



**Testimony to the
Education & Environment Division
of the
House Appropriations Committee
House Bill #1013**



January 14, 2021

North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind

A Division of the Department of Public Instruction

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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.....	12
Governor’s Budget Impact.....	14
Changes We Are Requesting to The Governor’s Budget.....	15
Conclusion.....	16
Appendix A – Historical Perspective	A-1
Appendix B – Strategic Plan Summary	B-1
Appendix C – Quick Facts about NDVS/SB	C-1
Appendix D – NDAB Resolution 2021-01.....	D-1
Appendix E – NDAB/Adult Client Testimony	E-1

Testimony – Paul Olson

Chairman David Monson and Members of the House Appropriations--Education and Environment Division:

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 House Bill 1013.

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.

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 & Challenges:

- NDVS/SB was honored with the **2020 Friend of Vocational Rehabilitation Award**. In the nomination letter it was stated: “In the last year, several collaborative measures have been made to provide better services to 110 clients, Older Individuals who are Blind clients, and our staff. NDVS/SB has shown an extraordinary commitment to “building a bridge” to enhance communication.”
- A very significant achievement was the design and implementation of a multi-faceted app to plan, record and assist in analysis of services which has been transformational. This sophisticated mobile app allows NDVS/SB staff to access student/client information, record the service, write reports and file the reports seamlessly. Administration and staff can now use the Power BI platform to view individual and group productivity as well as make strategic decisions more effectively.
- NDVS/SB took the lead role in implementing the National Babies Count Census in North Dakota. Participation in this ongoing census will allow better tracking of children under three with various eye diseases and/or “at risk” conditions. The data will be vital in North Dakota to better plan for educational resources and staffing in specific locations as well as be included in a national database.
- A number of planned facility upgrades were completed to ensure long-term viability of the facility. Roof repairs and a significant bathroom renovation were completed and an upgrade to the gym/multi-purpose room will be finished by March 2021.

A Summary on the Effects of COVID-19:

- The events of early 2020 have led to meaningful reflection and proactive practices that both reinforce our mission and have resulted in new and innovative methods of service delivery. As an early adopter of video conferencing, NDVS/SB was already well positioned to continue and enhance our specialized services to children and adults during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the adoption of customized apps to aid in service efficiency puts NDVS/SB on the cutting edge and have prepared us to serve our residents even better going into the next biennium.
 - NDVS/SB staff carried out a successful transition to a combination of direct and virtual (hybrid) services in both schools and homes
 - Several new virtual adult discussion/teaching groups were launched using Zoom Video Conferencing.
 - The traditional short-term program weeks for school age students were converted to a virtual format allowing students to participate from home or from their local schools.
 - A substantial phone interview survey was conducted to determine the needs of families before and during Covid-19 conditions. A Rehabilitation Counseling Intern from the University of North Dakota was assigned the task of calling families to ask critical questions about past and present services. The data collected has already been valuable and will serve to guide further hybrid service delivery in the next biennium.

Challenges:

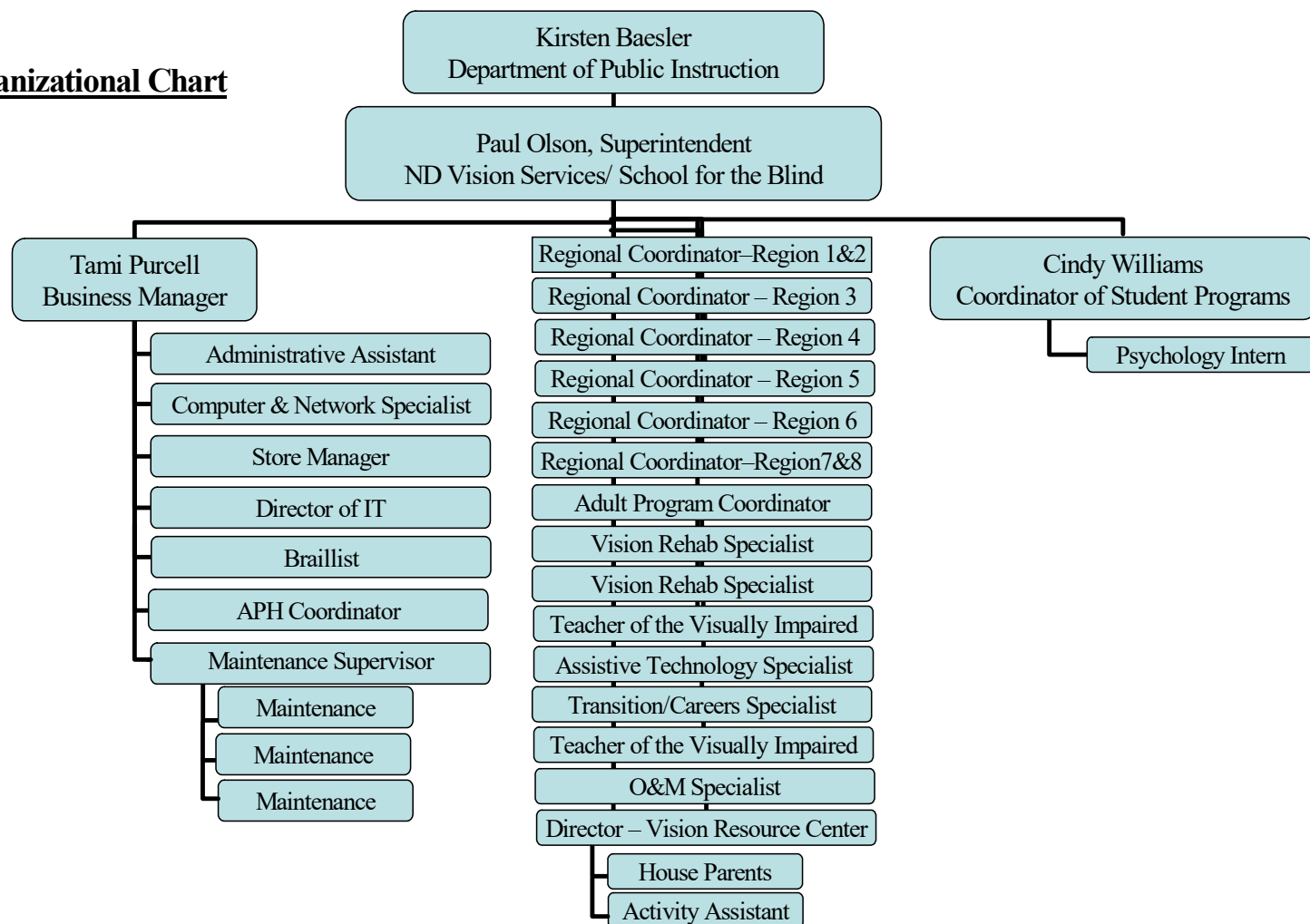
- During the spring months of 2020 that resulted in the shutdown of schools, it became very apparent that a new way at looking at and delivering services statewide would be required. Speaking of doing things differently in the future is necessary as circumstances will continue to evolve. The only thing that will remain a constant is the need to reach and adequately serve students and adults under new circumstances. One aspect of the new circumstance beside overall safety is fear. The fear that some individuals and families experience cannot be discounted because it can and does interfere with service delivery. We are confident that we have been using safe procedures and have communicated our service delivery options to alleviate the real and perceived fears that our students and families have been experiencing.
- Although successful thus far, there has been a very rapid transition to new technology to support record keeping, business functions and most noticeably in the area of service delivery. This rapid transition is very challenging for staff to keep up with and continues to require more training time overall. The access technology that students use is complicated already, but the use of long-distance instruction technology added yet another layer. To add to the complexity many of the student learning management systems (LMS) that public schools use are not fully accessible to students that are visually impaired. Google Classroom and Schoology are just two of many (LMS) that are common and require a great deal of manipulation and learning curve ultimately for the student in order to use these platforms. The challenge of bridging these gaps falls on teachers of the visually impaired employed by NDVS/SB as well as our public-school counterparts.
- In the past NDVS/SB has gone through an accreditation process with the National Accreditation Council (NAC). The organization that now administers this specialized accreditation for schools and agencies serving the visually impaired is the AER Accreditation Council (AERAC). Due to a number of factors in addition to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the accreditation process has been postponed. NDVS/SB has neither had the staff time or resources to devote to this effort under the circumstances. Accreditation is an identified goal during the 2021-2023 biennium.
- As noted in previous years the retention and recruitment of highly qualified and specially trained staff is of the highest importance. Retirements and/or other attrition would leave NDVS/SB critically understaffed in specialized areas of instruction. In the reprioritization of funding directed by the governor's office, current dollars within the budget may be redirected in a more proactive manner to ensure financial assistance for staff seeking critical training/certification—again this is identified in the 2021-2023 goals.

Next Biennium Goals & Plans:

- It is an absolute goal to continue and enhance our specialized services to children and adults during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The resumption of on-site, student and adult short-term programming (STP) is a high priority. In addition to restarting STP, we will endeavor to provide much more robust distance instruction for both the efficiency and ability to deliver high quality service.
- A major effort to reach out to families and address any disparities identified in the 2020 Parent Interview Survey will be made. It is anticipated that most disparities may resolve due to the declining effects of COVID-19, but all disparities will be analyzed and targeted for improvement.
- A sizable project to privately fund the Little Room Project with the Lions Foundation will come to fruition with the purchase and distribution of this equipment designed to enhance learning for children with significant sensory and physical disability.
- NDVS/SB will begin the process of a self-study and full accreditation with the AER Accreditation Council. This process requires several months of self-study before conducting an on-site review with the intent of receiving a full 5-year accreditation. This specific accreditation body exists strictly for the purpose of serving schools and agencies serving students and adults with visual impairment.
- A number of facility maintenance projects are slated. These include the typical sidewalk repairs, replacement of air conditioners, garage door replacement, etc. We are particularly hoping to improve lighting efficiency through further transition to LED. We will also experience a significant savings in heating/cooling through a major upgrade to HVAC components. The biggest project we are hoping to complete is installation of a new electrical service in the south wing of our building.



Organizational Chart

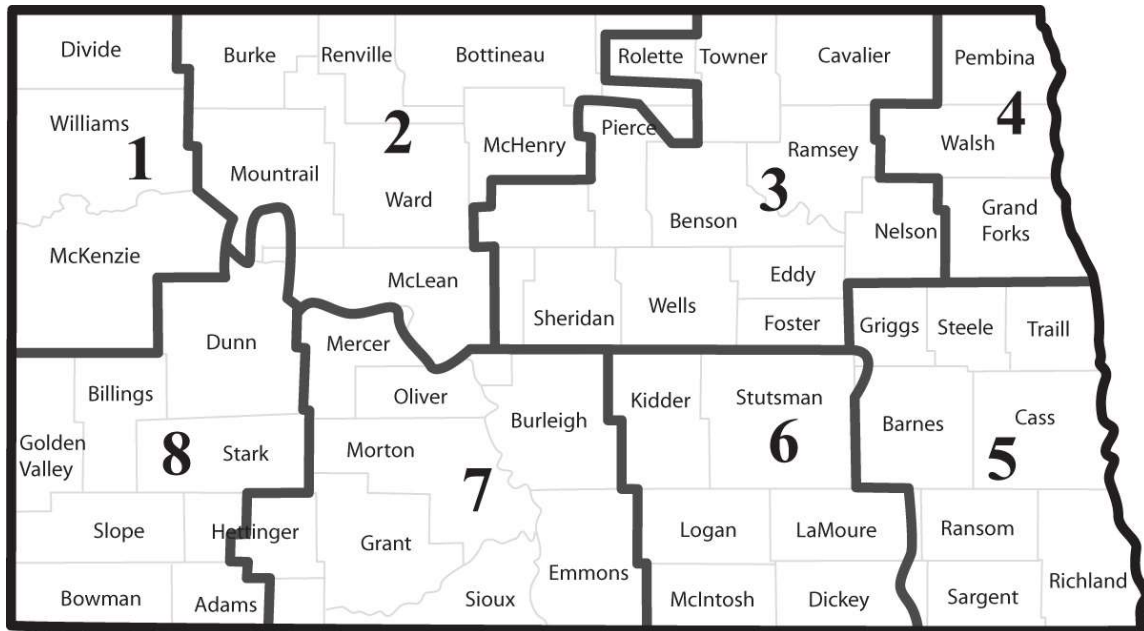


Client Services Data

Services Provided	2017-2019 Biennium	7/1/19-6/30/20 Annual
Clients Served (Unduplicated):		
Infants/Students	343	207
Adults	<u>219</u>	<u>138</u>
Total	562	345
Vision Resource Center:		
New Loans	1,717	615
"Reaching Out" Newsletter (circulated quarterly)	390	410
APH Federal Registry	285	296
Store Sales (Invoices)	433	205
Braille Access Center (pages)	20,357	7,119
Short-term Programs (Persons Served):		
Student Programming	128	31
Adult Weeks	37	11
Summer Camps	37	16
Evaluations, Consultations and Instructions (Services Provided):		
Consultations	1,656	785
Evaluations	375	179
Instruction	7,927	4,066
In-Service Training (Attendees)	1,417	591



Persons Served by Region July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020



Region 1 - Williston

Infants/Students: 16
Adults: 12
Total: 28

Region 5 - Fargo

Infants/Students: 48
Adults: 21
Total: 69

Region 2 - Minot

Infants/Students: 31
Adults: 17
Total: 48

Region 6 - Jamestown

Infants/Students: 28
Adults: 10
Total: 38

Region 3 - Devils Lake

Infants/Students: 14
Adults: 9
Total: 23

Region 7 - Bismarck

Infants/Students: 15
Adults: 17
Total: 32

Region 4 - Grand Forks

Infants/Students: 24
Adults: 43
Total: 67

Region 8 - Dickinson

Infants/Students: 25
Adults: 4
Total: 29

Relocated/Out of State

Infants/Students: 6
Adults: 5
Total: 11

Totals

Infants/Students: 207
Adults: 138
Persons: 345

Current Biennium One Time Funding

One Time Funding:		Total Special Funds 2019-21
South wing restroom remodel	\$ 120,000	Completed December 2020
Gym floor replacement	42,000	Will be completed March 2021
West wing roof repair	39,000	Completed June 2020
Daily living skills remodel	25,000	Completed January 2020
Garage door replacement	16,000	Will be partially completed 2021
Glycol replacement	6,000	Completed Sept. 2019
Carpet replacement	6,500	Completed February 2020
Sprinkler head replacement	6,000	Completed April 2020
Adaptive tech. equipment	20,000	Partially purchased and will be completed by spring 2021
Total One Time Funding	\$ 280,500	

November 2020, NDVS/SB requested a line item transfer of \$30,000, from Operating to Capital Assets. Asbestos abatement for the restrooms ended up being more expensive than anticipated. Also, the West wing roof repair had more damage than original estimates. This has enabled NDVS/SB to complete the gym floor project.



Base Budget and Request

	FTE Positions	Salaries	Operating	Capital Assets	Total	General Fund	Special Fund	Total
2021-23 Agency Request	27.75	\$4,924,219	\$789,586	\$364,692	\$6,078,497	\$4,700,682	\$1,377,815	\$6,078,497

Executive Budget Rec. via Base Budget	Executive Budget Recommendation					Funding Source		
	FTE Positions	Salaries	Operating	Capital Assets	Total	General Fund	Special Fund	Total
2021-23 Biennium Base Level	27.90	\$4,935,291	\$795,821	\$39,192	\$5,770,304	\$4,717,989	\$1,052,315	\$5,770,304
Payroll Changes:								
5% Reduction	-0.15	(229,664)	(6,235)		(235,899)	(235,899)		(235,899)
Cost to continue Teachers on Composite Salary Schedule		72,610			72,610	72,610		72,610
Restore funding for teacher position		145,982			145,982	-	145,982	145,982
Executive Compensation Changes		73,636			73,636	66,660	6,976	73,636
Operating Changes:								
ITD M365			3,085		3,085	1,068	2,017	3,085
Capital Asset Changes:								
Carpet/Flooring				10,000	10,000	-	10,000	10,000
A/C Units South Wing				40,000	40,000		40,000	40,000
Electrical Service South Wing				165,000	165,000		165,000	165,000
Sidewalk/Roof Repair/Parking Lot				24,000	24,000		24,000	24,000
Overhead Door/Main Door/Keys				45,000	45,000		45,000	45,000
HVAC Updates				86,000	86,000		86,000	86,000
						-	-	-
Executive Recommendation	27.75	\$4,997,855	\$792,671	\$409,192	\$6,199,718	\$4,622,428	\$1,577,290	\$6,199,718

	2021-23
Special Fund Projections:	
Land Department Trust Funds	\$ 1,369,714
Rental Income	363,204
Charge for services	32,000
Other	30,000
Total Projected Revenue	\$ 1,794,918

Optional Requests

2021-2023 Item	Amount Requested	Included in Executive Recommendation	Funding Source	One Time /Ongoing
1 Carpet/Flooring	\$10,000	\$10,000	Special	One Time
2 Small Repairs: Overhead Doors, Main Door, New Key System	45,000	45,000	Special	One Time
3 A/C Units - South Wing	40,000	40,000	Special	One Time
4 Replace Electrical Service - South Wing	165,000	165,000	Special	One Time
5 Sidewalk/Roof/Parking Lot Repairs	24,000	24,000	Special	One Time
6 HVAC Upgrade	86,000	86,000	Special	One Time
7 Restore Funding for Teachers Position	145,982	145,982	Special	Ongoing
8 Teacher Salary Increases	72,610	72,610	General	Ongoing
9 LED Lighting	33,000		Special	One Time
Total One Time Optional	<u>\$403,000</u>	<u>\$370,000</u>		
Total Ongoing Optional	<u>\$218,592</u>	<u>\$218,592</u>		

Description of Optional Budget Changes/Requests

- 1. Carpet – Flooring Replacement – \$10,000.** This request is to replace flooring in the main restrooms, and in the living quarters of the East Wing.
- 2. Small Repairs – \$45,000.** This includes several smaller building repairs/updates. Replace overhead garage doors for \$20,000. This was requested last biennium and NDVS/SB will not be able to install due to projects costing over budgeted items. Door #4 is NDVS/SB's main sliding door. It will be over 25 years old by 2021. The cost to update is \$5,000. Replace the key system for building with fob system. - \$20,000.



3. **Air Conditioning Units for the South Wing - \$40,000.** The South Wing does not have central air but individual units. Some of the units are over 20 years old and several are over 10 years old. This amount will update about approximately ½ of the units.
4. **Replace Electrical Service for the South Wing - \$165,000.** This is a recommendation from a 2012 Building and Grounds Building Plan. SiteLogIQ has also made this recommendation. This Includes replacing primary and secondary service to the South Wing.
5. **Parking Lot/Sidewalk/ Roof Repairs - \$24,000.** This involves repairs to our parking lot, sidewalk repairs, and garage roof repairs.
6. **HVAC Upgrade - \$86,000.** This project is at recommendation of SiteLogIQ and involves energy savings to NDVS. Quoted from the business consultant, there will be energy savings by tweaking the system.
7. **Restore Funding to Position #1593 - \$145,982.** NDVS/SB currently has one Orientation and Mobility position. It has been and is a need to have to have a position in western North Dakota.
8. **Teacher Salary Increase (Contracted Employees) - \$72,610.** HRMS has completed a Teacher Salary Schedule for 2021-2023. The above amount includes teachers advancing one step for each year of the biennium.
9. **LED Lighting Replacement - \$33,000.** This recommendation is from SiteLogIQ study to update the lighting in the South and East Wings of the building. This will include a cost saving to North Dakota. **This amount is not included in the Executive Recommendation.**

Governor's Budget Impact

The 2021-2023 Base Budget includes a 5% General Fund reduction. The reduction taken includes Salaries and Wages, \$229,664, and Operating (Repairs), \$6,235 for a total of \$235,899.

The Salary line item includes temporary salaries, \$74,312, reduction of funding for position #1593, \$145,982, and omitting the FTE .15 for position #1596, \$9,370.

Because salaries are over 80% of our budget, NDVS/SB had to reduce in the salary line item.

- Position #1593, is a teaching position recently vacated in the Minot area. NDVS/SB did request the funding back for this position, and it was funded with special funds versus general funds in the Governor's recommendation.
- Position #1596, is a lead houseparent position, that supervises students during center based programming during non-instructional hours. We believe that we can accomplish this through our temporary salaries.

An agency never wants reductions in their budget. We believe that we will still be able to complete our goals and programming needs with these reductions.

Reprioritizations:

NDVS/SB was asked to reprioritize \$52,616 of Special Funds. Our decision was to reallocate within the Operating line item:

Reductions Travel	\$ (32,616)
Reductions Office Rental	(20,000)
Professional Supplies	15,000
Technology Adaptive Equipment	10,000
Professional Development	20,116
Operating Fees	7,500
Total	0

Changes We Are Requesting to The Governor's Budget

- NDVS/SB is requesting that \$33,000 omitted from the Governor's budget be reinstated so that we can replace our lighting with LED's. This will have a 7-8 year payback per SiteLogIQ.
- NDVS/SB is requesting that the House Appropriations Committee fund the salaries for position #1593 from general fund versus special fund, \$145,982.

The reason for the first request is that in the upcoming years, NDVS/SB will need to replace roofs on two wings of our building. A few years ago, discussion was held that projects like these should be paid for from our special funds. Our building was built in 1960. We are attempting to maintain it as best as possible.

Conclusion

NDVS/SB is a small agency with an essential mission. Through our center-based services in Grand Forks in our 50,000 sq. foot building and our aggressive outreach services across the state, we strive to make the very best use of the resources allocated by the North Dakota Legislature. We again graciously ask for your support for the overall budget proposal in addition to the change package requests that we identified as important in carrying out our mission for the next two years.

The resources provided during the 2019-2021 biennium allowed for NDVS/SB staff to carry out our mission with both caution and vigor. The events of 2020 certainly changed the nature of services as well as affecting the anticipated expenditures. One unexpected development that occurred because of the pandemic was receiving 13 Hewlett Packard laptop computers via the *Federal Cares Coronavirus Funding*—the value of which was over \$15,000. These laptop computers allowed our staff a more successful transition to teleservice. NDVS/SB has a reputation for wise financial stewardship, and it is relevant to note that the audit that occurred yielded no major audit findings. We take this as an indicator that we operate with the best interests of both our constituents and the taxpayers in mind.

We look forward to meeting the needs of students and adult clients in the remaining months of the biennium and for the entire 2021-2023 biennium. We will use the resources allocated as well as continue to adapt to new service delivery methods even though we anticipate that there will be a significant return to center-based instruction.



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.

As we enter 2021, we have full intention of being an innovative leader, investing in new technologies to better serve our students and adult learners, and being the best possible stewards of the state's resources. We will not rest on past success; we will continue to improve!

Strategic Plan Summary

Goal 1: NDVS/SB will provide increased options and individualization for services to people who are blind/low vision.

- Will have an individualized protocol for all center-based services.
- Redesign on-campus week/weekend services for consumers.
- Reconfigure services to increase distance service and consults for school-age and adult consumers.
- Improve our decision-making through data analysis.

Goal 2: NDVS/SB will have an active and progressive staff recruitment and cross training program.

- Will work with UND and/or other educational units to develop and plan interest in the field of vision education to aid in recruitment of qualified teachers.
- Develop and implement cross-training program for NDVS/SB instructional staff.
- Explore internships and temporary employment options for areas of specialized need (social work, marketing, etc.) based on available funding.

Goal 3: NDVS/SB will strive to reach out and connect with individuals and groups who may benefit from our services.

- Reestablish public awareness team and increase public awareness to be more consistent and focused.
- Conduct ten regional presentations per year on services available to ND residents with low vision and blindness. The topic of this presentation will be services at ND Vision Services/School for the Blind, Vocational Rehabilitation, ND Assistive, ND State Library, North Dakota Association for the Blind, National Federation of the Blind. Whenever possible, NDVS/SB will include representatives from the afore mentioned agencies organizations.

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.

NDAB Resolution 2021-01:

State 2021-2023 Biennial Appropriation for North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind (NDVS/SB)

Whereas, statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau in 2019 estimated that there were 762,062 residents living in North Dakota. Conservative Demographic studies consistently demonstrate that **3.3%** among the general population have medical conditions which mildly, moderately, or severely compromise their eyesight, this means that approximately 20,000 individuals in North Dakota are affected by uncorrectable sight loss - 5,000 of whom have significant sight loss and/or are “legally blind”; and,

Whereas, the loss of eyesight is a major life-altering disability that requires specialized and specific rehabilitation skills training to help people of any age cope with this condition; and,

Whereas, North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind in Grand Forks has the components for a comprehensive center-based rehabilitation training program, is recognized regionally and nationally as a program that is of excellence and high quality, has the capability and capacity that allows it to serve people of all ages (i.e. has both children and adult oriented training programs); and,

Whereas, children and adults with sight loss, who receive a regimen of specific, comprehensive, intensive center-based blindness skills training, such as that which is available at NDVS/SB, are employable and are capable of functioning with a high degree of independence; and,

Whereas, during the current 2019-2021 biennium, NDVS/SB has had to reduce its budget by 6% as requested by the Governor which was accomplished through temporarily not filling 1.5 positions and delaying many necessary expenditures, the primary impact of these reductions has been the inability to place a certified mobility specialist in western North Dakota as had been planned during this biennium; and,

Whereas, to request even more reductions of this critically important educational program for children and adults with blindness, will undoubtedly further erode the capacity and availability of existing services,

Now, therefore, be it resolved by the Board of North Dakota Association of the Blind assembled on this date of Sunday, January 10th, 2021 that we strongly urge the Governor and the 67th North Dakota Legislative Assembly that will convene on January 5 2021, to maintain and increase the appropriation for North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind in the state budget which is adopted for the 2021 -2023 biennium so that the NDVS/SB appropriation will,

- Restore funding to maintain a vision professional (preferably a mobility specialist) in western North Dakota to ensure all residents are served with enough frequency and intensity that they can make steady progress toward mobility independence.
- Maintain funding that will allow NDVS/SB to purchase and demonstrate rapidly evolving assistive technology at a high priority level to establish and maintain a state of the art technology demonstration and training center as falling behind on training programs will result in lower productivity and employability.
- Maintain funding for outreach travel within the state and for professional development of staff at regional and national training conferences.



North Dakota Association of the Blind

To: Representative David Monson, Chair, & Members of the North Dakota House of Representatives Appropriations Environment and Education Subcommittee, 67th North Dakota Legislative Session.

From: Allan Peterson, Legislative Committee, North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB).
Home address: 7009 Horseshoe Bend, Horace, ND 58047.
H: (701) 282-4644; c: (701) 429-7209; Email: allan.c.peterson@gmail.com

Re: Testimony offered for HB1013, specifically for the Appropriation provided to North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind for the biennium of 2021 – 2023.

Greetings Chairman David Monson and members of the North Dakota House of Representatives Appropriations Environment and Education Subcommittee.

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 2021 - 2023.

A resolution that supports the biennial appropriation request of the North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind, 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 67th North Dakota Legislative session. We are well aware that there are significant unmet needs and that there is a great need for more resources that would go a long way to help more people with sight loss here in North Dakota.

It cannot be over emphasized, just how very 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.

As someone who lost his eyesight as an adult, I can personally 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 would 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 and adaptations that 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 particularly thankful that this training can be offered virtually via a phone conference 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’ve found this skill to be very 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.

As has been the case since COVID has imposed its will on us, instruction we’ve received from the School has been done virtually, which of course, has its advantages and disadvantages. A popular advantage has been that Instructors at the School have 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.

Briefly 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 sight impaired. We are a statewide membership organization that was founded in 1936, 85 years ago; 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.

About me: I serve as one of the Legislative Liaisons for North Dakota Association of the Blind and am registered with the state to speak on behalf of the organization – I offer this service as an unpaid volunteer.



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.