

NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED



2024 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

New Jersey Department of Human Services
Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired

2024 Annual Report - State Rehabilitation Council

The New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI) promotes and provides services in the areas of education, employment, independence, and eye health for people who are blind, deaf-blind, or visually impaired, their families, and the community.

The Commission adopts four major strategies in carrying out its mission, which are:

- (1) Providing specialized services to people with limited or no vision;
- (2) Educating and working in the community to reduce the incidence of vision loss;
- (3) Improving social attitudes about blindness and visual impairment; and
- (4) Increasing employment outcomes for individuals who are blind, visually impaired, and deaf-blind.

Detailed information about services can be found at: <http://www.cbvi.nj.gov>.

Any questions regarding this report, or to request it in alternate formats, should be directed to Charles McKenna at 973-648-7900 or via e-mail at charles.mckenna@dhs.nj.gov.

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State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) – Chairperson’s Letter

Dear Colleagues & Friends,

The State Rehabilitation Council for the New Jersey Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired is proud to present its Annual Report for 2024.

In this report, you will find examples of successful individuals who, with the assistance of the Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired, have either reached their employment goals or are in the process of attaining those goals. In addition, the Annual Report highlights many seniors and students who have reached their highest levels of achievement and independence.

Despite the successes noted in the Annual Report, it has been a challenging year for the State Rehabilitation Council. For over two years, the Governor’s Office has failed to comply with federal law, as outlined in the Rehabilitation Act, in making appointments to the SRC. This has resulted in a lack of a quorum and has greatly limited the SRC from accomplishing its goals and federally mandated mission of assisting the Commission and reviewing policies and procedures to ensure that artificial barriers to service do not exist.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Bernice Davis, Executive Director, Charles McKenna, Assistant Division Director for Vocational Rehabilitation programs, and their staff for all the assistance and support they have given the SRC.

Finally, I also want to thank the members of the SRC for volunteering their time and efforts on behalf of the Blind, Deaf/Blind, and Visually Impaired residents of New Jersey.

Vito J. DeSantis, Chairperson

New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired

State Rehabilitation Council

Executive Director's Letter

It is my pleasure to join the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) of the NJ Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI) in sharing this report that details our accomplishments during Federal Fiscal Year 2024. The pages ahead will highlight the work of the CBVI team with the support of the SRC.

This partnership is vital to carrying out our mission of assisting New Jersey residents who are blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired in their efforts to reach their educational, employment and self-sufficiency goals. It continues to be my privilege to serve in this role while working alongside people who, apply their talents, skills and expertise with a shared focus of enabling CBVI to provide comprehensive services, appropriate to the individual needs of the people we serve in a timely and effective manner.

I am also deeply appreciative of the State Rehabilitation Council members for their unwavering commitment to making a meaningful difference in the lives of individuals with disabilities. Their dedication is evident through their consistent efforts in offering valuable insights, feedback, and thoughtful advisement that help make CBVI better. Their contributions are a testament to their genuine interest in advancing the rights and opportunities for people who are blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired, and their dynamic energy continues to be a driving force for positive change.

We thank you for your continued support of our mission and look forward to another year of collaborating for successful outcomes for the people it is our mission to serve.

Sincerely,

Dr. Bernice Davis

Executive Director
Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired

SRC Working Principles and Responsibilities

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) was established by Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. It gives advice to, and works in partnership with, the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency. The members of the State Rehabilitation Council are appointed by the Governor and convene at least four meetings a year. All meetings and public forums are announced, and are open and accessible to the general public. The meetings are held in compliance with the New Jersey Open Public Meeting Act, NJSA 10:4-6.

The functions of the SRC are to:

- Review, analyze, and advise CBVI regarding performance of its responsibilities of the Agency under Title I of the Rehabilitation Act amendments of 2014;
- Assist CBVI with the development of State goals and priorities, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the Vocational Rehabilitation program;
- Advise and assist CBVI with the preparation of the State Plan and amendments to the plan, applications, reports, needs assessments, and evaluations required under the Rehabilitation Act amendments of 2014;
- Conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of, and consumer satisfaction with, Vocational Rehabilitation services;
- Prepare and submit an annual report to the Governor and the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) on the status of Vocational Rehabilitation programs operated within the State, and to make the report available to the public;
- Coordinate with other councils within the State, including the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC);
- Establish successful working relationships between CBVI, the SILC, and Centers for Independent Living (CIL) within the State; and
- Perform other functions consistent with the purpose of this title, as the SRC determines to be appropriate.

2024 SRC Board Members

Vito DeSantis, Chair

Pending Reappointment (3/17/23)

(856) 296-1315 | jdesantis@optonline.net

*Representative of Individual

Multiple Disabilities

Don Campbell – Pending Reappointment (3/17/23)

(609) 816-9605 | decampbell124@gmail.com

*State Independent Living Council (SILC)

Jeanne McMahon – Pending Appointment

(973) 642-8100 | jmcmahon@spanadvocacy.org

Statewide Parent Advocacy Network

*Parent Training & Information Center

Gwen Orlowski – Pending Appointment

(609) 292-9742 | gorlowski@disabilityrightsnj.org

Disability Rights New Jersey (DRNJ)

* Client Assistance Program (CAP)

Kathleen Spata – Appointed to 2nd Term

Center for Sensory and Complex Disabilities, TCNJ

(609) 670-9564 | spatak@tcnj.edu

*Community Rehabilitation Program

Lauren Weishaar – Pending Reappointment (9/17/24)

(732) 227-4248 | lweishaar@hcs.works

Hudson Community Enterprises

*Community Rehabilitation Program Provider

Ronda Banks – Pending Reappointment (3/17/23)

(862) 323-0623 | rpbanks@njtransit.com

New Jersey Transit

*Business and Industry Representative

Steven McCoy – Pending Appointment

(212) 810-0744 | stevenmccoyb@gmail.com

*Business and Industry Representative

James Good – Pending Appointment

(201) 406-2310 | jimgoodfanclub@gmail.com

*Business and Industry Representative

Gary Robinson – Pending Appointment

(845) 517-0165 | grobi38452@aol.com

*Business and Industry Representative

Wanda Williford – Pending Reappointment (9/26/23)

(609) 375-6682 | woo577@comcast.net

New Jersey Council of the Blind (NJCB)

*Advocacy Group Representative

John O’Connell – Pending Reappointment (9/17/24)

(732) 300-5524 | joconnel9@gmail.com

Blinded Veterans Association

*Advocacy Group Representative

Linda Melendez – Pending Appointment

(908) 590-1747 | president@nfbnj.org

National Federation of the Blind NJ (NFB NJ)

*Advocacy Group Representative

Joseph Zesski – Pending Appointment

(609) 410-8890 | jzesski@rilnj.org

* Current/Former VR Applicant or Recipient

Alice Eaddy – Pending Reappointment (12/9/22)

(856) 765-0601 | cheiro_alice@aol.com

*Current/Former VR Applicant or Recipient

Representative

Sioban Leahy – Pending Appointment

(551) 208-1305 | sleahy@hipcil.org

*Current/Former VR Applicant or Recipient

Representative

Amanda Philp – Pending Appointment
(551) 697-4948 | amanda.philp@doe.nj.gov
NJ Department of Education (DOE)
*State Education Agency Representative

John Tkacz – Ex-Officio
(609) 292-9338 | John.Tkacz@dol.nj.gov
NJ Department of Labor (DOL)
*Division of Vocation Rehabilitation Services
(DVRS) Representative

Kathleen Donnellon – Ex-Officio
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Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
*VR Counselor

Charles Pat McKenna – Ex-Officio
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Commission of the Blind and Visually Impaired
*Assistant Division Director

Dr. Bernice Davis – Ex-Officio
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Commission of the Blind and Visually Impaired
*Executive Director

SRC Proposed Goals for 2025

Despite the current lack of a quorum, the SRC will meet four times in 2025 and continue to support CBVI's goals and commitment to excellent services.

2025 Meeting Dates:

- February 7, 2025
- June 6, 2025
- October 3, 2025
- December 5, 2025

Once in compliance with Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act and CFR 34 361.17, whereby a quorum exists,

- The SRC, by reviewing various reports and current and proposed policies, will:
 - Work with CBVI to enhance and improve competitive integrated employment outcomes across all VR consumer groups being served;
 - Assist CBVI in identifying and partnering with apprenticeship opportunities;
 - Assist CBVI in enhancing partnerships with the local One-Stops and larger workforce system;
 - Assist CBVI in providing services, ensuring that Rapid Engagement is utilized while ensuring Informed Choice to the consumer;
 - Assist CBVI in developing Career Pathways for appropriate consumers who wish to progress from education and training to Competitive Integrated Employment.
- SRC members will continue to participate, as appropriate, in public forums and agency programs to benefit consumers.
- SRC will work with CBVI to identify, develop, and provide onboarding training for new SRC members to ensure all members understand the scope and role of SRC membership and the VR program.
- SRC and CBVI will conduct a yearly SRC Purpose and Responsibilities training.
- SRC will work with CBVI to identify topical presentations that can be presented at each SRC meeting related to agency performance and compliance.
- SRC will enhance and operationalize the role of the subcommittees to align their focus with the core requirements of the SRC, its bylaws, Federal Regulations, and the VR program.

Overview of the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired

In April of 1909, the New Jersey State Legislature directed that a state agency be established "to provide any and all means which shall be deemed feasible for ameliorating the condition of the blind." Over 115 years later, the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI), more than ever finds itself fulfilling that original mandate.

The Commission was established as a state agency in 1910 under the direction of Lydia Young Hayes, a blind teacher of the blind. One of the initial tasks of the Commission was to compile a registry of the state's blind residents. During that first year, 750 people were registered.

The formation of a single agency to administer to the needs of New Jersey's blind population emerged from a wave of social consciousness that swept the country in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As a result of increased awareness, significant strides were made toward equalizing opportunities for people who were blind.

During that first year, Miss Hayes and another teacher, Janet Paterson, established the state's first integrated classes for blind and sighted students within the Newark school system. These classes were based on the belief that integrated classes provided blind students with the educational tools and exposure necessary for a smooth assimilation into society.

The integrative educational philosophy and policy was recognized throughout the country, as an innovative model in the field of education of the blind. From the early 1940's to the late 1960's, and under the supervision of Josephine Taylor, the Commission's evolving educational programs, known as the New Jersey Plan, gained world-wide recognition. The educational initiative of supporting blind and visually impaired students in public schools, and sending teachers to assist them through lessons in Braille, low-vision aids, and special classes, has grown over the years into an even more comprehensive educational service program that supported over 2000 students last year.

A Home Teaching Service Program was also installed during the first years of the Commission. Teachers went into consumers' homes to help them discover ways to efficiently use new techniques and their own talents to achieve self-sufficient lifestyles. This program offered instruction in communication skills such as Braille and typing, and included guidance in the production of marketable crafts and handiworks, which led to the creation of a Home Industries Program, that functioned as an agent for the sale of products made by blind persons.

In 1915, the Commission began a program to place blind workers in the work industry at large, capitalizing on employment opportunities resulting from World War I Armed Services recruitments. Federal and state legislation offered additional support to the Commission's early employment and social service programs, which were designed to provide legal and economic leverage to agencies that served people with disabilities.

Basic legislative mandates and their various amendments allowed the Commission to vastly enhance its services during the middle period of its growth, under the direction of George Meyer (1936-1964). Major legislative amendments, such as the Barden LaFollete Act in 1943, and earlier federal rehabilitation legislation like the Smith-Fess Act of 1920, provided funds and authorized state agencies to help blind and visually impaired people obtain meaningful employment through vocational training, counseling, physical restoration, and placement services.

The Randolph-Sheppard Act of 1936 authorized the Commission to license qualified blind people to operate vending stands in federal and federally-sponsored buildings, which was later broadened to include state, municipal and private buildings. There are presently 38 Commission-sponsored newsstands, snack bars, coffee shops, and full-service cafeterias in facilities throughout the state, with several more planned.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services were formally organized in 1941 under the supervision of Carl Pirrups-Hvarre. Vocational Rehabilitation Services provided a wider range of training, placement, counseling and guidance to prepare blind people for employment, and to further immerse them into the business arena.

From 1911 to 1918, the Commission, concerned citizens, and private organizations such as the New Jersey Association for the Blind, pooled their resources to secure legislation to promote research into blindness prevention. Eye Health Services were formally established in 1943 under the supervision of the late Emma Howe, which included the nation's first traveling eye unit and a glaucoma registry. These Commission services have continued to grow over the years with the Better Eye-Health Services and Treatment (Project BEST) program, which provides services in the areas of eye health and eye safety by offering free vision screenings for adults and children, with a concerted effort to provide these services to historically underserved sectors of the population (low income, elderly, minorities, people with Diabetes, and individuals with special needs).

Under the direction of Joseph Kohn, (1964-1976), the size and scope of the Commission's staff and service programs more than doubled. Significant expansions occurred in many departments: social services, rehabilitation teaching, eye health nursing, the home industries program, vocational rehabilitation, an expanded contract workshop program, the opening of the George Meyer Textbook and Materials Center, preschool eye screening programs, and many more.

With the establishment of the first Consumer Forum in 1964, under the auspices of Governor Richard Hughes, consumers and other interested individuals began to take active participation in the Commission's decision and policy-making procedures. Now the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) established in Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, advises and works in partnership with CBVI administration and staff.

CBVI, known as the Commission for the Blind until 1982, was at the forefront of that movement and still works diligently toward the realization of new levels of achievement in the quest for equal opportunity in education, employment, and community integration.

Although the Commission's scope of services has significantly expanded since 1910, the established direction is still an integral part of today's programs and policies as well as tomorrow's goals and aspirations.

Statewide Impact of CBVI Services

Numbers indicate total individuals served by Commission services and/or programs.
(Please note that individuals may be served in multiple programs at CBVI):

	COUNTY	ED	IL	IL-OB	VR	PP	JKTC
1	Atlantic	91	78	188	76	6	5
2	Bergen	159	59	128	197	10	9
3	Burlington	160	71	172	170	4	11
4	Camden	173	129	213	183	7	10
5	Cape May	20	14	44	19	0	1
6	Cumberland	46	35	80	42	0	3
7	Essex	162	100	207	319	10	40
8	Gloucester	102	61	81	80	1	4
9	Hudson	89	53	88	145	6	13
10	Hunterdon	25	8	18	21	2	3
11	Mercer	100	56	125	115	6	10
12	Middlesex	224	120	208	255	8	20
13	Monmouth	142	96	200	195	12	11
14	Morris	111	39	104	100	4	9
15	Ocean	203	89	300	157	19	9
16	Passaic	112	53	57	143	6	6
17	Salem	25	14	25	16	0	2
18	Somerset	74	45	48	90	2	8
19	Sussex	35	14	21	28	1	2
20	Union	134	71	142	199	10	6
21	Warren	14	5	30	25	1	4
22	Out of State	0	2	0	3	0	0
23	Not identified	10	13	30	13	38	1
	Total	2211	1225	2509	2591	153	187

* Explanation of Abbreviations

ED – Education (Ages: 0-21 years),

IL – Independent Living (Ages: 54 years and younger)

ILOB – Independent Living for Older Individuals who are Blind (Ages: 55 years +)

VR – Vocational Rehabilitation (Ages: 14 years and older)

PB – Project BEST (Serving all age groups)

JKTC – Joseph Kohn Training Center (VR consumers 18+)

Employment Outcomes

*111 total employment outcomes

Management Occupations	8.1%
Business and Financial Operations Occupations	5.4%
Computer and Mathematical Occupations	4.5%
Architecture and Engineering Occupations	0.9%
Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations	1.8%
Community and Social Service Occupations	5.4%
Legal Occupations	0.9%
Education, Training, and Library Occupations	7.2%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations	1.8%
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	2.7%
Healthcare Support Occupations	9.0%
Protective Service Occupations	0.0%
Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations	4.5%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occupations	2.7%
Personal Care and Service Occupations	0.9%
Sales and Related Occupations	9.9%
Office and Administrative Support Occupations	22.5%
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations	0.0%
Construction and Extraction Occupations	0.9%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations	5.4%
Production Occupations	3.6%
Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	1.8%
Military Specific Occupations	0.0%
BEP Operator	0.0%

Education Services

Education Services are provided to eligible children (from birth through grade 12) by certified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs). The TVIs worked closely with the children, family members, and local school personnel to provide high-quality services that foster access to learning so that all service recipients who are blind, deaf-blind, and visually impaired can participate fully in the classroom and school and compete equally with their sighted peers. Infants and toddlers through 2 years of age are provided with home-based services in collaboration with private early intervention providers and focus on play-based functional assessment and activities designed to foster the development of early concepts and pre-literacy skills. Our early childhood TVIs also offer training to parents and early intervention providers as part of our services to infants and toddlers. For preschool through grade 12 students, TVIs provide school-based services that include participation in the IEP process, consultation with parents and school teams, training for parents and school personnel, and specialized instruction for students. Education Services include the provision of accessible books and materials as well as specialized devices and equipment that lead to access to classroom learning, the general curriculum, and full participation in school activities. Pre-Braille skills development, formal Braille instruction, low vision device instruction, other forms of specialized instruction, technology support and reinforcement, functional skills assessments, and in-class observations form the basis of school-based instruction and support.

Pre-High School Upwardly Mobile Program

PUMP (Pre-high school Upwardly Mobile Program) is our summer learning experience for middle school students, and the program (in its second year) took place during the last 3 days of July at the Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC). This program focused on building a greater level of independence, self-advocacy, and awareness of transition as these students in grades 7 and 8 prepare for transition to high school in the very near future. The program occurred during the week of the LIFE 101 Program. The theme of this year's program was threefold:

1. Be true to yourself.
2. Put yourself "out there" and participate.
3. If you need help or are concerned, seek help from a trusted adult.

The students in PUMP interacted and shared activities with the older students in LIFE 101. The program only lasted 3 days, but we noticed growth in each student within that short period. During this second year of PUMP, the older students were kind and generous to the PUMP students in terms of the honest and heartfelt information they shared. Some older students shared with the younger students that they must put themselves "out there" by participating in clubs, sports, choir, or instrumental music. They also shared that high school is a time to seek service-learning opportunities at school, and they advised the middle school students not to allow a well-meaning but misguided teacher to make helping the blind student the focus of a service-learning project. For our students, these opportunities to share experiences and life lessons are vital for building positive self-image, self-esteem, and overall well-being, in addition to the more specific activities intended to prepare them for transition to high school and beyond.

Pre-Employment Transition Services

In FFY 2024, the Commission continued to develop and expand its Pre-Employment Transition Services in alignment with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. The Commission has a long history of providing Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services to students and youth with disabilities, with dedicated programs going back nearly 50 years. CBVI currently has six Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors dedicated to working with high school students, three Counselors dedicated to our consumers enrolled in College full-time, and a number of programs and services that have been developed and continue to evolve to meet the needs of our consumers and the federal regulations that govern the VR program.

These recurring transition programs include Life 101, EDGE (Employment, Development, Guidance, and Engagement) 1.0 and 2.0, STEPS (Successful Transition Experiences Preparing Students), CREATE (Career Research, Exploration and Awareness for Transition to Employment), and SUCCESS (Students Understanding College and Career expectations for Excellence in School and Society). In addition, in January of 2024, an advocacy and leadership workshop series, the ACE Academy program, was offered in partnership with Sky's the Limit Communications to help college students gain confidence in identifying as a person with a visual impairment, speaking with others about their disability, and how to communicate accommodation needs in a variety of educational, vocational, and community settings. Under the ACE Academy umbrella, this program provided techniques and strategies to thrive as a young adult.

Pre-Employment Transition Services continue to be available for eligible and potentially eligible students with disabilities, ages 14 to 21. These services include job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, workplace readiness training, instruction in self-advocacy, and counseling on post-secondary enrollment opportunities.

EDGE (Employment, Development, Guidance, and Engagement) 1.0

Now in its 9th year, the EDGE program helps prepare blind and visually impaired high school students receiving transition services from the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired to become successful professionals. EDGE continues to hold monthly in-person workshops at CBVI's JKTC, where students sharpen their professional, advocacy, social, and independent living skills. EDGE staff and mentors host virtual weekly meetings for students that focus on topics such as technology, school stress and how to deal with it, time management, exploring college options and opportunities, and more. In addition, EDGE also hosts Parent Calls covering SSI, college resources, independence resources, and more. EDGE provides ample opportunity for students to speak with and learn from successful blind professionals from various fields to develop their path to a better future career and obtain work-based learning experiences. The program is run and staffed by successful blind and visually impaired individuals who understand the importance of instilling blind youth with the independence and confidence necessary to become successful adults, professionals, and members of their communities.

LIFE 101 (Learning Independence for Future Employment)

LIFE 101 is a two-week Pre-Employment Transition Services program designed for ninth and tenth-grade students, conducted by staff at the Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC) in late July and early August. In the Summer of 2024, Ten high school students participated in various group classes designed to promote

independence, develop and improve social skills, develop and improve skills related to self-advocacy, and spark career planning and decision-making. Students received preparation for the world of college, work, and life after high school. Each student worked with a peer mentor who assisted them as needed throughout the program, and each student completed a workbook, with the assistance of their Transition Counselor, designed to help solidify the learning activities.

[Students Understanding College and Career Expectations for Excellence in School and Society \(SUCCESS\) at The College of New Jersey](#)

The SUCCESS Program is a pre-employment transition residential program designed to provide high school students who are blind and visually impaired with expressed interest in attending college university to prepare for entry into college or university. The program staff of the Center for Sensory and Complex Disabilities at The College of New Jersey provides students with preparation for their adjustment to college life.

Students participated in college-related academic workshops where they were given opportunities to assess self-advocacy skills, assess independent living skills, network, receive peer mentoring, work on community integration, and work on career and college exploration. Students also had an opportunity to engage in Person-Centered Planning workshops and activities to help create a vision and plan for the future. Throughout the program, staff collectively evaluated the students' skills that are necessary for a successful college life and provided a description and recommendations for the development in the aforementioned areas to Transition and College counselors for follow-up. Students could experience living in a college dorm room with a roommate, learn independence skills, obtain the ability and confidence to travel independently around the college campus, acquire knowledge and practice of how and when to request accommodations as needed, and more.

[Successful Transition Experiences Preparing Students \(STEPS\)](#)

The STEPS Program is a pre-employment transition program facilitated by the Center for Sensory and Complex Disabilities at the College of New Jersey. It is for high school students (ages 16-21) who are blind and visually impaired with additional disabilities and would benefit from an employment outcome upon high school completion—consumers who attend the program desire to work and can do so with or without support.

In the Summer of 2024, STEPS prepared consumers for life after high school by providing opportunities to practice work-related academic and soft skills, employment skills, and independent living skills. Students had a chance to create resumes, begin the Customized Employment Discovery process, experience virtual community-based instruction, engage in recreation and leisure activities with their peers, and begin to plan their future with the support of Person-Centered Planning workshops and activities. Throughout the program, staff collectively evaluated the students' skills necessary for a successful employment life and provided descriptions and recommendations for their development to their Transition Counselors.

Career Research Exploration and Awareness for Transition to Employment (CREATE)

CREATE is a pre-employment transition program facilitated by the Center for Sensory and Complex Disabilities at the College of New Jersey. It allows students ages 16-21 who are unsure of their career path to explore further their strengths, abilities, capabilities, and interests to identify or better define their employment goals and next steps upon high school completion.

In the Summer of 2024, students completed career assessments, such as interest inventories, which helped them to understand how their interests relate to possible career options using the Holland code. Students were provided with travel training and instruction, participated in hands-on experiences and job shadowing opportunities, and experienced living independently with a roommate. Additionally, exposure to various employment opportunities via in-person presentations, tours with different local businesses, and internet research were conducted throughout the program to assist students in carving out their future employment or educational goals.

EDGE (Employment, Development, Guidance, and Engagement) 2.0

EDGE 2.0 serves over thirty college undergraduates across New Jersey and Pennsylvania who are blind and visually impaired. Students learn how to maximize their college experience through an individualized assimilation plan that addresses barriers on campus, sets academic and social goals, and establishes plans for campus and community engagement. As upper-level students in the program, students have career development plans that provide a map to graduation and a guide to careers in their fields of interest. In addition, students participate in campus visits with a career advisor, monthly mentor conversations, and peer meetings with career-centered activities. Using each of these resources and a career-focused approach, students enhance their ability to become employed competitively in their field of choice.

The Fellowship Program

Now in its second year, the Fellowship Program is a mentorship program designed to address the needs of individuals with vision loss residing in New Jersey. It is a collaboration between CBVI and a community agency or organization serving as a program facilitator. Individuals are identified and referred to the program by CBVI VRCs (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors) and must be active consumers who are also receiving services from the agency.

The program's goal is to create a sense of community and mutual mentorship by building meaningful connections between college students 18-21 years of age and individuals 54 and older (ILOB—Independent Living Older Blind) who are experiencing vision loss. Objectives foster mutual respect, independence, resilience, and advocacy through educational and skills-based activities.

Project Objectives

1. The program provides adults over 21 with the opportunity to meet and share knowledge, communication skills, professionalism, and life experiences with younger individuals.
2. The program provides individuals ages 18-21 with the opportunity to meet and share knowledge and interests such as technology (assistive and other) as well as their life experiences with vision loss.
3. There are virtual meetings hosted twice a month and two in-person meetings held at the agency hosting the program twice per year.

4. The meetings serve up to 20 participants consisting of both large and small group activities, as well as supervised discussions related to living life with vision loss.
5. Program evaluations are completed with each participant. The first, a pre-participation survey, in order to gain baseline information, interests, and goals from participants, and the second, a post-participation survey, in order to gain feedback from participants on their experiences and progress towards personal goals.

Examples of Virtual Activities

- Meet and Greet of Participants
- Emotional Aspects of vision Loss
- Accepting Your Vision Loss
- Developing a Positive Self-Image
- Self-Advocacy Skills Training
- Building Healthy Relationships
- Identifying and Developing Personal and Professional Goals
- Managing Social Anxiety and Peer Pressure
- Socialization and Communication
- Accessing Social Media
- Resume Building and Practicing Interview Skills
- iPhone/iPad Accessibility
- Smart technology
- Computer Accessibility

Examples of In-person Activities

- Orientation and Mobility
- Cooking Skills
- Yoga, Mindfulness, and Meditation
- iPhone/iPad Workshop
- Helpful Apps for iPhone/iPad

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

VR services provided by the Commission under this program are designed to assist individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or deaf-blind to prepare for, secure, retain, or advance in employment that is consistent with their strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, interests, and informed choice. The scope of Vocational Rehabilitation Services includes but are not limited to:

- Assessment for determining eligibility and VR needs by qualified personnel;
- VR counseling and guidance, including information and support services to assist an individual in exercising informed choice, including referral and services from other agencies;
- Physical and mental restoration services;
- Vocational and other training services;
- Maintenance and transportation related to the rendering of VR services;
- Vocational Rehabilitation services to family members, to assist in achieving the employment goal for an individual with a disability, e.g., family counseling;
- Interpreter services, including sign language and oral interpreter services, for individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, and tactile interpreting services for individuals who are deaf-blind;
- Independent Living skills instruction, including personal and home management;
- Orientation and Mobility services to instruct in methods of independent community travel;
- Services to assist students to transition from school to work;
- Job-related services, including job search and placement assistance, job retention services, follow-up services, and follow-along services;
- Supported employment services, including customized employment;
- Personal assistance services, including reader services;
- Occupational licenses, tools, equipment, initial stocks, and supplies;
- Technical assistance to individuals who are pursuing self-employment;
- Rehabilitation technology services and devices;
- Post-employment services, i.e., short term services required to keep a job;
- Eye Health services for assisting consumers in accessing medical care, including surgery, which may be necessary to restore vision and/or prevent further vision loss as part of the employment plan;
- Education related to eye disorders and their treatment;
- Joseph Kohn Training Center – to obtain comprehensive training in skills of independent living that will enable consumers to be integrated into their community;
- Business Enterprises New Jersey (BENJ) to help consumers become independent business operators; and
- Assistive Technology Services to allow consumers to develop useable methods of accessing computer equipment and other information technology.

Youth Employment Solution (YES) Program

The Youth Employment Solutions (YES) Program is conducted in partnership with TCNJ to serve students in transition to adult life. Through person-centered approaches, a YES Support Specialist will work with and on behalf of the consumer to assess/improve work readiness as well as provide technical assistance while supporting the consumer's transition to employment; once they have attended one of the Summer Transition Programs. The YES Support Specialist communicates with CBVI staff, supported employment agencies and any support staff who are part of the consumers' network to ensure the goals of the consumer and family are guiding the process. Additionally, deliverables are created and shared along with ongoing technical assistance as needed, to communicate the outcomes in the following topic areas:

1. Discovery Process/Exploration: (Get to know the consumer)
2. Job Developing/Job Exploration/Job Carving ("Pounding the Pavement")
3. Job Acquisition/Transition
4. Job Retention/Short Term Follow-up

In virtual YES workshops, consumers discuss various topics including but not limited to the following:

- ❖ Discovering interests/and identifying possible workplaces
- ❖ Finding a part time job
- ❖ Creating a Personal Pitch (How to talk about skills/strengths)
- ❖ Interview Preparation
- ❖ Soft Skills - Social Skills
- ❖ Learning how to organize a schedule
- ❖ Setting up a Daily Routine
- ❖ Transportation Options (Navigating the NJ Transit Website/Access Link Info)
- ❖ Social/Recreational Activities
- ❖ Assistive Technology
- ❖ State Agency Applications (What's available?)
- ❖ Planning for "Next Steps"
- ❖ Creating/Updating Resume
- ❖ Websites/Apps for Learning (educational)
- ❖ Websites/Apps for Learning (leisure/games)
- ❖ Health, Nutrition & Fitness
- ❖ Wellness (stress relief, meditation, relaxation strategies, etc.)
- ❖ Cyber Safety
- ❖ Social Media Safety
- ❖ Cooking
- ❖ Money Management
- ❖ College Preparation
- ❖ College Application Process
- ❖ Independent Living

Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC)

The Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC) is a state-of-the-art facility offering Commission consumers vocational rehabilitation, employment services, and independent living skills training. The JKTC is a three-floor residential center with meeting and conference rooms, classrooms, a cafeteria, a gym, a recreation room, a student lounge, an accessible kitchen, a technology demonstration and evaluation center, and student dorms. Consumers participate in various classes and may meet with the staff social worker, psychologist, and guest presenters. In the evenings, students engage in recreational and learning activities at JKTC and also throughout the community. Additionally, near the end of the program, students participate in a community-based work experience related to their interests and abilities. At this point, consumers can also participate in an independent living experience in the JKTC independent apartment.

Upon completion of the program, students are required to complete a graduation project of their choice. This project can include a presentation of their progress in the program and next steps, practicing a skill they may need to improve, or cooking a dish that represents them and their journey. Students have been exceptionally excited and proud to demonstrate what they have accomplished in the 16-20 weeks of the program.

The mission of the JKTC is to assist blind, deaf-blind, and visually impaired individuals in leading whole and productive lives as they live and work in their communities. The program is customized for each consumer and can range in duration from approximately 2 weeks (assessment only) to 20 weeks or more. Customization can include targeted skills and abilities for a consumer looking to pursue higher education.

The majority of our consumers are residents. However, consumers do have the option of commuting to the program. At this point, consumers attend the program four days a week for in-person instruction and receive virtual instruction one day per week. Instruction is provided individually, in small groups, and in whole group formats. Instructional areas include activities of daily living, Braille and communication, keyboarding and technology, orientation and mobility, career exploration, and fitness and health. Other areas heavily emphasized include job-seeking skills development, soft skills development, technology trends, personal health, creative expression, and social work topics. Consumers participate in adjustment to vision loss groups and, when requested, participate in individual counseling in this area. As vocational services are provided, JKTC works with the Business Relations Unit (BRU) to enhance services and follow a progressive employment model.

Business Relations Unit (BRU)

The Business Relations Unit (BRU) provides services to public and private sector businesses to assist them with meeting their diversity initiatives in hiring individuals with disabilities. The BRU partners with businesses to address their needs, such as education and technical assistance on recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees who are blind, deaf-blind, and visually impaired. The BRU endeavors to present an alternative pool of candidates to businesses while attempting to break down any barriers to employment for people with disabilities, including assistive technology and accessibility consultation.

While we often share employment opportunities with our referred consumers, they only sometimes result in successful hires. Along these lines, we have started a bi-monthly Job club, where we work with the consumers virtually in a group setting to discuss not only improving the basic skills, resume writing, application procedure, interviewing, etc., but also facilitate sharing experiences and discussing concerns and solutions to common scenarios, encouraging individuals to be more assertive and positive in their job searches.

Over the spring/summer, three college students were accepted into the NextGen Leadership sponsored by Disability: In. This is an opportunity for college students or recent graduates to be mentored by national corporations for six months. As a result of participating in this mentorship, these three individuals were invited to attend an in-person conference in July. The Business Relations Unit is still working with management to formulate on-the-job training and internship policies to assist and encourage employers to hire our consumers.

This past summer, we worked with the EDGE program and facilitated an internship program with the Business Enterprise Program. Then, BRU also worked with and implemented the Progressive Employment Pilot sanctioned by the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI). The Progressive Employment Pilot is a program that believes there is some job for everyone. It assists individuals in exploring employment opportunities even when they are still determining what type of work they want to pursue, and this is accomplished through informational interviews with employers, job tours, job shadows, and/or short-term employment. In 2023, the business relations unit began collaborating with the Joseph Kohn Training Center on a Progressive Employment program. The Institute for Community Inclusion, a part of UMass Boston, designed this project as a dual-customer, team approach that uses work-based learning strategies to meet the needs of both local businesses and job seekers. The idea is that students at Joseph Kohn Training Center will participate in many smaller experiences such as informational interviews, mock interviews, job shadows and tours, and mini-work experiences to help prepare them for future employment. Due to this project, the business relations unit has gained new employer contacts in various industries, including the justice system, office of innovation, technology, food service, and medical. Job tours were held at Best Works, Shop Rite, a Courthouse, and a hospital. There were also some work experiences at a gym/fitness center and some retail and restaurant/food service establishments. Students have expressed enthusiasm for the project because it allows them to explore their interests on a smaller scale before entering the job market. So far, two students have received employment offers based on connections made through the Progressive Employment project. The business relations unit and Joseph Kohn Training Center look forward to continuing this collaboration to create more employer relationships and opportunities for career exploration for students.

In October, the Business Relations Unit hosted a “Dining in the Dark” event with representatives from seven different employers. The Deputy Commissioner of Human Services, the Assistant Division Director, and the statewide VR coordinator of CBVI were also in attendance. This event engaged the participants through sighted guide travel, eating a meal, and a hands-on activity, all while wearing sleep shades. The emphasis was on

communication between employer, employee, and co-workers. A panel of two employers was held to discuss some of the lessons learned and obstacles overcome after hiring a blind individual.

Deaf-Blind Services

iCanConnect NJ

The iCanConnect NJ Program (The National Deaf-blind Equipment Distribution program) has provided various assistive technology and telecommunication devices to over 150 New Jersey residents. Devices such as iPads, iPhones, Braille note-takers, laptops, screen readers, and adaptive software have been purchased for individuals meeting the program's eligibility requirements. This program was established to ensure that laws enacted in the 1980s and 1990s to increase the access of persons with disabilities to modern communications were brought up-to-date with 21st-century technologies. The technologies include new digital, broadband, and mobile communications. Any New Jersey resident with combined hearing and vision loss can reach out to see if they qualify for the iCanConnect program to receive free accessible technology to support distance communication. Program guidelines can be found at <https://www.icanconnect.org/how-to-apply/#eligibilityoverview>.

Support Services Providers of New Jersey (SSP-NJ)

The Support Services Providers of New Jersey Program, or SSP-NJ, is a consumer-driven program that provides qualified, trained professionals who support our Deaf-Blind residents by promoting independence. SSPs (Support Services Providers) provide visual and environmental information and human guidance to acclimate consumers to their environment. This acclimation to their environment allows consumers to make informed decisions. The program supports consumers in various activities such as post-secondary education, household management, employment, health/well-being, and community integration. The relationship between the Deaf-Blind person and the SSP is a partnership based on trust and open, honest, and comfortable communication.

Technological Support Service

Assistive technology support is available to consumers to train, gain, retain, or advance one's employment. Assistive technology is defined as any item, piece of equipment, or system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is commonly used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. The Agency's Technological Support Services department assists consumers in gaining direct access to computer equipment and other technology through a comprehensive assessment of skill and accessibility needs. The purpose of the unit is to minimize barriers, while also taking into account the consumers' unique situation, making recommendations for equipment and training that would enable the individual to efficiently address his/her professional or academic responsibilities. Technological Services Specialists (TSSs) are responsible for maintaining and staffing five comprehensive and up-to-date Regional Technology Assistance Centers (RTACs) located throughout New Jersey in Newark, Freehold, Cherry Hill, Atlantic City, and New Brunswick.

The past four years have seen a number of new challenges and innovative solutions as the Technology Services Specialists adapted to providing services both during and after a pandemic. Staff quickly adapted to the successful implementation of remote instructional options to continue providing training, support, and assessments to CBVI clients through the Pandemic. As this approach has proven to be quite effective in providing service, it now

remains as a possible option to be offered to those clients for whom virtual instruction is a good fit. CBVI clients may now receive technological services either in-person, or virtually.

QWERTY Program

Technological Support Services introduced a new program in 2019 for VR consumers, to help fill a needed gap in typing instruction called QWERTY (Quality Work Experience Related to You). This program has proven quite effective in supplementing training for those who need to increase or develop their typing skills before they can successfully begin additional training. Participants are provided instruction on how to use 1 of 2 typing programs and receive support and guidance from a QWERTY mentor throughout their participation. The program is self-directed to meet expectations while being supported by the QWERTY mentor. Individual expectations for practice and improvement are reviewed and participants commit to meeting those expectations so they can progress to other technology training upon completion. Solid typing skills are an important, fundamental skill consumers need before learning additional Assistive Technology and the QWERTY program is the first step in Assistive Technology Training success. We are pleased to offer this program for the sixth consecutive year.

Business Enterprises New Jersey (BENJ)

The New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired is the State Licensing Agency (SLA) for the Federal Randolph-Sheppard program. Business Enterprises New Jersey (BENJ), a unit within CBVI, directly oversees New Jersey's Randolph Sheppard program. As such, BENJ is responsible for coordinating the operation of thirty-eight (38) Randolph Sheppard food locations across the state. The types of operations include: 6 cafeterias, 4 single person sites (dry stands), 2 military cafeterias, 7 snack bars, and 19 vending sites.

Individuals who wish to enter BENJ are required to be at least 18 years of age, be legally blind, have a high school diploma (or GED), pass a background check, and be a United States citizen. The BENJ unit is comprised of one Supervising Community Program Specialist, 6 Field Representatives, and one Administrative Assistant.

BENJ 2023 Highlights

- Total gross sales: \$ 18,285,720
- Manager average net income: \$ 92,291
- Total number of Managers served: 30
- Total number of consumers evaluated for Small Business Program: 4
- Total number of consumers received assistance for their Small Business Program: 0
- Total number of consumers evaluated for BENJ: 2
- Total number of consumers training: 0
- Total number of consumers receiving placements: 0

New Locations Setup:

- Opened a new vending location Library for the Blind - Trenton
- Opened a new vending location Distribution Center - Trenton
- Opened a new vending location Education Department - Trenton
- Opened a new vending location Department of Corrections - Trenton
- Opened a new vending location Budgeting/Treasury - Trenton
- Opened a new vending location Immigration Citizenship (ICE) - Newark
- Opened a new vending location Veterans Administration - Toms River

BENJ 2024 Initiatives:

- BENJ is working on developing a partnership with New Jersey County Colleges for vending.
- BENJ is looking to continue the internship program with transition-aged students of the Commission.
- BENJ will continue to attend national trainings for Randolph-Sheppard
- BENJ continues to work with the elected Committee of Business Enterprise Managers to develop training opportunities for the Blind managers.
- BENJ continues to work with the elected Committee with developing marketing for the program to obtain additional participants and new locations.

Independent Living Services

Independent Living services are designed to assist individuals of all ages (Independent Living - 54 years of age and under, and Independent Living Older Blind – 55 years of age and better) who are blind, visually impaired or deaf-blind gain and adapt the skills needed to lead full and productive lives. CBVI provides assistance and instruction in the areas of daily living, communication, orientation and mobility, assistive technology, Braille instruction, eye health education, and low vision services. The Independent Living Services Department works with community partners, providing information and education so that they can best serve blind and visually impaired members of their community.

All IL services are provided in-person, unless remote lessons are specifically requested by the consumer.

Our Assistive Support Programs for Independence Renewal and Education (ASPIRE) has grown to include more specialized groups and groups serving those ages 21-54. The Library Equal Access Program (LEAP) provides assistive technology training to seniors 55 and older interested in honing their iPad or iPhone skills. The Senior Hands-On Retreat Experience (A SHORE Thing) was held in the fall of 2024 and served a total of 12 consumers (ages 55 or better) and 10 of their companions. The program included hands-on instruction, travel, presentation, and adjustment to vision loss. We look forward to the next opportunity to conduct the SHORE Program.

Assistive Support Programs for Independence Renewal and Education (ASPIRE)

Established in 2015, ASPIRE is a state-wide network of peer support groups designed to provide individuals who are living with vision loss the opportunity to gain the necessary coping skills, information, and education needed to thrive. The ASPIRE Program has increased the number of Peer Support Groups in its network from 23 to a total of 60 groups, four of which were established specifically for Veterans. There are also new groups serving individuals age 21-54, and two specifically for the deaf-blind population. Other specialized groups have named themselves, including Guide Dog Handlers, Tech. Geeks, and the Parents group (a support group for Parents who are blind raising small children). ASPIRE connects with groups in all 21 New Jersey counties. Training for group facilitators is held annually.

ASPIRE is administered by the Independent Living Unit of CBVI, and although its groups are mostly geared towards those with vision loss 55 years or older, groups are available to all adults interested in attending. ASPIRE offers individuals with vision loss the opportunity to connect with others who share similar challenges and the same life experiences. Through attendance in monthly group meetings, program participants talk with one another and receive emotional support, exchange useful information, and find practical solutions for challenges that accompany low vision and blindness. ASPIRE helps people with vision loss to realize they are not alone and that

they can achieve much more than they ever thought possible. Groups may meet either in-person, virtually, or via teleconference.

In addition, twenty outreach events were conducted this year to raise awareness among the general public about the programs and services offered by the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI) and how membership in an ASPIRE support group may benefit those with vision loss.

For more information about support Groups in the ASPIRE Network, please contact the Community Outreach Supervisor, Susan Vanino at 973-648-2821 / susan.vanino@dhs.nj.gov

Library Equal Access Program (LEAP)

The LEAP initiative targets adults 55 and older experiencing a change in their vision. It provides basic computer skills training on assistive software, such as magnification and audio reading tools, to help visually impaired users read websites, emails, and other documents. Training also includes an introduction to using assistive technology features now available on iPads. LEAP represents a unique partnership between CBVI, the State Library's Talking Book & Braille Center (TBBC), and Assistive Technology Specialists. Classes are provided in the following locations: Atlantic City – Richmond Street Library, Toms River, Cherry Hill, Mullica Hill, Talking Book and Braille Center, East Brunswick, Hackensack, and Newark. With assistive technology available now in local libraries across the state, blind and visually impaired seniors may visit a local LEAP library location and take advantage of the classes and resources. When classes are not in session, the equipment provided - computers (with speech and magnification software), iPads, and a Closed-Circuit Television System (CCTVS) - may be used by library members.

Senior Hands-On Retreat Experience (SHORE)

The Independent Living Older Blind program provides specialized comprehensive training to 12 blind, visually impaired, or deaf-blind seniors aged 55 and older. These participants and their companions are invited to attend a week-long overnight program sponsored and staffed by the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Our Senior Hands-On Retreat Experience (SHORE) provides rigorous independent living skills training and fun from 8:00 AM to 7:00 PM throughout the week. A Support Service Provider (SSP) is available every evening from 5:00 to 11:00 PM to assist the participants as needed.

Seniors participate in an all-inclusive program that demonstrates real-life experiential learning throughout the week. Participants receive intensive independent living instruction in safe travel, health and wellness, assistive technology, communication, and self-advocacy skills. Consumers also obtain information about and/or participate in adjustment to vision loss, community integration, and leisure activity options. Some specific activities/lessons include but are not limited to, overall eye health and nutrition, diabetic education, community travel, food preparation/kitchen safety skills, dining at restaurants, and emergency preparedness. The week ends with a graduation ceremony where participants and their companions reflect on their experiences and successes from the week.

Project BEST [Better Eye-health Services and Treatment]

The mission of the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI) is to promote and provide services for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. One of CBVI's key programs is the Better Eye-Health Services and Treatment Project, or Project BEST. This project helps to prevent avoidable blindness and address the impact of vision loss by providing free vision screenings and eye health services available directly to residents in their own neighborhoods. In fiscal year 2024, Project BEST screened a total of 21,584 individuals.

Childhood is a critical period in the development of visual systems, making early detection of visual impairments particularly important. Without early detection and treatment, uncorrected vision disorders can impair health development, interfere with learning, and even lead to permanent vision loss. Project BEST has screened over 44,000 school children across the last 5 years, identifying over 5,000 children with visual impairments and connecting those in need to eye health services.

Project BEST recognizes that historically underserved communities are vulnerable to the impacts of avoidable blindness due to a lack of access to screening and eye health education. Project BEST brings screening and eye health services directly into these local communities and continues to serve New Jersey's diverse residents, including over 350 migrants in the past year. Project BEST conducted over 5200 total on-site screenings in FY2024.

In FY24, 1,972 individuals were referred to see a doctor, 1,360 individuals were referred to other services, and 305 were referred to CBVI programs or services.

NJ CBVI, Project BEST Success Stories 2024

1. Undocumented individual with a long history of type 2 diabetes. We screened them at a diabetic event held at a local Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC). Their patient navigator had concerns about some difficulty in controlling blood sugars. Project BEST screened the individual and referred them for a comprehensive retinal exam due to preliminary findings. Upon receipt of the comprehensive report, the individual consumer was sponsored for a series of sight restorative treatments, including 6 antiVEGF injections per eye and 3 total laser treatments aimed at effectively and safely reducing the risk of severe vision loss and blindness in people who suffer from complications of diabetic retinopathy.

Additionally, we worked with the consumer's patient navigator to establish long-term care at University Hospital in Newark, NJ, where they could continue to receive free/low-cost vision care. Our nurse provided diabetes education and supplemental materials in hopes of better compliance with blood sugar control through diet, medication, and healthy lifestyle choices. Overall, the consumer's vision was stabilized, and further irreversible damage was stopped.

2. This individual consumer was seen at a diabetic event held in partnership with a local health clinic. The individual was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes during COVID-19 and expressed concern as he has struggled to find and receive care. Due to a series of events, he found himself without employment and admitted to emotionally not being in a great space. Project BEST was able to assess the immediate concern with regard to what was self-described as a gradual decrease in vision overall. Additionally, we contacted the Diabetes Foundation to provide consumers with various support. The individual was treated with a series of lasers and injections aimed at stopping any further damage to the eye caused by diabetic eye disease.

Success Throughout the Lifespan – Spotlight Stories

Consumer Shubert L. is 46 years old and experienced a significant change in his life when he was 23 due to severe visual impairment from an attack. Initially, his family was overprotective, unsure of his capabilities, and treating him like a child. This added to his challenges as he adjusted to his new reality.

With his father's encouragement, Shubert chose not to succumb to depression or see himself as a victim. Instead, he resolved to use every available tool and service to adapt to his vision loss. He learned about CBVI from his eye doctor, who provided essential orientation and mobility training, including using a white cane and safe traveling techniques. CBVI also offered residential training, teaching him to use adaptive tools in the kitchen and phone apps to identify money, read texts aloud, or request live assistance. Shubert attended the Joseph Kohn Training Center, where he was pleased to find that he could share his fitness knowledge, gain support from fellow students, and excel in his tasks. He also participated in trial work experiences, discovering he could offer his services as a licensed massage therapist at a chiropractic or physical therapy offices. Additionally, he received career guidance, SSA benefits counseling, services coordination, encouragement, and monitoring from a vocational rehabilitation counselor.

Motivated by his family and friends, Shubert has found joy in having a service dog, something he had never imagined possible. He is inspired to be a role model for his teenage son, demonstrating that determination and discipline can overcome obstacles. Active in his community, Shubert serves as a Chaplain and spiritual leader for a local Free Mason Lodge. He is also a diversity consultant who advocates for people with disabilities on various committees in Verona, New Jersey. Shubert and his wife own a home. His employment goal is to continue working as a freelance massage therapist in healthcare-oriented centers and offices and to become self-employed and financially independent in the coming years.

Consumer Rosa L. In December 2019, Ms. Rose L. began her journey with CBVI VR services under pressing circumstances. Faced with the urgent need for an eye treatment procedure and lack of health insurance, Ms. Rose L, working as a substitute teacher with the Paterson Board of Education, was at risk of losing sight. Recognizing the situation's urgency, our team swiftly provided comprehensive support. We began by guiding Ms. Rosa through applying for NJ Family Care. Concurrently, we connected her with the NJ CBVI EHN referral and liaised with her doctor's office to secure financial assistance for her emergency eye treatment.

In addition to addressing her immediate medical needs, we provided Ms. Rosa with orientation and mobility (O&M) services to help her travel safely within her community. Understanding the importance of maintaining her professional responsibilities, we also assisted her in obtaining low-vision services and devices. Among these was the Ruby portable hand magnifier, which was invaluable for her reading large print materials for her students. Ms. Rosa's journey with us did not end with her medical and practical needs. She also received emotional support and guidance throughout the process. Today, Ms. Rosa is not only successfully continuing her work but also expressing heartfelt gratitude for the services provided by NJ CBVI. Her success and satisfaction with the VR services are a testament to the positive impact of our comprehensive support. We are proud of Ms. Rosa's achievements and honored to have played a role in her continued success.

Consumer Vidhi R. has had an outstanding year, excelling across all four key areas: Employment, Development, Guidance, and Engagement. Her exceptional academic performance and proactive approach to her career aspirations have been inspiring. After completing a double degree in Journalism and Psychology in December, Vidhi's dedication and hard work were further recognized when she was accepted into Rutgers University's Communication and Journalism master's program. Remarkably, she is set to begin her master's studies in the Fall semester and will graduate with both undergraduate and master's degrees before she turns 21.

Vidhi's eagerness to gain practical experience has been evident throughout her journey. She began interning at VanDyk Mortgage, focusing on social media. Her drive to build on this experience led her to secure a social media internship with the EDGE Program through the Rutgers internship program. In this role, she developed a strong presence on Facebook and Instagram and contributed valuable insights to the EDGE marketing calendar. This opportunity allowed her to earn course credits while advancing her academic and career goals. Vidhi's initiative, thorough preparation, and impressive negotiation skills testify to her advocacy and determination. She actively seeks out guidance and development opportunities, both with EDGE and within the broader community. Notably, she has been selected to attend the Disability IN Next Gen Leadership Program in Las Vegas this July. This prestigious opportunity will greatly enhance her personal and professional growth and is a significant investment in her future career. The EDGE staff is proud of Vidhi's achievements and is confident in her continued success. Her exceptional drive and accomplishments underscore her potential for a bright and impactful future.

Consumer Jack Z. a dedicated student at Rutgers University, is pursuing a double major in Psychology and Communication. Over the past year and a half, his journey has been marked by impressive achievements and personal growth, demonstrating his commitment to academic and professional development. Jack's talent and enthusiasm were evident during his internship at Art of the Kitchen, where he played a crucial role in rebranding the company. From logo creation to web design, Jack's contributions were integral to the project's success. His reliability and engagement were notable; he consistently met deadlines and attended every meeting, showcasing his dedication and work ethic.

Over time, we have witnessed significant growth in Jack. He has learned to accept constructive criticism and adapt to change, greatly enhancing his skills. His ability to write compelling online journals and blogs has further highlighted his talent. Jack continues to refine his skills through successful freelance work, underscoring his passion for writing and creative design. Jack's vibrant personality and intellectual curiosity have shone through in his professional experiences. During his internship at Best Work Industries, a company known for hiring blind and visually impaired workers to produce goods for the military, Jack worked closely with a marketing executive on various projects. His creative flair and enthusiasm for the industry were evident, and his excitement about marketing trends was refreshing and inspiring.

Jack's commitment to learning and growth is truly commendable. He consistently seeks advice, eagerly discusses marketing trends, and guides others. Despite facing rejections and challenges, Jack maintained a positive and determined attitude. His perseverance paid off when, after sending out nearly 50 resumes, he secured a 10-week full-time internship at Lumanity, a leading medical marketing company.

We are incredibly proud of Jack and his achievements. His journey reflects his passion, resilience, and talent. With his impressive track record and unwavering dedication, Jack is undoubtedly on a path to great success.

Consumer Saku D. Keep working, keep pushing, but be patient. My client, Mr. Saku D., and I have used this mantra throughout his case with the NJ Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. In my decade-plus

career as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the agency, this has been the longest case I've had, and it has been a trying one, but with a very satisfying ending. Saku was born with optic nerve hypoplasia. He had his case with NJ CBVI opened when he was only a few months old. Saku received services from our agency throughout his childhood, and looking back through his case file, one can see a real "who's who" of this agency's former staff since this was over 30 years ago, and many of the staffers have since retired. After graduating from Atlantic County Special Services School, Saku was assigned to my caseload in July 2013. Over the coming years, Saku continued to work with staff on his O&M and daily living (RT) skills and always aimed to become gainfully employed. Saku attended JKTC and enjoyed his time there, where he learned and honed his skills. He also grew in terms of interpersonal skills. After JKTC, we tried an exploratory program at Atlantic Cape Community College, but Saku struggled there, primarily due to mild developmental and cognitive disabilities. We used several supported employment agencies to find job opportunities, but these never worked out. As many in our agency know, service availability in the southern areas of NJ is limited, and the providers we used did not have sufficient knowledge and training to work with the intricacies of a case like this one. Throughout the process, Saku remained upbeat and energetic. Every time a hurdle would be placed in front of him, Saku would find a way to overcome it.

Two of the biggest hurdles we faced occurred simultaneously: COVID-19 and DDD (Division of Developmental Disabilities) eligibility. The pandemic and the shutdown greatly restricted our abilities to search for jobs, especially since one of the key areas we were looking for was in the restaurant industry. As for DDD, Saku and his family didn't know about the need to sign up for services after he graduated high school. We needed to sign up for DDD to acquire long-term follow-along services to aid in his employment. But no one had the records from his school days, neither DDD, the school district, nor his family. Throughout a year or so of communications, our agency got an evaluation performed that would satisfy DDD's eligibility process, and Saku was deemed eligible.

In the spring and summer of 2023, Saku asked me to check with area restaurants again to see if they would hire a silverware roller. Since job development is an under-utilized activity, I was happy to look for this role in person. I stopped at a long string of restaurants in the area. It was Outback Steakhouse in Mays Landing where these efforts paid off. I met with a manager, Christian Laing, who liked the idea of hiring someone to do the silverware, as the rest of the staff usually hated doing that as part of their opening or closing side work. Christian put me in touch with Albert Frio, the store's managing partner. Al was ready to hire Saku sight unseen. Saku and I met with Al a few days later, and what was supposed to be a job interview turned into an orientation session, as Al offered the job to Saku right then and there. Saku has been successfully employed at Outback for about eight months, and all parties are pleased with the arrangement. Saku has a silverware rolling area right off the kitchen, so he can interact with the staff while doing his work, and the staff is very appreciative that they no longer have to do that job!

I can't say enough about Saku's continuously positive attitude and the willingness of Mr. Frio and the staff at Outback, which have made this such a great resolution.

Consumer N.S. is an 88-year-old consumer who has been diagnosed with Dry Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD) POAG (Primary Open Angular Glaucoma), severe OU, and Pseudophakia OU. N.S. had expressed that the progression of AMD has caused her to suffer significant vision loss, and the consumer was facing challenges in doing small things around her home, including reading. N.S. mentioned that her goal was to remain independent in her home. N.S. was offered the CCTV loaner, granted after several months of use because it was a great help and made a big difference in her life. N.S. expressed that she can now read her mail, medication labels, and cans of food and will return to college artwork, which she used to do in the past. The client also mentioned that she can see family pictures with the device. N.S. also mentioned how confident she feels now as she can take her medications safely, knowing that she's not self-medicating incorrectly. The client indicated that she is more active and verbalized that the CCTV "is like another pair of eyes."

Consumer Anthony O. attends William Paterson University and plans on pursuing a career in the law field. Anthony has had the "itch" to work for a long time and has been interning through the EDGE program in the past few years. In EDGE2, he has shown an interest in the legal field and a penchant for advocacy work. Anthony worked at Eyes Like Mine twice, most recently as an advocate for the organization. He received a glowing evaluation and has a standing recommendation from them whenever he needs one. Anthony was persistent in wanting to secure an internship in the legal field. He successfully found a summer internship at the Zemel Law Firm, focusing on disability rights. We hope this position will offer Anthony valuable hands-on experience in a dynamic legal environment and the opportunity to contribute to meaningful work under the guidance of experienced attorneys. After completing this internship, Anthony is considering obtaining a certificate in paralegal studies. Good luck in your future endeavors

Consumer Sebastian C. When individuals lose their vision later in life, adapting to the situation and focusing on professional development can be difficult. However, with the proper training and support, it is possible to learn new skills and adaptations for vision loss and successfully find a new job in a much-loved career field.

When Sebastian Costa lost his vision, he was unsure if he would ever work in the restaurant business again. Although he worked for 25 years in his family's Pizzeria, doing everything from bussing tables to managing other staff, he was overwhelmed by trying to keep up with the fast-paced restaurant while understanding what accommodations he might need. Sebastian attended the Joseph Kohn Training Center to gain an immersive training experience. At the center, Sebastian learned how to cook and clean accessibly, integrate adaptive technology into his daily life, and orient himself to home and work environments non-visually. As a part of the Progressive Employment Project, Sebastian even got to trial work environments to see what might be a good fit. When he got to prepare cookies and try out the Hot Bar at Shoprite, Sebastian felt hope again. He explained that the job sampling showed him that maybe he could keep up with a restaurant environment, and he was eager to participate in a work experience at Filippo's Famous Pizza to develop these skills further. During the last four weeks of Sebastian's training experience, he excelled while working at a restaurant. Filippo's manager was so impressed with Sebastian's effort and experience that he offered him a job on weekends while he was still at the center and completing the work experience portion of the program. Upon Sebastian's graduation, his position expanded to part-time, which will likely develop into a full-time position shortly. Sebastian takes the train independently to work every day, and his willingness to take on challenges enabled him to thrive during his time at the center. While initially extremely anxious about adjusting to a life without vision, Sebastian proved he had the confidence and skills to work in the field he loved again.

Consumer Alfonso H. is the go-getter of all go-getters. He's not one to sit back and wait for opportunities, nope, he actively sets and diligently pursues goals. Interestingly enough, that wasn't always the case. Born in New York, Alfonso and two of his other siblings (he's one of six) were born with visual impairments. Although each has some useable sight, testing couldn't identify a specific condition that caused the impairments, making them legally blind. Growing up, they attended camps for kids like them, but outside of that, they weren't exposed to any other people who were blind or visually impaired. Alfonso went to a school for the Blind for two years when he was really young, then went to public school in New York until his family relocated to New Jersey when he was 11, where he attended public schools, graduating from Weequahic High School in Newark.

He didn't enjoy school, so he didn't apply himself. It's not because he wasn't capable; it was simply because he wasn't aware of any opportunities available for someone with visual impairments. His family always encouraged him, saying he could do or be anything he wanted, but he never believed it. He accepted that he would graduate high school and then collect social security. But that mindset would soon change.

Shortly after graduating high school, Alfonso got referred to the Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC) through the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. He entered those doors one man and exited a completely different one. He went from 'why try?' to 'why not try!' Aside from those summer camps, this was the first time Alfonso really spent time with people like him. It was also the first time he learned of programs and resources available for people with visual impairments – technology, aid, employment programs, and so much more. They gave him the skills to live independently, but they did something better. They motivated him and gave him hope to have a career and bright future. JKTC encouraged Alfonso to go to college, so he earned his associate degree in Liberal Arts from Bergen County Community College. Midway through earning this degree, he learned about the Business Enterprise New Jersey (BENJ) program that prioritizes people who are blind to operate vending facilities on Federal property. When he expressed interest in the program, he was advised to finish his degree, so he did. Then he went one step further, earning his Bachelor in Business Management from Kean University, hoping to operate one of these BENJ facilities one day. During college, Alfonso learned he was going to be a father. Initially, he was going to drop out so that he could work and provide for the family, but ultimately, he stayed the course and completed his degree. Once he graduated, his job search began.

It just so happens that Alfonso ran into an old friend who worked for Bestwork Industries for the Blind. Alfonso struggled with applying because he lived almost 90 minutes from the Cherry Hill location, but took a chance and applied despite his reservations. He was hired as a sewing machine operator in May 2021 and assigned to the Navy Fleece line. He commuted more than two and a half hours each way per day and never complained. He was determined to work to provide for his family. A few months later, Bestwork's leadership changed hands. With the new leadership came new strategic initiatives and goals. One key initiative included increasing recruiting efforts to find blind employees seeking employment. To accomplish this goal, it was decided to create a part-time recruiting position and post it internally. Alfonso was one of many employees who applied for the position. After interviewing all applicants, Alfonso was the clear choice and was promoted to Bestwork's Recruiter. He was excited to take on this new role. He started by developing and executing a recruiting plan, which proved to be successful. He generated multiple leads that resulted in Bestwork hiring 15 blind employees. During that time, he demonstrated his initiative and skills with technology, which earned him the selection to work on Bestwork's new e-commerce store as a part-time customer service associate. He would split his time between the two roles, which meant he would now be a full-time indirect employee.

Alfonso's ability to connect with people is incredible, but more than that, he's opening doors for blind people who never knew opportunities like employment at Bestwork were possible. He's become a resource hub for people all

across the state of New Jersey. He's gone above and beyond, learning bus and train routes to help people navigate travel, and he's helped connect people with the state for housing. He's even attended career fairs and educated job seekers about Bestwork. In October 2023, Bestwork opened a Satellite Office in Montclair, NJ, which was much closer to where Alfonso lived. He asked if he could give up his 5+ hour commute and work from that location. Working there meant a new job opportunity in addition to recruiting. He would be a Team Lead for the new light assembly team, leaving the Customer Service role. The decision was made. In addition to recruiting, he now leads a team of employees in North Jersey and couldn't be happier. He's learning to manage his team effectively while generating awareness for Bestwork's employment opportunities. "Balancing these two roles helps me put into perspective what I tell people when I talk to them about our employment opportunities," says Alfonso. "In the past, I'd bring people in, but they would be responsible for their successes. Now, I'm also able to help motivate them, working with them so that they are successful." Alfonso's future is bright. He's excited to help grow our current satellite office and build the workforce for additional locations as they open. Outside of his Bestwork responsibilities, Alfonso hopes to open a BENJ facility one day, but with a line of vending machines. It's something he'd like to share with his daughters. Alfonso is a father of two and glows when he talks about his little girls (ages 4 and 2). He'd also love to work with animals in some capacity – he's a huge animal lover, donating monthly to local SPCAs and volunteering when time allows. Activity-wise, Alfonso is heavily involved in sports—playing goal ball and beep baseball through the US Association of Blind Athletes (USABA). He's been playing both for over a decade and enjoys traveling around the States to play in tournaments. In 2013, he also helped start a beep ball nonprofit organization called NJ Titans, a team for blind and visually impaired athletes. Alfonso says his favorite part about working at Bestwork is following people's stories from when they started to now. Considering his journey to get here, it's a full-circle moment. He went from a young man with no career aspirations to someone helping employ people in similar situations and motivating them for success.

Did you know?

The NJ State Library Talking Book and Braille Center offers an array of leisure reading and magazines in digital audio, Braille, and large print. Call 1-800-792-8322 or visit: www.njsltbbc.org

Bookshare.org offers thousands of leisure reading and academic materials in text to speech and embossed Braille formats. www.bookshare.org

Learning Ally is a major provider of academic books on all levels in DAISY-format CD or download. www.learningally.org

Newspaper reader services from NFB – NEWSLINE, sponsored by CBVI at 1-888-882-1629

NFB-NEWSLINE is a free service available to anyone who is blind, deaf-blind, vision impaired or print-disabled. Funded by state sponsors, NFB-NEWSLINE offers over 400 publications to choose from, including ten national newspapers like the Wall Street Journal and USA Today, sixteen breaking news sources such as CNN, BBC, and ESPN Online, fourteen international newspapers including Financial Times and Vancouver Sun, and countless state newspapers, as well as fifty magazines like Family Circle, Time, Consumer Reports, Jet, Guideposts, Smithsonian and more.

The Commission may be able to assist with*:

*Based on eligibility

- Vocational Rehabilitation to help you obtain employment.
- Rehabilitation teaching to help you perform daily living tasks.
- Orientation and Mobility instruction to assist you in traveling independently.
- Referral to community resources for housing, financial assistance, and other supported services.

The Commission will respond to your concerns, if you are dissatisfied with the services you receive. Call the Office of the Executive Director at 973-648-3161.

The Client Assistance Program (CAP) can assist you in resolving any disputes regarding provision of Vocational Rehabilitation services by calling: 1-800-922-7233. The CAP program is administered by Disability Rights New Jersey.

Para-transit can provide transportation to work, medical appointments, etc. Call the NJ Transit Office of Special Services at 1-800-772-2287 to get the phone number for your County.

SRC Meeting Dates – 2025

SRC meetings are held in compliance with Section 105 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and also are in compliance with the NJ Open Public Meeting Act, N.J.S.A. 10:4-6.

The public is invited to all meetings, which will start at 9:30 a.m. on the following dates in 2025:

February 7

June 6

October 3

December 5

Service Centers and Facilities

For a complete description of CBVI services, please visit the web site at <http://www.cbvi.nj.gov>

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