Board Meeting Reports

June 3, 2025

# Interim Director's Report – Sarah Willeford

The Department’s budget how been approved by the Legislature and Governor.

The request included additional appropriations in the amount of $120,019.00 as well as a capital appropriations request of $559,000.00. This includes:

* **$53,019.00** in state appropriations, which will enable us to access an additional **$129,347.00** in federal funds designated for cost-of-living expenses.
* **$67,000.00** to restore the funding no longer provided under the State Plan for Independent Living.
* **$559,000.00** in capital appropriations to replace the chiller at the IDB building.

The Iowa Department for the Blind celebrated kicked off its Centennial Celebration with an open House on April 2nd. Over 200 individuals joined us to celebrate the 100 years of service, advocacy, and progress. Over the past century, countless individuals have benefited from our programs, gaining the skills and confidence needed to lead fulfilling lives. Through vocational training, orientation and mobility services, educational support, and employment initiatives, we have championed the right of every person to pursue their aspirations without limitation. Our partnerships with businesses, educators, and advocates have strengthened our mission and expanded opportunities for inclusion in every aspect of society. As we continue to honor our past and embrace our future, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has supported, participated in, and contributed to the Iowa Department for the Blind.

Governor Kim Reynolds announced she has appointed Stacy Cervenka as Director of the Iowa Department for the Blind.  She will start her role as Directo on July 7, 2025. On behalf of the Department, we would like to welcome Stacy, and we look forward to working with her to continue provide services and programs to blind Iowans.

# Financial

## Budget Report:

Enclosed is a budget report on State FY25 through 04/30/2025.

# Communication – Connie Mendenhall

## Communication and Outreach

The second quarter of 2025 has been very productive for Communication and Outreach. Through tours, presentations and the Centennial Open House myself and IDB staff members have connected with over 700 people. Add in the media coverage of the Open House and the Facebook campaigns Mary Horton, Information Specialist, has been working on with IDB staff IDB has reached thousands of Iowans and even people outside of the state of Iowa in the last quarter.

As we move into the third quarter of the year our communication focus will be geared towards continuing to build up our website, increase our social media presence and develop promotional materials to be distributed at the many outreach events IDB staff participate in. To ensure a clear, consistent and concise message across all platforms we will be implementing a communication guide to be used across the agency. Creating and implementing this guide will ensure consistency across all platforms and create strong templates so messaging will simply have to be updated instead of recreated in the future.

# Education and Training – Ambrose Ball-Harney

The ET Team is currently well into the Spring Semester of its’ Young Adult Transition Program (YATP). Currently there are still two students enrolled in the program, and they continue to demonstrate growth and commitment both within their daily classes as well as community-based outings. There will be a News for the Youth webinar being held on 3/13 at 6:00 pm which will aim to provide new students and referrals with some introductory information regarding some of the youth and Pre-ETS programming provided by IDB. The ET Team will conclude its weekend retreats for the Spring Semester with the final two happening on April 4th and 25th. Weekend retreats focus on students working on their non-visual skills in a variety of environments while also engaging with their community as well as vocational resources. The ET Team was able to increase the amount of weekend retreats held at IDB which led to an increase in student participation throughout both semesters. The ET team is excited to continue the IDB Summer program LEAP (Leadership Education and Advocacy Program) for 2025, which will be starting on June 9th. LEAP provides students opportunities to connect with friends, learn non-visual skills, build confidence, and prepare for their transition to higher education or to enter the workplace with confidence. Students may attend all or part of the summer as their own personal and family schedules allow.

# Independent Living Program - Kimberley Walford

**Upcoming: June Super-Community Based Training (CBT)**

We are thrilled about the strong interest of Department clients who want to attend our Community-Based Training (CBT) scheduled for Tuesday, June 3 through Saturday, June 7, 2025. We have ten clients attending.

Our Super-CBT events are held at our regional area in Polk County at the Iowa Department for the Blind (IDB). Clients who enroll may include Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Independent Living (IL) clients. The focus of the training is on non-visual skills training with classes structured very similar to the Iowa Blindness Empowerment and Independence Center.

The Iowa Department for the Blind's 2025/2026 Community Based Training (CBT) sessions and application deadline dates have been approved for publication and are listed below:

08/12/2025 – 08/16/2025 Application deadline June 27, 2025
10/07/2025 – 10/11/2025 Application deadline August 22, 2025
01/27/2026 – 01/31/2026 Application deadline December 12, 2025
03/24/2026 – 03/28/2026 Application deadline January 9, 2026

**May Outreach: #FlippingTheScript on what it means to grow older with blindness.**

Every May, the Administration for Community Living (ACL) leads the nation’s observance of Older Americans Month (OAM), a time to recognize Older Americans' contributions, highlight aging trends, and reaffirm our commitment to serving older adults. The 2025 theme was #Flip the Script on Aging; however, at the Department for the Blind we added our focus on transforming how society perceives, talks about, and approaches aging with blindness and vision loss.

This season, our Rehabilitation Teachers met with individuals who dispelled misconceptions about blindness and aging. We honor older adults with vision loss or who are blind and those who were making so many contributions as well as exploring the many opportunities for staying active and engaged as they age in their homes and communities.

Their stories were celebrated by using various social media platforms. We thank those individuals who were open to sharing their personal stories, the Rehabilitation Teachers who helped to meet with and gather the information so those stories could be created, and Mary Horton, our Information Specialist, who helped to bring these stories to life through our social media platforms. We hope you were able to read these stories, and we would certainly enjoy hearing your thoughts about this outreach effort.

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

## Library Updates

The Library is one of four libraries participating in a pilot program for the new talking book player from the National Library Service - the DA2. The DA2 boasts significant upgrades, including built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connectivity, along with a substantial 28 GB of internal storage. This means users can now directly connect to BARD (NLS Braille and Audio Reading Download) to easily download audiobooks and magazines, store them on the device, and enjoy listening through Bluetooth-enabled speakers or headphones, offering an even more convenient and seamless reading experience. So far, the Library has checked out over 30 of the DA2s to patrons across the state. You may get questions about the new player, if so, please direct them to call the Library and we would be happy to help. Due to limited quantity, the new players are available to eligible patrons only.

The library participated in the Des Moines Book Festival on Saturday, March 22nd and in the Downtown Des Moines Farmer’s Market on Saturday, May 21st. Staff provided information about the library the department, hands-on braille activities and personalized braille bookmarks.

The Elizabeth Perowsky Workshop and Luncheon was held on Friday, April 25, 2025. Each year the Library and the Iowa Department for the Blind honors our volunteers with this luncheon and the theme for 2025 was *Making Strides, Moving Forward* in honor of the Iowa Department for the Blind’s Centennial. Every moment our volunteers gives makes a huge difference in so many ways. Their willingness to share both their time and talents by volunteering with the Library says a lot. The Friends of the Iowa Library for the Blind and Print Disabled also presented the library with their annual contribution in the amount of $12,000.00.

We are excited to announce that we have a finalist competing in the 2025 Braille Challenge Finals! Aria Murray is a finalist in the Apprentice category. She has been invited to compete in the Braille Challenge Finals competition held on June 26-28 in Los Angeles on the University of Southern California (USC) campus.

The Instructional Materials Center staff developed a monthly report using our new production tracking system, Athena. This report will provide monthly statistics on the accessible educational materials that were ordered, produced and provided to students across Iowa. April’s report has been included in the following library statistics.

We want to help make sure educators have the information they need, so the Instructional Materials Center (IMC) at the Iowa Library for the Blind and Print Disabled is offering a two week online, self-paced course where we will discuss Accessible Education Materials, the ordering of these materials and the role of the Instructional Materials Center. Along with the discussion of Accessible Education Materials, there will be Lessons 1-10 of the Library’s Braille Bits course. Braille Bits is an introductory course to braille designed to familiarize participants with the braille system. The course will be offered two times this summer with live webinars each Tuesday during the two-week sessions, June 16-June 27, 2025, and July 14-July 25, 2025.

## Upcoming Events, Programming and Outreach

Get ready for an EPIC summer adventure with the *Power Up: Game on for Summer Reading*program and become a *Quest Club Member*! This 8-week virtual Summer Reading program takes club members on a thrilling journey across the United States, exploring different regions through exciting games, hands-on crafts, and special guest appearances.

* June 9th through July 25th held Virtually on Monday, Wednesday, Friday from 1:00pm – 1:45pm
	+ Monday – *ARTS!*
	+ Wednesday – *Interactive Games and Mystery Adventures!*
	+ Friday – *STEM Theme Friday and Special Guest!*

The Iowa Library for the Blind and Print Disabled will also be hosting an 8-week Career Exploration experience for teens in collaboration with IDB’s LEAP Summer Program. Each Thursday afternoon there will be special guest speakers introducing different careers and STEM activities.

Leland Smith, our Service Specialist for the Instructional Materials Center, will be the keynote speaker at the NETC – National Extension Technology Community conference in June. Leland will be sharing his experiences with accessibility both in the physical and digital worlds.

# Iowa Blindness Empowerment and Independence Center Report – Karly Prinds

The Center currently has five students and two staff in training. We have had two graduations in May, so we are very happy for our graduates to continue their chapter. They both are working the LEAP summer program, and we are very proud of them and wish them well in their next chapter.

We went bowling in April and will be volunteering on May 30th with Habitat for Humanity. This is a great way to give back to the community and we have a great partnership with them as we have been volunteering with them for several years now, so we are very much looking forward to working with them again.

We also partnered with the Ho’opono Center in Honolulu Hawaii to do a joint Business Class on May 19th. Students enjoyed this a lot and have been talking about it ever since. We look forward to continuing this collaboration in the future.

We have three students starting in June and three more potential students starting in July or August. We are currently working out some logistics with these potential students as well to secure start dates very soon. We will additionally have three LEAP students in the Center this summer and are looking forward to this as well. It will be a busy and productive summer with lots of things to look forward to.

# Vocational Rehabilitation – Keri Osterhaus

## Position Vacancies and Changes

Management Analyst 3 / Quality Assurance and Training Specialist – I am pleased to announce that Jamie Phipps accepted the position of Management Analyst 3 /Quality Assurance and Training Specialist. This role involves training staff and completing quality assurance reviews statewide to ensure successful outcomes for our clients. In this role, Jamie will also help to drive quality standards and practices, in addition to acting as a subject matter expert for our procedures and training efforts. In her previous position as the Lead Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, Jamie consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to IDB’s success and made significant contributions to our Vocational Rehabilitation Program. Jamie started in her new role on May 9, 2025. As a result of this promotion, her previous position is being reviewed, and we will be posting a job opening soon.

Secretary 1 – Sandy Giffrow retired from her position at the Iowa Department for the Blind on April 23rd. We are currently in the position of hiring a new Secretary 1 to support the VR program. We hope to have a new secretary starting in June 2025.

## Program Updates

IDB currently has 454 clients accessing vocational rehabilitation services. Since the beginning of Quarter 4, April 1, 2025, we have had 31 new applications for VR services and have determined 16 individuals eligible for services. During the current program year, 29 individuals have closed successfully in employment in the following Job Titles:

* Computer Network Support Specialist
* Braillist
* Budget Analyst
* Business Analyst
* Buyer
* Cook
* Customer Service (3)
* Dining Room Attendant
* Direct Support Professional (2)
* Executive Administrative Assistant
* Food Prep Worker
* Graphic Designer
* HVAC Installer
* Information Clerk
* Inventory Specialist
* Janitor (2)
* Job Coach
* Laundry Worker
* Lawyer
* Pediatric Nurse
* Physical Therapist
* Teacher (2)
* Secretary
* Shipping and Receiving Clerk

These individuals are earning a median wage of $17.76/hour (an average of $23.54/hour). They are working a median of 40 hours/week (an average of 32 hours/week). There are currently 19 individuals in employment status with plans to close their cases within the next three months.

Every three years, IDB completes a Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) to assist in identifying and describing the rehabilitation needs of blind Iowans. The goal of the CSNA is to effectively assess the needs of VR clients to inform the goals and priorities of the IDB State Plan and to advise future policy and decision making so IDB can best serve its clients and meet their rehabilitation needs. The CSNA requires a focus on the following needs:

* Individuals with the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment services;
* Individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program;
* Individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce development system as identified by those individuals and personnel assisting those individuals through the components of the system;
* Youth with disabilities and students with disabilities, including their need for pre-employment transition services or other transition services, and an assessment of the extent to which such services provided by VR agencies are coordinated with transition services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; and
* Establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within Iowa.

IDB is partnering with Analytic Insight to conduct the assessment of vocational rehabilitation needs for Iowans who are blind or have low vision. IDB will be reaching out to current clients, staff, and other stakeholders to participate in the CSNA. The expected completion of the CSNA is mid-August 2025.

Every two years, IDB works with WIOA core partners to review the current Unified State Plan and submit modifications to the plan that reflect changes in labor market, economic conditions, law or policy, or any other changes that affect the delivery of workforce development services in Iowa. WIOA core partners are the Iowa Department for the Blind, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, the Iowa Department of Education and Iowa Workforce Development. We plan to submit the draft of the modifications to the State Plan to the State Workforce Development Board (SWDB) for approval on December 5, 2025, and will then post the modifications for Public Comment between December 8, 2025, and January 12, 2025. Following the Public Comment period, the final draft will be submitted for final approval at the State Workforce Development Board Meeting on February 12, 2026. Our submission deadline for the State Plan Modifications to our Federal Partners is March 1, 2026.