in training. Currently, we have three students, and six staff in training. We will have a new student starting on March 11 and we are looking forward to his start of training. We also had one graduation and one termination.

Center staff cooked a big Italian meal for our students right before the holiday break. The meal consisted of homemade lasagna, salad, bread, and cheesecake. Our students were able to practice serving themselves in a buffet line, carrying their plates to the table, and eating, using nonvisual skills.

A staff member and I met with city planners upon their request in January to discuss public transportation and its effectiveness and importance throughout the city. They would like to meet again later this spring to follow up, especially with the talk of changes with the DART system.

Zach Ellingson, our Center Travel instructor, was interviewed by the DSM Magazine to discuss structured discovery training. They would like to do a follow up story with him this spring because after they saw our Center and what we stand for, they would like to dig deeper into our training and the successes of our students.

Our first activity for this year is axe throwing on February 28. Our activities help students not only get out into the community, but also help build their confidence, not only in themselves, but dealing with the public as well.

We have our first Self-Week of 2024 from March 3-9, and our first IL Integration week from March 24-29 so we are looking forward to both program weeks. These program clients will learn alongside our Center students during classes as well as mingle for dinner in a more relaxed setting so that our clients get a taste of our intense Center training and understand how important this training is. Our hope and plan is that with these programs, clients will then come to our Center for more intense training so that they will gain these nonvisual skills in all areas and be successful moving forward throughout their life. The beauty of our Center training is that once students have learned nonvisual skills and gained confidence, they will not need to come back to training as they have the skills to be successful.

We continue to build up our team of Vocational Rehabilitation Teachers (VRT's.) David Gillmore is now in the field full-time and is doing a great job! Vanasha Washington has been transitioning from her role as a Youth Service Worker and has been filling in for the YATP program, as well as starting to see VRT clients. Her transition to full-time VR teaching will be in early April, and we are looking forward to having her full time with our team.

Jeff Jasper was hired as a VRT on February 16, and will transition his role from a Youth Service Worker to fulltime VR teaching as of the end of the school year. We are happy to have him transfer to our team! It has been exciting to build back up our team of VR teachers and I look forward to their growth over the coming year.

I am also happy to announce that Luis Gutierrez transitioned from our Center Generalist to our Center Tech Instructor on December 22 and is doing a great job in his new role. We are currently in the interview process for our Generalist position and are hoping to fill it soon.

# Vocational Rehabilitation – Keri Osterhaus

## Position Vacancies and Changes

We continue to try to fill the DeafBlind Specialist position. This individual will be working with clients who are DeafBlind, and those who are blind and hard-of-hearing throughout the state of Iowa. The individual will be providing guidance and counseling, pre-employment transition services, training services and other VR services to clients. In addition, this individual will focus on providing support and technical assistance to employers, community rehabilitation providers and other stakeholders.

## Program Updates

IDB currently has 443 clients accessing vocational rehabilitation services. This program year, we have taken 112 applications for services and 102 individuals have been determined eligible for services. Ninety-nine plans for employment have been developed with IDB clients and clients are moving forward with accessing VR services. 80 students are enrolled in high school and 63 students are enrolled in post-secondary training programs.

At the last report, we have awarded five contracts with programs that would provide pre-employment transition services to students who are blind or have low vision. These programs are Sky’s the Limit, Clusiv, Helen Keller National Center, Public Consulting Group and Norman and Associates/Dale Carnegie. We have a team working with the different programs and they are beginning to implement services. On of these programs was held on February 21, 2024, where 8 students attended a virtual program – You Don’t Have to be Brilliant to be Resilient – which was hosted by Sky’s the Limit with special guest presenter, Dr. Rob Gilbert, a sports psychologist. This training offered clients the chance to practice real life advocacy, coping, and management skills. They were walked through a variety of scenarios where they could practice stress and time management skills. The students participated in important discussions related to advocating for themselves in their personal, education, and future employment lives.  Feedback from attendees was positive, with all of them reporting feeling more confident and knowledgeable about their abilities. We are looking forward to partnering again for additional programs.

IDB successfully exited 34 VR clients in competitive and integrated employment since July 1, 2023. These individuals worked an average of 31.26 hours per week and earned an average of $20.68/hour. The median wage for these individuals is $17.64/hour and the median hours is 37.5 hours/week. At the time of the last report, there were 13 individuals closed in a variety of positions. Since that report additional employment outcomes have been in the following positions: adjunct English instructor, auto technician, certified public accountant, childcare worker, database administrator, file clerk, general and operations manager, housekeeping cleaner, human resources specialist, kitchen worker, lawyer, lobby attendant, office manager, package handler, post-secondary teacher, public health administrator, social worker, stocker and order filler, teacher therapist and warehouse worker. There are currently 25 individuals working in positions that meet their employment goals.

IDB continues to collaborate with core partners on the four-year State Plan which engages partners across our state workforce system to effectively deliver workforce development services throughout Iowa. The Department and core partners posted a draft of the unified state plan at the end of December 2023 for public comment. Following the comment period and two town hall sessions (one virtual and one in-person), updates were made, and final submission planned for March 4, 2024, to ensure the required deadline is met. Implementation of the state plan will be on July 1, 2024.

Over the past few months, our VR and BEP teams have participated in several training opportunities. Most of our teams have now participated in either Youth or Adult Mental Health First Aid training and have completed the certification process. In addition, they have completed both the dependent adult abuse and child abuse Mandatory Reporter Trainings. Our BEP counselors and executive officer also participated in the RSVA Sagebrush 2024 National Business Enterprise Program Training Conference where Carrie Wadding, BEP counselor, was asked to be a part of a panel discussion and Enrique Mejia, rehabilitation technology specialist, participated in a discussion related to implementing technology solutions into the everyday business practices of a vendor. In January, Rebekah Traver, supported employment specialist, hosted a lunch and learn event for community rehabilitation providers to discuss partnership and training opportunities for providers interested in collaborating with IDB on providing services to individuals with the most significant disabilities. In February, several of our VR counselors participated with our workforce partners in trainings around the state to continue to build partnerships and knowledge of local workforce programs and services.

As we move forward into the next quarter, counselors will be participating in training focused on serving veterans. We are excited to partner with the Technical Assistance Center – Quality Employment to bring this training to our staff. JR Beamer, VR counselor and careers instructor will be providing training to local area veteran career planners in March to share information about IDB services. Our goal is to identify strategies to better collaborate and provide services to veterans, and their family members, who are blind or have low vision. Additional trainings will also be provided to additional community rehabilitation providers regarding IDB services, partnership opportunities, and discussing strategies to better serve individuals who are blind or have low vision.