June 4, 2024

Dear Governor Reynolds,

It is with a heavy heart that I am writing to notify you of my retirement from the position of Director of the Iowa Department for the Blind. My last day in this position will be July 18, 2024. As you know I have been battling stage IV kidney cancer since January of 2023. I have greatly appreciated your and your staff's willingness to let me take the time that I have needed for treatments and healing. However, this is a battle I most likely will be continuing to fight for the rest of my life.  Treatment side effects and the chronic conditions they create have greatly reduced my stamina and tolerance for stress. While my love of public service and passion for empowering blind Iowans to be gainfully employed and live independently has not diminished, I am afraid I can no longer continue to put forth the high level of energy and effort our citizens deserve.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the members of my leadership team for the many extra tasks they have taken on and extra effort they have put forth throughout my illness. I have complete confidence in Deputy Director Sarah Willeford's ability to keep the agency moving forward until a new Director can be hired.  She is an outstanding leader. I'm sure every Director says this, but I am continually amazed by the innovation, work ethic, and dedication of our agency staff.  Before I became ill, I had a practice of commenting on and signing every evaluation in the agency. This would regularly make me tear up with gratitude at how much heart and soul people put into serving blind Iowans.  I will greatly miss being a part of this extraordinary community.

It has been an outstanding opportunity and exciting challenge to occupy this historic position. I had hoped to be able to serve during the 100-year anniversary in April 2025. There is something deeply inspiring and humbling about working in the office once belonging to Kenneth Jernigan. Because of his legendary example, blind Iowans expect a great deal from the leadership of the Iowa Department for the Blind and will not tolerate anything less than excellence and equality. This can often make the position of Director exceedingly challenging. I would respectfully urge you to select a new Director in an open and public manner with the full engagement of blind Iowans. I would also strongly encourage you to select a Director who holds high expectations for those they serve and is dedicated to providing real, meaningful vocational rehabilitation and true independent living services. History has repeatedly shown that IDB Directors who do not meet these qualifications (or are not perceived to have met these qualifications by the public) experience a great deal of failure, frustration, and misery.

When I was a client of the Iowa Department for the Blind and a student in the Iowa Blindness Empowerment and Independence Center in the late 1990s, I could not have imagined that serving as   the IDB Director would be the culmination of a 26-year career in vocational rehabilitation. Having grown up legally blind in a small town in Northwest Iowa without access to blindness skill training or   
  
positive role models, I had believed that I was inherently less capable and worthy than my sighted friends and family. I had no belief that I could be employed or independent. I was so scared and hopeless that I attempted suicide one month before graduating from Drake University. The skills, positive attitude toward blindness, and self-confidence I gained in my training in the IDB center made me understand that     the amount of eyesight a person possesses has nothing to do with their worth, competency, or potential. This   saved my life. In addition, the services I received from IDB empowered me to    craft a highly meaningful career. I have so loved watching my former students and clients going on to teach others and achieve their dreams. I have been blessed by this rare opportunity to pay forward such a profound gift. Because of this and my deep love for and pride in the great state of Iowa, it has been a true honor and genuine privilege to serve.

Sincerely,



Emily Wharton  
Director  
Iowa Department for the Blind