

Final
STAFF SUMMARY OF MEETING

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

Date: 09/03/2015

ATTENDANCE

Time: **01:03 PM to 04:06 PM**

Aguilar X

Lundberg A

Place: HCR 0112

Primavera *

Windholz X

This Meeting was called to order by
Representative Danielson

Balmer X

Danielson X

This Report was prepared by
Katie Ruedeusch

X = Present, E = Excused, A = Absent, * = Present after roll call

Bills Addressed:	Action Taken:
Remote Testimony on Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the Blind	Witness Testimony and/or Committee Discussion Only
Adaptive Technology	Witness Testimony and/or Committee Discussion Only
Employment and On-the-Job Training	Witness Testimony and/or Committee Discussion Only
Veteran's Issues	Witness Testimony and/or Committee Discussion Only
Public Testimony	Witness Testimony and/or Committee Discussion Only

Representative Danielson called the meeting to order. She introduced the agenda for the meeting.

01:03 PM -- Remote Testimony on Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the Blind - Grand Junction

Ms. Lorraine Hutcheson, representing the Colorado Department of Human Services Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), began her presentation via remote testimony in Grand Junction. She discussed the locations served by DVR on the Western Slope. She noted the services offered to low vision/blind clients in DVR offices in western and southwestern Colorado. She stated that when a client needs extensive services not available in her region, DVR refers clients to Denver-metro based programs. She detailed the other organizations she works with in the Grand Junction area, including the Center for Independence. She also noted that vocational rehabilitation is available to blind veterans in Grand Junction through the local United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital. She continued by describing how she connects clients with local advocacy organizations. In response to committee questions, she discussed the caseload burden in her office. At the request of the committee, she noted that when clients are referred to services in Denver, a financial needs assessment is performed to determine if and how much funds maybe be provided to help clients pay for travel to Denver. She also explained the differences between services offered in Grand Junction and services offered in Denver, such as the Colorado Center for the Blind.

01:22 PM

Mr. Steven Davis, representing himself, came to the table via remote testimony. He described his personal experiences as a person who is blind and advocated for specific services for the blind within DVR. He stated that DVR needs more counselors who understand the particular issues facing clients who are blind. He discussed problems with assistive technology.

01:32 PM

Mr. Nathan Hecker, representing the Grand Valley Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind, came to the table via remote testimony. He discussed his personal experiences with DVR and advocated for specific, specialized services for the blind. He noted that South Dakota and Nebraska have separate units dedicated to serving persons who are blind.

01:35 PM

Representative Danielson thanked the witnesses testifying via remote testimony at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction.

01:36 PM -- Adaptive Technology for the Blind

Mr. James Gashel, representing KNFB Reader, LLC, came to the table. He noted that his company creates and provides readers and other adaptive technology to persons who are blind. He spoke about the importance of talking about technology and blindness. He demonstrated several pieces of technology that persons who are blind might use daily and the costs associated with those technologies. He noted that several technology devices, such as computers, smartphones, and tablets provide built-in audio technology functions for persons who are blind. He continued demonstrating other pieces of technology, such as a braille note-taking device. He stated that vocational rehabilitation can provide technology to clients who are blind, but that the technology provided has to be connected to a person's individualized plan for employment (IPE). He noted that persons who become blind later in life might not have access to available technology through DVR because they are not seeking employment. He stated that Colorado lacks a technology resource center to help educate persons who are blind about the availability, means, and costs associated with technology. He recommended that the committee consider a comprehensive, specific program for the blind that includes a technology center for persons who are blind in Colorado.

01:51 PM

Mr. Gashel, in response to committee questions, discussed how persons who are blind can afford adaptive technology. He noted that some persons receive technology through DVR and others through the Technology Access Fund, nonprofits, or other organizations. He also stated that some technologies, such as many smartphones, are already adaptive technologies out of the box. He discussed the funding for accessible technology available from the state through DVR and other governmental programs, including federal funds. He noted that DVR must seek other opportunities to fund technology purchases, which limits funds for other persons not in DVR. According to Mr. Gashel, DVR seeks to save money by finding opportunities such as self-funding or other outside sources, to help clients pay for assistive technology. In response to committee questions, he discussed the designated agency for assistive technology that is required under federal law and noted he did not know what agency serves as the designated agency in Colorado.

01:59 PM

Ms. Susan Emmerling and Mr. Jim Pilkington, representing DVR, came to the table. Ms. Emmerling discussed adaptive technology services available through DVR. She noted that low vision/blind clients are as diverse as the general population. She stated that braille literacy and technology are imperative to a low vision or blind client's success. She discussed the DVR's Personal Adjustment Training (PAT) program. She stated that all PAT students are taught in a one-on-one settings and discussed the factors involved with client success. She also noted that DVR helps persons already employed with navigating technology related to their specific employment setting. She stated that the three most important skills that low vision/blind clients need are touch typing, computer literacy, and adaptive technology skills.

02:07 PM

Mr. Pilkington, in response to committee questions, discussed the problems with accessing websites, such as Amazon. He noted the graphic nature of websites and lack of labeling on websites make accessing technology challenging for persons who are blind even when using adaptive technologies. He also discussed the issues persons who are blind face when accessing social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. In response to a question from the committee regarding the transition to the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE), Mr. Pilkington discussed the fast-changing nature of technology and the challenges of keeping up with those changes. He noted that even though some technologies such as the iPhone are adaptive out of the box, there is much training behind the scenes to allow persons to use the device properly. He also stated that along with the time to train clients, there is a continuous training component that counselors need in order to keep up with new technology as well.

02:17 PM -- Employment and On-the-Job Training

Dr. Edward Bell, Director of the Institute on Blindness at Louisiana Tech University, came to the table. He discussed employment outcomes for persons who are blind and data related to vocational rehabilitation services outcomes. He stated that in 2011 he conducted research that indicated that a significant factor in keeping people who are blind employed after vocational rehabilitation services was access to adaptive technology. He stated that vocational rehabilitation services that have counselors who are well trained in the needs of low vision and blind clients create better employment outcomes.

02:27 PM

Mr. Kevan Worley, representing Worley Enterprises and the National Association of Blind Merchants, came to the table. He stated that entrepreneurship should be a large component of any vocational rehabilitation services available persons who are blind. He noted that the current Business Enterprise Program (BEP) staff helping blind vendors in Colorado are excellent, but there is more opportunity for expansion. He believes there should be more targeted efforts to reach out to minority, women, veterans, and seniors with entrepreneurial opportunities. He expressed that there should be more opportunity for blind vendors in Colorado to work with other organizations in Colorado besides BEP. He noted that even vending machines in state buildings have accessibility issues. He stated that adding specific staff for the blind within DVR would help create more entrepreneurial opportunities for blind vendors in Colorado. Also, he discussed the need for better procurement systems, new tax incentives, and the end of BEP exemption for Colorado institutions of higher education. He noted that navigating opportunities for small businesses can be challenging and that vocational rehabilitation needs to be proactive in helping blind merchants. In response to committee questions, he stated his opinion that CDLE is open to expanding entrepreneurship opportunities for persons who are blind through vocational rehabilitation.

02:48 PM

Ms. Tera Lynn Gray, representing the Employability Center (center) at the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind (CSDB), came to the table. She discussed the students served by her program and stated that the goal of the center is to make sure every student can achieve their goals and find their dream jobs. She stated that the program focuses on three areas: post-secondary education, employment, and independent-living skills. She described how the center targets students from kindergarten to the time they leave the CSDB. She described how the center helps students in their junior year by introducing students to DVR. The center works with DVR to arrange visits to DVR locations to meet with DVR counselors. She also described a paid, competitive internship program the center offers to students to gain work experience and on-the-job training. In addition, she explained the Bridges to Life program for students ages 18-21 which helps students transition into employment and independent living. She stated that the Bridges to Life program serves not just the students at the CSDB, but students living beyond Colorado Springs. In response to committee questions, she stated that the center has over 110 partnering employers in Colorado. She noted the biggest barrier to students getting employment is misunderstandings among employers about blindness. She stated the center strives to get tools in the hands of students to achieve employment and the necessary training available to use the technology that helps them in their employment. As for post-secondary education, she stated that the College in Colorado website is not accessible to students who are blind. At the request of her students, she stated that better transportation is needed for persons who are blind to be able to get to work. In response to committee questions, she noted that the center is just for CSDB students, but that CSDB does work with rural and other school districts.

03:10 PM

Mr. Petr Kucheryavyy, representing the Colorado Center for the Blind (CCB), came to the table. He discussed how he assists CCB clients and works with DVR to help persons who are blind gain employment. He mentioned that he helps clients write resumes, work on public speaking, practice for interviews, and work with technology. He stated that the greatest barriers and challenges to finding employment for persons who are blind is the public perception of blindness. He suggested that there should be efforts by DVR to reach out and offer education to potential employers. He noted that educating vocational rehabilitation counselors on the specific barriers facing persons who are blind would help his clients find successful employment. He discussed his personal experiences as a student and person who is blind in his home state of Georgia and in Colorado. He noted the importance of effective vocational rehabilitation counselors and that the counselors have a large impact on the success of their clients who are blind. He stated that youth, especially students age 16-18, need to be able to access vocational rehabilitation services. In response to committee questions, he discussed incentives that are needed to help employ persons who are blind. He noted that, in his opinion, direct payment options through DVR rather than tax credits, which are extra work for employers, might work better for potential employers.

03:36 PM -- Veterans' Issues

Mr. Jim Stevens, representing himself and A3, came to the table. He discussed his experiences with the VA and DVR. He noted that he benefited greatly from VA vocational rehabilitation services. He noted that most vocational rehabilitation counselors lack knowledge and training about persons who are blind, but those issues can be remedied through better cross-training efforts. He stated he believes that the problems facing DVR are systemic in nature and that more training, individualized plans, and cross-training for counselors can help solve problems better than a new blind-specific unit. He noted that his experience with the VA and services for veterans has taught him that no additional bureaucracy is needed; instead better training is needed to better serve persons who are blind. The committee thanked Mr. Stevens for his service in the armed forces.

03:50 PM -- Public Testimony

Ms. Christine McGroarty, a state employee representing herself, came to the table. She noted that she has benefited in her life from the services offered by both DVR and the National Federation for the Blind. She stated that the services she received from DVR were vital to her employability in Colorado. She discussed the State of Colorado's move from Microsoft Outlook to Gmail and the accessibility issues facing the state government. She distributed a copy of the state accessibility statute to the committee (Attachment A). She asked that the committee consider working on accessibility at the state level. Also, she discussed the misrepresentation of service dogs and the legislative efforts of other states regarding this matter.

04:02 PM

Ms. Julie Deden, representing CCB, came to the table. She highlighted the excellent work of the DVR counselors that have spoken in front of the committee. She spoke of her hope about the better services that can be offered through a specific, dedicated unit to the blind in Colorado.

04:06 PM

The committee adjourned.

C.R.S. 24-85-101

COLORADO REVISED STATUTES

TITLE 24. GOVERNMENT - STATE
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ACCESS FOR BLIND
ARTICLE 85. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ACCESS FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO
ARE BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED

C.R.S. 24-85-101 (2014)

24-85-101. Legislative declaration

The general assembly hereby finds that the state needs to improve nonvisual access to information, whether by speech, Braille, or other appropriate means.

C.R.S. 24-85-102

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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ACCESS FOR BLIND
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C.R.S. 24-85-102 (2014)

24-85-102. Definitions

As used in this article, unless the context otherwise requires:

- (1) "Access" means the ability to receive, use, and manipulate data and operate controls included in information technology.
- (2) "Blind or visually impaired individual" means an individual who:
 - (a) Has a visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with corrective lenses or has a limited field of vision so that the widest diameter of the visual field subtends an angle no greater than twenty degrees;
 - (b) Has a medically indicated expectation of visual deterioration; or
 - (c) Has a medically diagnosed limitation in visual functioning that restricts the individual's ability to read and write standard print at levels expected of individuals of

comparable ability.

(3) Repealed.

(4) "Information technology" means all electronic information processing hardware and software, including telecommunications.

(5) "Nonvisual" means synthesized speech, Braille, and other output methods not requiring sight.

(6) "State agency" means the state or any of its principal departments, agencies, or boards or commissions.

(7) "Telecommunications" means the transmission of information, images, pictures, voice, or data by radio, video, or other electronic or impulse means.

C.R.S. 24-85-103

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C.R.S. 24-85-103 (2014)

24-85-103. Nonvisual access standards

(1) The chief information officer in the office of information technology, created in section 24-37.5-103, shall maintain nonvisual access standards for information technology systems employed by state agencies that:

(a) Provide blind or visually impaired individuals with access to information stored electronically by state agencies by ensuring compatibility with adaptive technology systems so that blind and visually impaired individuals have full and equal access when needed; and

(b) Are designed to present information, including prompts used for interactive communications, in formats intended for both visual and nonvisual use, such as the use of text-only options.

(2) The chief information officer in the office of information technology, created in section 24-37.5-103, shall consult with state agencies and representatives of individuals

who are blind or visually impaired in maintaining the nonvisual access standards described in subsection (1) of this section and the procurement criteria described in section 24-85-104.

(3) The head of each state agency shall establish a written plan, as part of its annual information technology plan, and develop any proposed budget requests for implementing the nonvisual access standards for its agency at facilities accessible by the public.

C.R.S. 24-85-104

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TITLE 24. GOVERNMENT - STATE
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C.R.S. 24-85-104 (2014)

24-85-104. Procurement requirements - criteria - implementation

(1) The office of information technology, created in section 24-37.5-103, shall approve minimum standards and criteria to be used in approving or rejecting procurements by state agencies for adaptive technologies for nonvisual access uses.

(2) Nothing in this article shall require the installation of software or peripheral devices used for nonvisual access when the information technology is being used by individuals who are not blind or visually impaired. Nothing in this article shall be construed to require the purchase of nonvisual adaptive equipment by a state agency.

(3) Notwithstanding the provisions of subsection (2) of this section, the applications, programs, and underlying operating systems, including the format of the data, used for the manipulation and presentation of information shall permit the installation and effective use of and shall be compatible with nonvisual access software and peripheral devices.

(4) Compliance with the procurement requirements of this section with regard to information technology purchased prior to July 1, 2001, shall be achieved at the time of procurement of an upgrade or replacement of existing information technology equipment or software.