

North Dakota Vision Services/ School for the Blind



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A Division of the Department
of Public Instruction

MARCH 10, 2023



**Testimony to the Education
& Environment Division
of House Appropriations**

Senate Bill #2013

Table of Contents

Testimony – Paul Olson	1
Organizational Chart	7
Client Services Data.....	8
Persons Served by Region.....	9
Current Biennium One Time Funding.....	10
Base Budget and Request	11
Optional Requests.....	13
Agency Workforce	15
Other Bills that may affect NDVS/SB	16
Conclusion.....	17
Appendix A – Historical Perspective	A-1
Appendix B – Quick Facts about NDVS/SB	B-1
Appendix C – NDAB Testimony for SB2013	C-1

Testimony – Paul Olson

Chairman Nathe and Members of the House Education and Environment Committee:

My name is Paul Olson. I am the superintendent of North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind (NDVS/SB). Tami Purcell, Business Manager, and I will provide testimony relative to SB 2013.

North Dakota Century Code

25-06-01. North Dakota vision services – school for the blind – Maintained – Location. There must be maintained at Grand Forks, in Grand Forks County, a statewide service, resource, and referral center for the education and training of all residents of this state who are blind or have a visual impairment which must be known as the North Dakota vision services - school for the blind.

25-06-01.1. Definitions. For purposes of this chapter, an individual who is blind means an individual who is totally blind or whose central visual acuity does not exceed twenty/two hundred in the better eye with corrective lenses, or the widest diameter of the visual field is no greater than twenty degrees; and an individual with a visual impairment means an individual with an impairment in vision which, even with correction, adversely affects the individual's functional ability.

25-06-02. Duties and responsibilities of North Dakota vision services – school for the blind. Within the limits of legislative appropriation, North Dakota vision services – school for the blind shall: Provide vision-specific services that include consultations, evaluations, information, training, and educational services, including instruction in orientation, mobility, Braille, Braille music, daily living skills, technology, vocational training and recreation. Collect and distribute information on vision services and resources available in the state. Coordinate loans of adaptive devices, equipment, and materials. Maintain a data base of residents who are blind or have a visual impairment. Facilitate collaboration with agencies and programs providing services to individuals who are blind or have a visual impairment. Assist residents to access appropriate services, including services available from the vocational rehabilitation division, independent living centers, infant development programs, developmental disabilities programs, the state library, local education programs, and advocacy programs.

25-06-02.1. North Dakota vision services – school for the blind – Appointment of superintendent, budget, staff, and reporting structure. The superintendent of the North Dakota vision services – school for the blind is appointed by and reports to the superintendent of public instruction. The North Dakota vision services – school for the blind must have a separate budget and separate staff from the department of public instruction.

25-06-02.2. Superintendent – Special duties. The superintendent of the North Dakota vision services – school for the blind may also be the superintendent of the school for the deaf.

25-06-03. Superintendent to possess certain qualifications. The superintendent of the North Dakota vision services – school for the blind must possess those qualifications, educational and otherwise, as in the opinion of the superintendent of public instruction may qualify that person to instruct and minister to the needs of the blind persons.

25-06-04. Qualifications for admission to school for the blind – Residents of state entitled to free education. Repealed by S.L. 2001, Ch. 257, § 5.

25-06-05. Services to nonresidents. Individuals who are blind or have a visual impairment who are not residents of this state may receive services from North Dakota vision services – school for the blind if the individuals pay the cost of the services as determined by the superintendent of public instruction. Nonresidents may not receive services to the exclusion of residents of this state.

25-06-06. Transportation of indigent persons. Repealed by S.L. 1979, Ch. 336, §3.

25-06-07. Instruction at school for the blind. Repealed by S.L. 2001, Ch.257, § 5.

25-06-08. Accounts for clothing – How collected. Repealed by S.L. 1997, Ch. 244, §4.

25-06-09. Blind person – Duty to report. Repealed by S.L. 2001, Ch. 257, § 5.

25-06-10. Purchase and resale of vision-specific adaptive aids, devices, and appliances – Revolving fund – Continuing appropriation. A revolving vision aids, devices, and appliances fund is hereby established in the state treasury to be used by the North Dakota vision services – school for the blind to purchase and resell vision-specific adaptive aids, devices, and appliances to be used by blind and visually impaired persons resident in this state. The North Dakota vision services – school for the blind may apply service charges when needed to cover the cost of purchasing, invoicing, and shipping, and all revenue from the sale of aids, appliances, devices, and shipping and postage fees must be deposited in the fund. The North Dakota vision services – school for the blind may receive gifts, grants, and donations for deposit in and use by the fund. All moneys in the revolving fund are hereby appropriated to the North Dakota vision services – school for the blind on a continuing basis for expenditure for the purposes of this section.

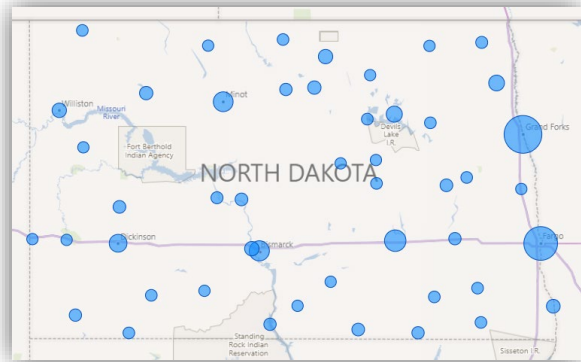
Mission

We are educators and advocates partnering with related agencies to provide individualized services and resources to infants, children and adults with visual impairment to empower them in achieving their goals.

Outreach – Birth through High School

Regionally based teachers of the visually impaired travel to homes and local schools on an intermittent basis to provide assessment, consultation and instruction. A major focus of outreach is providing information, advocacy, emotional support and guidance for families.

18 Month – Service County Locations



WHAT WE DO

Citizen Focus 1

Working with early childhood programs to conduct vision screenings and consultations to facilitate learning for **infants and toddlers** who are visually impaired and their families



Citizen Focus 2

Working with the public schools to serve all **students** who have been identified as visually impaired in preschool through 12th grade



Citizen Focus 3

Providing training and support to **adults** in their homes across North Dakota who are visually impaired and their families



Citizen Focus 4

Short-term program weeks at NDVS/SB for school age groups provide intensive life skills training in the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC)



Citizen Focus 5

Our Vision Resource Center distributes special materials, textbooks and equipment to children and adults who are visually impaired



Citizen Focus 6

Short-term program weeks for adults provide intensive life skills training at NDVS/SB



Center Base - Short Term Programs for K-12

NDVS/SB offers individual and small group instruction in Grand Forks. Specialized learning in the Expanded Core Curriculum provides students with survival skills ranging from braille to technology instruction. These specialized areas of instruction are crucial if students are going to be independent and college/career ready.

Adult Services

Rehabilitation Vision Specialists provide outreach services regionally throughout the state. These professionals will do home visits to assess the needs of the adult client, provide instruction and refer the client for center-based instruction. Individuals with visual impairments experience varying degrees of need for professional services depending upon age, lifestyle, community characteristics and their own unique visual functioning.

Six weeks of center-based training weeks are traditionally scheduled in Grand Forks each year to provide intensive one-on-one instruction to help individuals regain and maintain their independence. During these sessions it is typical for 4-6 adults to participate in individual lessons as well as in group instruction.

The Vision Resource Center (VRC)

The VRC is more than a library. Specialized materials are distributed to individuals, schools, and families statewide, including braille, large print, and audio books for leisure reading and educational purposes. All these services allow clients and their families to lead more independent and enjoyable lives.



Biennial Accomplishments:

- NDVS/SB adapted successfully to the multitude of new needs that arose during the COVID Pandemic. NDVS/SB staff carried out a successful transition to a combination of direct and virtual (hybrid) services in both schools and home settings. Several new virtual adult discussion/teaching groups were launched using Zoom Video Conferencing in collaboration with the ND Association of the Blind. These adaptations have permanently and positively altered our service delivery going forward.
- During the height of the COVID pandemic, students and adults were served virtually or under very strict parameters in their homes. Short-term programs were also conducted virtually. In the Fall of 2021, NDVS/SB began to offer center-based training opportunities again with great enthusiasm and near average levels of pre-pandemic participation. The successful return to the high quality, hands-on instruction was a huge accomplishment showing trust in our agency by adult clients, parents of students and school districts.
- A new series of virtual professional development trainings for teachers of students with visual impairment around the state were conducted by NDVS/SB and are ongoing. These training sessions have met a growing need for teachers to learn new strategies and technology required to meet the diverse needs of the population we serve. This on-going professional development provides an easily accessible and cost-effective way to ensure North Dakota is providing the best education possible for our students.
- Targeted efforts in the area of public awareness have greatly increased and have become more sophisticated. One example of this is promoting our services several times a year in the North Dakota Living magazine which is distributed to rural electric customers statewide. The purpose being to better reach citizens with low vision who do not know about the services from NDVS/SB. We also enhanced how the public can locate our staff and services in regional offices. We are utilizing Google business for contact connections. Eye doctors, clients, or any citizen searching for information in these locations will find it easier to find us and access services than in the past. In another arena of public awareness, the NDVS/SB newsletter has seen a shift from hundreds of views to now thousands of views. When reviewing years 2020 vs 2022, website traffic is up from 5271 users to 11522 users, a 99.48% increase in Google Analytics website numbers
- A host of facility maintenance projects have been or will soon be completed. The implementation of an electronic key fob system has enhanced facility safety and security significantly which is one of our primary responsibilities. A major conversion of fluorescent to LED Lighting for energy efficiency is also very noteworthy. Working with the SiteLogic consultants has resulted in a number of well-planned facility efficiencies.

- An audit was completed by the State Auditor's Office in 2021. This is what the report stated: WHAT WE FOUND - **This audit did not identify any areas of concern.**

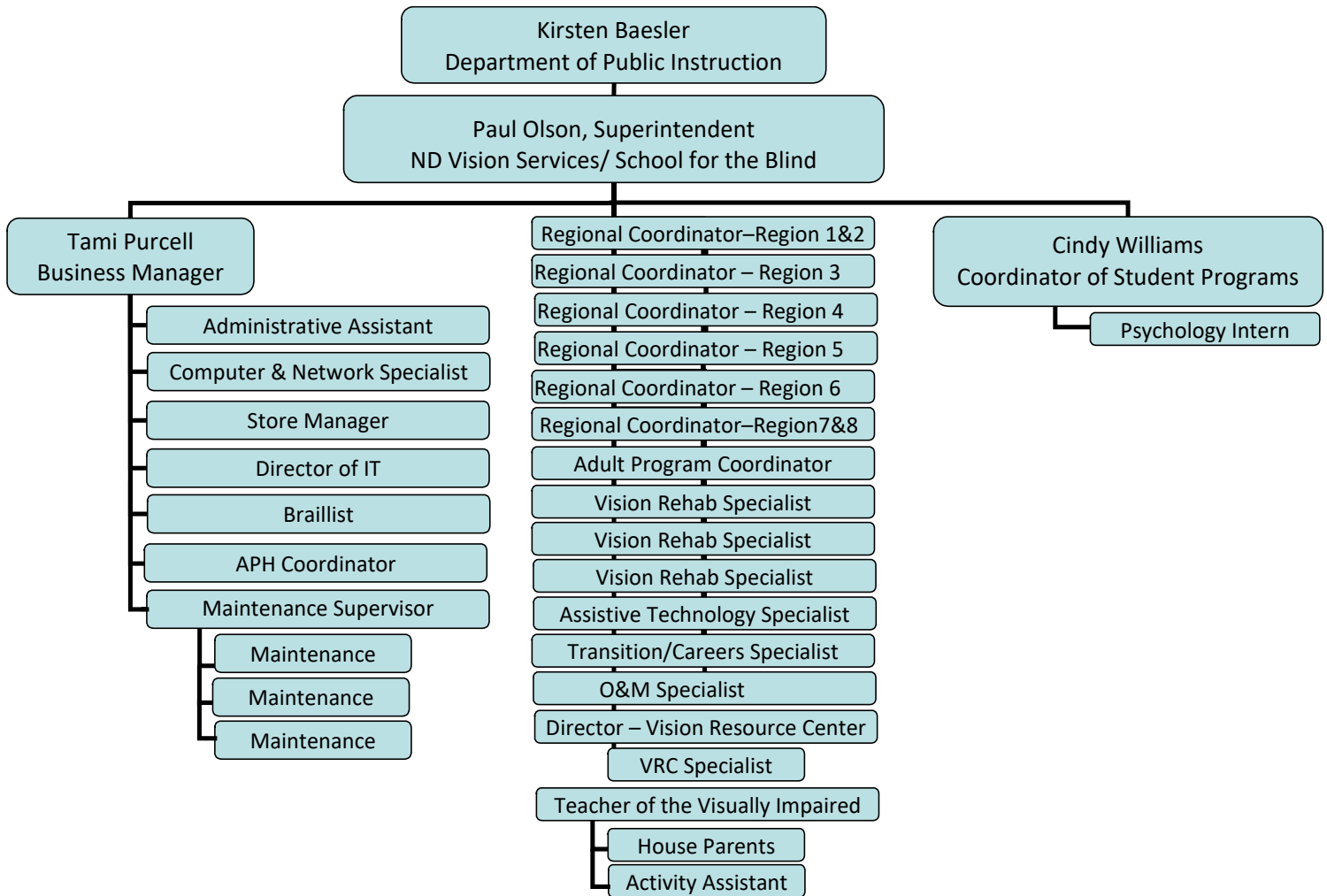
Challenges:

- The number one resource at NDVS/SB allowing us as an agency and specialized school to provide high quality services is our human capital. Our instructional staff must be experts in both assessment and instruction. Our professional support staff also carry out specialized technical tasks that require time and significant training to learn. 25% of our staff are eligible to retire in the next 5 years. That coupled with a national shortage of vision/blindness professionals has been and will continue to be a major challenge. Recruitment and training of new staff to carry out our mission is perhaps the most significant challenge.
- As with every state and private entity, there is an increasingly high need to protect our computer network which takes time and money. Our digital infrastructure is crucial and the risk of exposing the overall state network is significant. It requires a high degree of attention, training, and coordination with ND Information Technology Division. This challenge will be ongoing; it is worth noting because it takes a higher percentage of our time to safeguard the agency and the data of the people we serve.
- In regard to the resources needed to operate financially, we have seen unprecedented inflation. The cost of purchasing materials, specialized equipment, travel costs needed to reach students and adults across the state, utilities, etc. have increased. We strive to find efficiencies to operate as cost effectively as possible but planning for the biennium is a challenge.
- It is an ongoing challenge to gauge the changing needs of students in schools across the state as well as adults who are low vision or blind. Society is changing constantly and the demands on students in school settings as well as adults in their homes and at work have changed radically. NDVS/SB surveys the various populations we serve and attempts to adjust accordingly to ensure we are providing what people really need to succeed. That stated, it is very challenging to meet all of the changing citizen needs.

Next Biennium Goals & Plans:

- Reach and maintain a consumer satisfaction rating of 95% or greater with services for students and adults served.
- Increase the number of adult citizens served by 15% compared to the number served in the 2021-2023 biennium.
- Complete conversion to a new database platform integrated with Power Bi for better decision-making capability with staffing and resource allocation.
- Seek and be granted accreditation through the AER Accreditation Council.
- Maintain full staffing.
- Maintain a state-of-the-art training facility in Grand Forks.

Organizational Chart



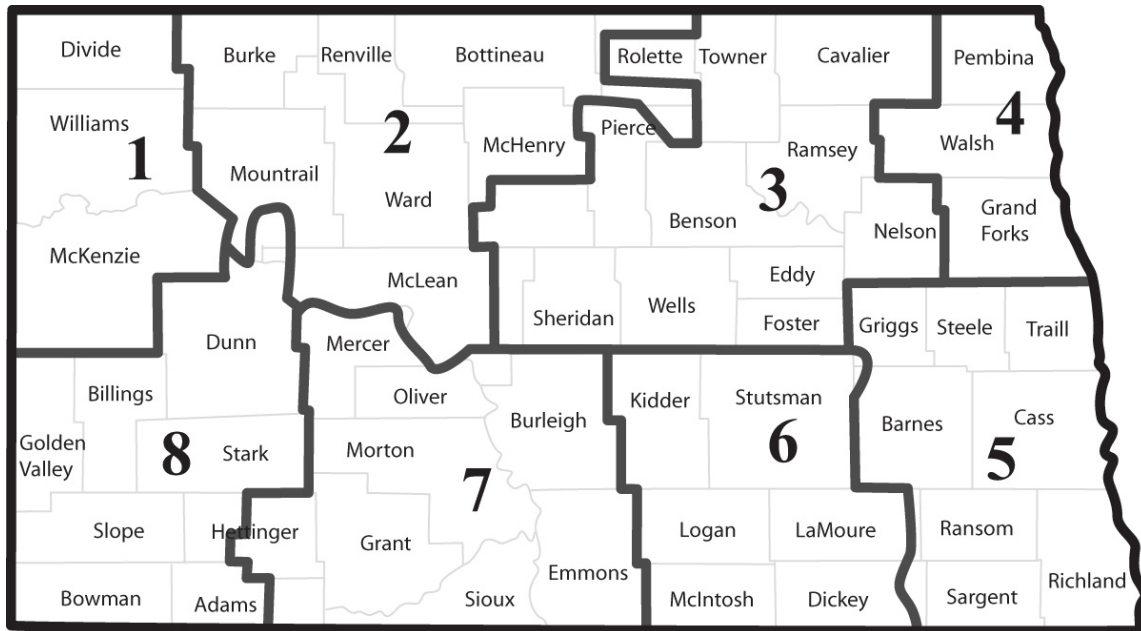
Client Services Data

Services Provided	2019-2021 Biennium	7/1/21 - 6/30/22 Annual	7/1/21 - 12/31/22 18 Months
Clients Served (Unduplicated):			
Infants/Students	292	232	270
Adults	<u>217</u>	<u>130</u>	<u>181</u>
Total	509	362	451
Vision Resource Center:			
New Loans	969	543	543
"Reaching Out" Newsletter (circulated quarterly)	365	538	910
APH Federal Registry	296	314	314
Store Sales (Invoices)	417	213	271
Braille Access Center (pages)	11,638	5,087	9,476
Short-term Programs (Persons Served):			
Student Programming	175	63	93
Adult Weeks	14	19	26
Summer Camps	27	20	26
Evaluations, Consultations, and Instructions (Services Provided):			
Consultations	1,598	838	1,295
Evaluations	400	210	297
Instruction	5,616	4,481	6,420
In-Service Training (Attendees)	660	901	1,403

(As of 06/30/20)



Citizens Served by Region July 1, 2021 to December 31, 2022



Region 1 - Williston

Infants/Students: 8
Adults: 4
Total: 12

Region 5 - Fargo

Infants/Students: 65
Adults: 37
Total: 102

Region 2 - Minot

Infants/Students: 39
Adults: 17
Total: 56

Region 6 - Jamestown

Infants/Students: 33
Adults: 5
Total: 38

Region 3 - Devils Lake

Infants/Students: 32
Adults: 13
Total: 45

Region 7 - Bismarck

Infants/Students: 26
Adults: 29
Total: 55

Region 4 - Grand Forks

Infants/Students: 34
Adults: 58
Total: 92

Region 8 - Dickinson

Infants/Students: 31
Adults: 10
Total: 41

Relocated/Out of State

Infants/Students: 2
Adults: 8
Total: 10

Totals

Infants/Students: 270
Adults: 181
Citizens: 451

Current Biennium One Time Funding

One Time Funding:	Total Special Funds 2021-23	
South Wing Electrical Service	\$ 165,000	Completed July 2022
HVAC Upgrade	86,000	Completed December 2021
Air Conditioners S. Wing	40,000	Completed August 2022
Key Fob System - Doors	20,000	Completed November 2022
Garage Door Replacement	20,000	Completed December 2022
Sidewalk/Parking Lot/Roof Repairs	24,000	Completed Summer 2022
Flooring in East Wing	10,000	Completed January 2022
Update Lighting to LED	33,000	Completed Spring 2022
Vision Screening Devices	11,500	Completed January 2022
Sliding Door Update	5,000	Requesting Door Replacement in 2023-25
Total One Time Funding	\$ 414,500	

New key fob/security system.



New flooring in apartments.



Base Budget and Request

	FTE Positions	Salaries	Operating	Capital Assets	Total	General Fund	Special Fund	Total
2023-25 Agency Request	27.75	\$5,153,098	\$895,686	\$478,192	\$6,526,976	\$4,891,862	\$1,635,114	\$6,526,976
Senate	Senate Version					Funding Source		
	FTE Positions	Salaries	Operating	Capital Assets	Total	General Fund	Special Fund	Total
2023-25 Biennium Base Level	27.75	\$4,992,194	\$792,671	\$39,192	\$5,824,057	\$4,761,879	\$1,062,178	\$5,824,057
Payroll Changes:								
Cost to continue increases		37,066	-		37,066	36,145	921	37,066
Teachers - Composite Salary Schedule		93,838			93,838	93,838		93,838
Additional Temp Salaries		30,000			30,000	-	30,000	30,000
Classified Salary Increases		132,154			132,154	118,632	13,522	132,154
Health Insurance Increase		152,608			152,608	136,821	15,787	152,608
Operating Changes:								
ITD M365			7,015		7,015	-	7,015	7,015
Additional Operating			60,000		60,000		60,000	60,000
Equipment and Doors			26,000		26,000		26,000	26,000
Power Platform DP			10,000		10,000		10,000	10,000
Capital Asset Changes:								
Roof Replacement & Rep				150,000	150,000	-	150,000	150,000
Repair Tar Parking Lot				50,000	50,000		50,000	50,000
Gutters for South Wing				50,000	50,000		50,000	50,000
Update Front Entrance				55,000	55,000		55,000	55,000
Flooring/Cabinets for Living Qtrs.				45,000	45,000		45,000	45,000
Update Student Commons Area				50,000	50,000		50,000	50,000
Replace Electric Panel Corridor				10,000	10,000		10,000	10,000
Replace Doors & AC Units				29,000	29,000		29,000	29,000
								-
Senate Version	27.75	\$5,437,860	\$895,686	\$478,192	\$6,811,738	\$5,147,315	\$1,664,423	\$6,811,738

2023-25	
Special Fund Projections:	
Land Department Trust Funds	\$ 1,686,570
Rental Income	353,180
Charge for services	32,000
Other	30,000
Total Projected Revenue	\$ 2,101,750

Optional Requests

Changes We Are Requesting to Senate Version - We ask that you consider maintaining what is included in the Senate Version. Please reference the Workforce sheet for more on the compensation package.

	2023-2025 Item	Amount Requested	Included in Senate/Executive Version (Ongoing)	Funding Source
1	Additional Operating	\$ 60,000	\$ 60,000	Special
2	Teacher Salary Increases	93,838	93,838	General
3	Temporary Salaries	30,000	30,000	Special
4	Additional IT Costs	10,000	10,000	Special
	Total Ongoing Optional	\$ 193,838	\$ 193,838	

	2023-2025 Item	Amount Requested	Included in Senate/Executive Version (One-Time)	Funding Source
5	Equipment Under 5,000	\$ 26,000	\$ 26,000	Special
6	Upgrade Parking Lot Tar	50,000	50,000	Special
7	Flooring - Cabinets E. Wing	45,000	45,000	Special
8	Update Front Entrance	55,000	55,000	Special
9	Update Student Commons Area	50,000	50,000	Special
10	Replace Electrical Panel	10,000	10,000	Special
11	Roof Replacement & Repairs	150,000	150,000	Special
12	Gutters for S. Wing	50,000	50,000	Special
13	Misc. Repairs (Doors & A/C)	29,000	29,000	Special
	Total One-Time Requests	\$ 465,000	\$ 465,000	

Optional Requests

1. **Additional Operating** This request includes: 4,000 for programming purposes for an event called Family Weekend. This program is growing, and we want to be able to provide quality education to families about their child's vision loss. 40,000 for anticipated utility increases. We receive our heat/electricity from UND and were recently charged a 19,000-overage fee. 11,500 for inflationary increases for outreach services to students/adults. Our property is on 10 acres of land and we recently began hiring to apply chemical application to control weeds, 4,500.
2. **Teacher Salary Increases** This is to place teachers on the Composite Salary Schedule developed by HRMS for 2023-25. This includes wages, retirement, and payroll taxes. They are not classified employees.
3. **Temporary Salaries** This request is to return a portion of the temporary salaries reduced in a prior biennium. We are anticipating 25% of staff to retire in next 5 years. This will allow a cushion to hire temporary staff as vision professionals are in high demand and short supply.
4. **IT Costs** This will allow NDVS to advance to Power Platform and allow us to build upon a low-code solution via a database, DataVerse. Our lead IT team member has been working with NDIT on this project for over a year and suggest this for the most positive citizen outcome.
5. **Equipment under 5,000** This includes 12,000 for adaptive technology equipment. NDVS/SB needs to be the leader in adaptive technology in ND. This will allow us to demonstrate new products. This also includes 3,600 for a floor scrubber and 4,900 for a carpet cleaner which the current machines are over 15 years old. These machines are both used frequently. This request also includes 5,500 to replace two doors in the garage/warehouse area.
6. **Update Parking Lot – Tar** This includes the north parking lot adjacent to Sixth Avenue North and the northwest parking lot adjacent to Sixth Avenue North and Stanford Road. The tar in this area has been repaired and older than 25 years old. It needs to be resurfaced and could be a safety hazard with its unlevel surface.
7. **Flooring – Cabinets for East Wing** This is to replace the flooring in the suites (where students reside) 10,000 and replacement of kitchen cabinets in the apartments, 35,000. These items will be over 25 years old at the time of replacement.



8. **Update Front Entrance** This will include an update to the front entrance (door #4). Most of the cost includes a drain to the sewer system for water that collects in this area. We are treating it as a safety issue. Breakdown of costs: Install drain 28,000, cement 17,000, tree removal 3,000, and landscaping 7,000.



9. **Update Student Commons Area** The objective is to make the room more functional to use as a social gathering or for student projects.



10. **Replace Electrical Panel – Corridor** This is to replace a panel that is approaching 45 years old.
11. **Roof Replacement and Repairs** This request includes replacement of the roof in the corridor area between the East Wing and South Wing – 135,000. During April 2022, SiteLogic and Tecta inspected the roof for all of our buildings. It also includes deferred maintenance of 15,000.
12. **Gutters for South Wing** Due to the fact that we have been doing deferred maintenance for many years, only one roof area is in need of replacement, and the replacement of gutters South Wing.
13. **Misc. Repairs (Doors and AC Units)** This request includes the replacement of two doors, (main door) – sliding door and exterior door between the South/East Wing, 19,000. Also includes the replacement of two air conditioners, 10,000.



NORTH DAKOTA VISION SERVICES/SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND

NDVS/SB may be one of the most unique of all state agencies. Our mission to serve people of all ages with visual impairment alone makes our role in the state unique. In terms of our workforce, the majority of our staff have specialized degrees and are considered experts in the field on the state level as well as some being recognized nationally. In most instances members of our work team cannot be replaced quickly or easily due to a shortage of professionals in this field regionally and nationally.

NDVS/SB currently has no FTE vacancies. A report from HRMS revealed that we are one of the ten lowest paid agencies. We highly support compensation increases for our classified employees and teachers. We also ask that you consider supporting SB2015 for the equity package.

WHAT HAPPENS IF WE CAN'T DO OUR JOB...

Result 1



Children under age three with visual impairment would not receive early intervention to facilitate concept development, use of all senses and confidence in movement if our teachers were unable to provide guidance to parents and a variety of services within the child's home.

Result 2



Students in public and private schools across the state would not receive expert assessment and instruction in the skills required to fully participate and be successful in school and ultimately be Choice Ready at the time of graduation.

Result 3



Adults who become visually impaired or blind as a result of age-related conditions, disease or accidents would not receive the training in orientation and mobility, technology, self-care, braille and other special skills that build independence. People who go without this vital training lose independence and are often not able to take care of themselves or be active in their communities.

CURRENT AGENCY TEAM MEMBER STATS

11.5

Average years of instructional services

0

Number of vacancies

27.75

Full-time team members

7

Retirement-eligible next 5 years

\$58,005

Teachers average annual salary

\$50,371

Classified average annual salary *

* Does not include Superintendent

Other Bills That May Affect NDVS/SB

SB 2015 which aligns with the Executive Budget provides equity dollars for all agencies as well as the University System and Research & Extension. This proposed equity package, if approved, will be in addition to the performance-based increases that have also been recommended. NDVS/SB currently is one of the ten lowest paid agencies from HRMS.

Below is the estimated target equity and justification as identified by HRMS.

<p>SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND</p> <p>Estimated Targeted Equity</p> <p>\$160,000</p> <p>Biennial Expense</p>	<p>Justification for targeted equity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Agency identified certain job categories as particularly hard to fill and retain<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Vision Specialists◦ Maintenance Workers◦ Maintenance Supervisor◦ Administrative Staff• Population analysis also revealed some relatively low paid employees
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Audit Findings

An audit was completed by the State Auditor's Office in 2021. This is what the report stated: WHAT WE FOUND - **This audit did not identify any areas of concern.**

Conclusion

North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind staff strive to serve boldly and operate efficiently. As a small agency with a sizable mission to provide services and resources to children and adults who are visually impaired, we must look forward and prioritize our tasks and projects. For the 2023-2025 biennium the short list of priorities strengthens and enhances services while being cost effective.

In a competitive environment it is important that increases in compensation for all staff are included. The increases for teachers allow NDVS/SB to compete with other North Dakota School districts. An increase in temporary salaries allows NDVS/SB to recruit and retain part-time employees (Such as dorm staff) at a competitive wage as well as utilize professional part-time help as needed to meet our obligations around the state.

There are always facility maintenance projects and modest upgrades that are requested every two years. This coming biennium is no different but the list this time around has a very reasonable price tag given how proactive we have been in keeping up on the health of the building and grounds. Enhancing the usability of the building for instruction through updating the front entrance, the student commons area and replacing flooring in the East Wing will greatly improve the appearance and function of the facility.

We consider each of these optional packages very important or essential. The roof targeted for replacement and the gutter repair for example are necessary and we feel it is prudent to do the as soon as possible. From new IT costs to purchasing new assistive technology, each item on the list was selected with care and a mindset of cost effectiveness.



Beyond 23-25 there were a number of additional improvements identified by SiteLogic. An upgraded HVAC system in the South Wing would enhance air quality as the current CFM is below standard. Also, in the South Wing a more substantial remodeling of space would increase function and enhance the lifespan of the building for decades. Those are future considerations, but we pride ourselves in being proactive by identifying needs well in advance.



Thank you for your consideration. We are prepared to provide additional information and clarification requested to assist you in this process.



Historical Perspective

- 1908 The North Dakota Asylum for the Blind opened in Bathgate, ND.
- 1941 Significant improvements to the building were made by the Works Progress Administration during the war.
- 1961 The school moved to Grand Forks to enable better transportation, medical services, and a more modern facility.
- 1975 Historic legislation *The Education for All Handicapped Act* passed which further strengthened special education in public schools and led to fewer students in residential settings.
- 1995 The residential program was discontinued and a new model of short-term programs and outreach for children was established.
- 2001 Name change to North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind coincided with clarification of the mission to serve all ages.
- 2008 Celebration of the 100 years included former students and staff, Lions Clubs, legislators, and the publication of the book “Recollections of 100 Years of Excellence.”

The Early Years (1908-1960)

Most states had special schools for the blind well before 1900 but ND was a late comer. Even South Dakota had a school, and this is where a number of children from North Dakota attended prior to 1908. When the North Dakota Asylum for the Blind was completed in early 1908, eleven children who had been in Gary, South Dakota were retrieved and finished the school year in Bathgate in Pembina County. The building was beautiful, but existence in a very small community was challenging. Although expectations were different in these early days, there was still much emphasis on preparing youth for careers and living independently. In the 30's, 40's and 50's many innovations were implemented in the little school on the prairie. The American Printing House for the Blind was providing specialized equipment and embossed materials. In 1941 the American Foundation for the Blind sent staff to work with teachers and students to provide instruction in theater. The war years were difficult, but staff and students were accustomed to hard work and sacrifice. The building needed repairs and fortunately the Works Progress Administration (WPA) did much work on the interior, and the legislature saw fit to make a few needed improvements--like a new generator. Students who moved on to professional careers were held in high esteem. Many of the young men became piano tuners, and the majority of young women became homemakers. Of course, there were a number that became teachers. The early biennial reports interestingly emphasized the importance of physical exercise. Hiking and skating were activities that were mentioned often.

The Big Move and Beyond (1961-1994)

Water supply and transportation were regular challenges during the early years. The 50's were relatively stable after the war, however. Attendance ranged from 40-50 students on a given year and students seemed to thrive together in an atmosphere of support. There were some who supported moving the school to Grand Forks, but early attempts failed. The community of Bathgate was proud of its school and held on tight. The benefits of moving to Grand Forks were so great that the 1959 legislature voted to relocate the school to 10 acres adjoining UND. The new, modern school opened in 1961 and ushered in an era of big change. Although most of the students were just blind or low vision, many students being placed at NDSB had additional handicaps. These students had significant needs. Staff were extremely dedicated to helping these young people learn important communication and self-care needs. Nevertheless, the writing seemed to be on the wall for yet another major change in service delivery. In the early 70's the Education for all Handicapped Children Act solidified the obligation of local schools in educating to the best of their ability all children with disability. NDSB continued to provide high quality instruction throughout the 80's but the expectation that all children would transition to their home schools was taking root. A new model of outreach across the state had already begun by 1991 alongside the residential program. In 1994 the legislature decided that it was too expensive to provide residential programming for such a small number of students and voted to close the dormitories.

The New Era (1995-Present)

By 1995 all of the children had either returned to their home communities or were placed around the state in residential facilities for children with developmental disability. This radical change in service had merit in many ways, but there continued to be a need for intensive assessment and training in specialized life skills. We call these special skills the "Expanded Core Curriculum." In order to provide very focused and intense training in areas like technology, braille, mobility and daily living skills a new model of **Short-Term Programs** was developed and was the first of its kind in the United States. At the same time the number of regional offices and teachers providing outreach expanded. Our goal was to reach every school district in every corner of the state. In 2001 the legislature changed our agency name to **North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind** and clarified in Century Code that our mission had expanded to serve all ages.

Several building improvements have been made since 1996 including the most recent which included a full remodel of the west wing that houses the Grand Forks Community High School.

NDVS/SB rose to the occasion and adjusted to the many challenges posed during the height of the COVID pandemic. New practices such as delivering more individual and group services via virtual connections have been transformational and our service delivery model continues to evolve.

Quick Facts about NDVS/SB

- Originally built in 1908 in Bathgate—Pembina County. The original appropriation to build was \$25,000. The building was beautiful, but the location proved to be poor for transportation of students.
- In the Fall of 1961, the new school for the blind was ready for students in Grand Forks. Based on records enrollment was often 50-60 students in the 1960s and 1970s but a shift toward inclusion was already underway for students with visual impairment.
- 1994 the model changed to **OUTREACH** and **SHORT-TERM PROGRAMS**. We continue to be the only program like this in the United States. There are about 45 special schools for the blind in the U.S. NDVS/SB is considered a leader among schools and agencies.
- In the U.S. NDVS/SB is considered a leader among schools and agencies.
- In 2001 the legislature changed our name from ND School for the Blind to ND Vision Services/School for the Blind and clarified that our mission is to **serve all ages**.
- We have **regional offices in Fargo, Jamestown, Bismarck, and Minot**. Instructors in these offices spend nearly every day in public schools and in homes assessing, consulting, and providing instruction.
- **Currently we serve over 300 students in a 2-year period and over 200 adults.**
- Short-term Program weeks consist of 8 weeks for students plus 2 summer camps and 5 weeks for adult training.
- There are estimated to be **6,000 North Dakotans with severe visual impairment**. Many are our older citizens including nursing home residents. We are working hard to reach children and adults across the state.
- **We love what we do** and are dedicated to helping students of all ages become CHOICE READY.



Testimony for SB2013

To: Representative Mike Nathe, Chair, and Members of the Education and Environment Division of the ND House Appropriations Committee, 68th Legislative Session.

From: Allan Peterson, Legislative Committee, North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB). Home address: 7009 Horseshoe Bend, Horace, ND 58047.

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Re: Testimony offered for SB2013, specifically for the appropriation provided to North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind for the biennium of 2023 – 2025.

Greetings Chairman Vigesaa, Vice Chair Kempenich, Representatives Bert Anderson, Bellew, Brandenburg, Karla Rose Hanson, Kreidt, Martinson, Meier, Mitskog, Mock, Monson, Nathe, Jon Nelson, O'Brien, Pyle, Richter, Sanford, Schatz, Stemen, Strinden, and Swiontek, Members of the House Appropriations Committee.

I am testifying on my own behalf as well as for that of the North Dakota Association of the Blind, we are testifying in support of the budget request that has been submitted for North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind for its operation and capital expenditures for the next biennium of 2023 - 2025.

A resolution that supports the appropriation request of NDVS/SB, adopted by North Dakota Association of the Blind, is also included with this testimony.

To be clear, we are testifying not only to maintain but to strengthen the appropriation for NDVS/SB. We do support the budget for NDVS/SB as was proposed in Governor Doug Burgum's budget as has been submitted to the 68th North Dakota Legislative session. We are well aware, that there are significant unmet needs and a great need for more resources that, if available, would help serve more people with sight loss in ND.

It cannot be over emphasized, just how important it is that persons who lose some or all of their sight, be afforded the opportunity to receive appropriate quality blindness rehabilitation skills training to deal with this most serious life altering change. This training is really what makes all the difference in having a much better quality of life.

About North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB): You could say that North Dakota Association of the Blind is an organization of and for people who are blind or visually impaired. We are a statewide membership organization that was founded 87 years ago in 1936. A majority of our members are blind or sight impaired. We provide educational, mentorship, networking, social and recreational opportunities for members and nonmembers. As an organization, we strongly advocate for blindness specific rehabilitation skills training, employment opportunities, and adaptations that will enhance and improve the lives of people who are blind and visually impaired. We have no paid staff, and our services are provided through the work of unpaid volunteers.

As a person who lost his eyesight as an adult, I can testify to the importance and efficacy of the training that can be offered by NDVS-SB. The skills that I learned through what is known as “orientation and mobility” using a white cane, is an adaptation I use each and every day and is of immeasurable importance to my independence. The skill set of orientation and mobility is taught by a mobility instructor who has been certified to provide this training. Clients learn and perfect the skills of mobility and orientation over a period of several weeks and even months of training.

Besides the “orientation and mobility” skills that I’ve learned, I rely heavily on the use of a computer that has been equipped with a speech (audio) output program, which allows me to work productively as a person that has no functional eyesight.

The instruction that I’ve received from the NDVS-SB technology experts on using audio output from my computer has been absolutely vital in developing my skills to access this mode of communication. Many others in the population of people who are blind can provide similar testimonials on the absolute vital need for the services of the skilled technology instructors employed by NDVS/SB. Because the digital revolution is so critically vital to independence in today’s society, we desperately need the specific training to allow us to be proficient in utilizing today’s latest electronic technology.

I have also gained very valuable skills on using an iPhone from instructors at NDVS/SB and am very thankful that this training can be offered virtually via a phone call.

Another vital skill I’ve learned and used extensively with the aid of instruction from teachers at NDVS-SB is to read and write in Braille. I have found this skill to be particularly useful in writing notes and marking items; Braille is an adaptation comparable to the use of paper and pencil.

Whether they are children or are adults, learning the skills to deal with blindness are best done at a teaching facility that is equipped and has the professional staff needed to instruct their students, so they are better able to deal with the challenges that this disability imposes on a person. And North Dakota Vision services / School for the Blind is the only teaching institution in North Dakota that offers a comprehensive program of instruction to deal with sight loss adjustment and it is absolutely imperative that this service be maintained and strengthened so that it is better able to continue to serve those of us who must deal with significant sight loss.

One of the benefits the pandemic yielded, was that we learned how to communicate virtually using electronic platforms like Zoom. Instructors at the School coordinated with our organization to offer a variety of virtual weekly meetings that have included among others - valuable information on accessible technology, coping skills, daily living skills like cooking, and much, much more that continue to be offered presently.



North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind is a division of the
Department of Public Instruction,
Kirsten Baesler, State Superintendent
www.dpi.nd.gov

NDVS/SB does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, age, sex (wages) or genetics in its programs and activities.