

March 10, 2025

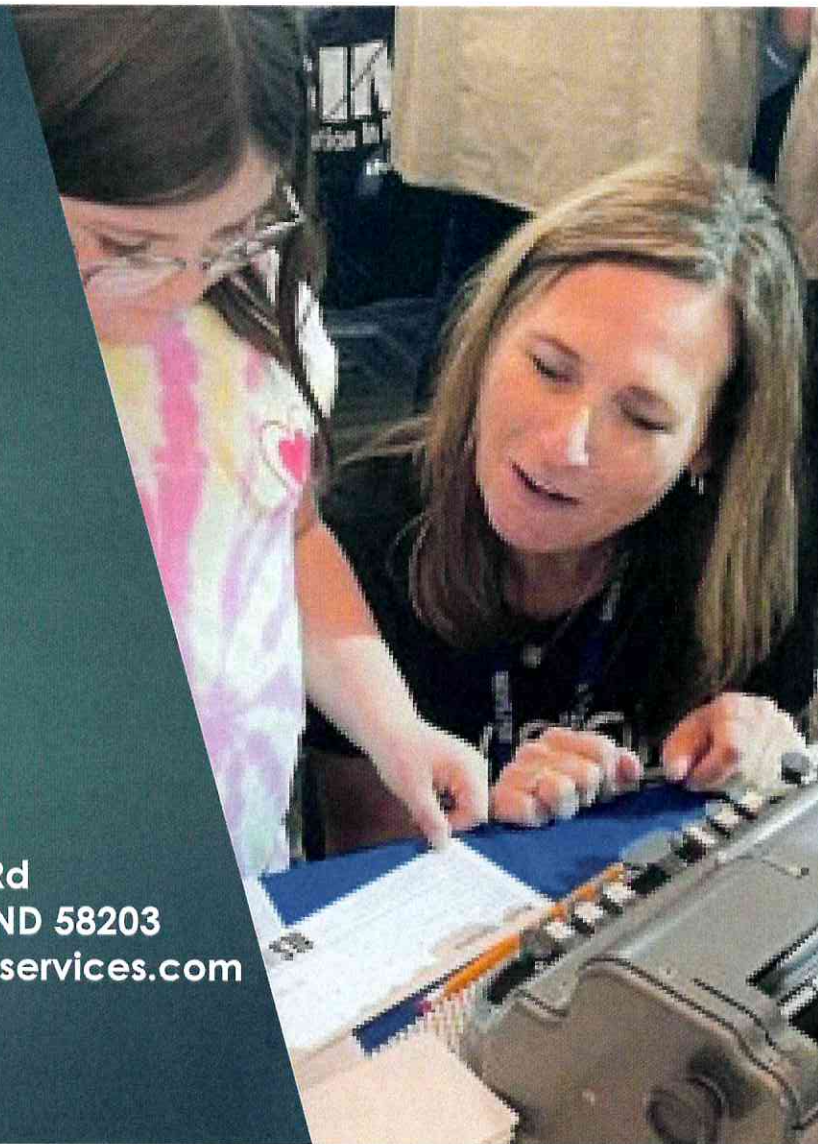
North Dakota Vision Services/ School for the Blind

A Division of the Department
of Public Instruction

Testimony to the Senate
Appropriations Committee



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AGENDA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Mission Statement
- Biennial Accomplishments
- Challenges
- Goal & Plans
- Current Biennium One Time Funding
- Base Budget & Requests
- Optional Requests
- Changes to the Executive Budget Recommendation
- Conclusion

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 for 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. Five 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 audiobooks for leisure reading and educational purposes. All these services allow clients and their families to lead more independent and enjoyable lives.



Adult Client learning Orientation & Mobility

BIENNIAL ACCOMPLISHMENT

We take immense pride in delivering essential direct services to the citizens of North Dakota. Each year, over 500 children and adults benefit from our assistance with technology, mobility, and critical life skills. Helping these individuals achieve their goals represents our core mission and is a significant accomplishment.

In May 2024, we hosted our first-ever community open house in Grand Forks to raise awareness about NDVS/SB's services. Over 100 attendees, including local citizens, legislators, Lions Club members, and other stakeholders, gained valuable insights into our work.

Our premier annual event, Family Weekend, continues to be a resounding success. The 2024 event in Grand Forks saw 14 families participate, with meaningful outcomes for all involved. We are eagerly preparing for the next Family Weekend, scheduled for April 4–5, 2025, in Minot.

We also completed significant renovations to the west wing of our facility, enhancing both living and instructional spaces. These improvements expanded square footage for educational activities and modernized the environment, greatly benefiting students in short-term programs.

Recruiting skilled professionals has been another key success. We filled critical roles, including a regional coordinator for the Devils Lake, Rugby, and Belcourt areas, and replaced our veteran business manager with an experienced professional skilled in HR and budget management.

Technology initiatives:

Created a centralized SharePoint website for streamlined internal communication and record-keeping.

Purchased and deployed updated assistive technology devices for students and adults, from laptops and magnifiers to cell phone apps.

Automated the transfer of over 60,000 records and images into SharePoint, enhancing metadata tagging for efficient retrieval.

Transitioned to GovDelivery for digital newsletter distribution, supported by NDIT.



Adult learning computer skills



Family Weekend Fun



Student using video magnifier

CHALLENGES

Maintaining a highly trained staff in strategic locations across the state remains a top priority. The national shortage of professionals in blindness services, coupled with anticipated retirements of 3–4 experienced team members in the next biennium, presents ongoing recruitment challenges.

Raising public awareness about our services is another hurdle. As a small agency serving a niche population, traditional advertising has been cost prohibitive. This limits awareness in the general public about what is available to them. In addition, although collaboration with medical eye care professionals does yield referrals for service, we recognize there are citizens who do not get proper referral for low vision and blindness skills training. There are several reasons why this may occur, but a gap does exist that needs to be filled.

Anticipating and preparing for future needs is critical but challenging. Emerging diagnoses such as Cortical Visual Impairment (a brain-based condition) have increased demand for specialized training and interventions, requiring us to continually adapt to meet these needs.

NEXT BIENNIUM GOALS & PLANS

- Implement recommendations from a current study to enhance assessment and instruction in assistive technology for the students and adults we serve statewide. The study's aim is to identify strengths and needs within the agency, identify staff training needs and to create a roadmap for meeting student needs in the near future.
- Proactively recruit professionals in the field to fill anticipated vacancies, focusing on key regions across the state. This will be approached by providing incentives and enhanced support to existing professionals who are positioned to take coursework leading to certifications or other recognized credentials.
- NDVS/SB will continue to increase public awareness through a broad range of media outlets and activities to reach citizens in both large and small communities throughout the state. In addition to mailings to eye care professionals, speaking engagements and active use of Facebook, the NDVS/SB Public Awareness Team will pursue additional activities to reach a broader audience. The number of adults who seek services for low vision or blindness has not increased significantly even though the population has increased substantially in the last decade. Increased efforts are aimed at reaching this underserved population.

CURRENT BIENNIUM ONE-TIME FUNDING



Decision Package Summary	Special Fund	One-Time Funding	Status
Equipment Under 5,000	26,000	Yes	In progress
Update North Parking Lot	50,000	Yes	Finished – spent 55,780
Flooring – East Wing	45,000	Yes	Finished – spent 45,000
Update Student Commons	50,000	Yes	Mostly finished – spent 33,342.39
Update Front Entrance	55,000	Yes	In Progress
Misc. Repairs (Doors & AC Units)	29,000	Yes	Finished – spent 33,285.36
Roof Replacement & Repairs	150,000	Yes	Mostly finished – spent 111,930
Gutters for South Wing	50,000	Yes	Finished – spent 50,000
Replace Electrical Panel	10,000	Yes	Finished – spent \$2,000
Total	465,000		331,337.75

BASE BUDGET AND REQUEST

Line Item:	Expenditures 2021-2023	Biennium Appropriation 2023-2025	Base Budget Request 2025-2027	Optional Budget Request 2025-2027	Total Budget Request 2025-2027
Salaries & Wages	\$4,992,194	\$5,538,818.30	\$5,299,687	\$108,950	\$5,408,637
Operating	825,671	895,686	895,686	365,223	1,260,909
Capital Assets	420,692	478,192	324,903	598,000	922,903
Total	\$6,238,557	\$6,912,696.30	\$6,520,276	\$1,072,173	\$7,592,449
Funding Sources:					
General	\$4,992,194	\$5,240,991.30	\$5,299,687	\$108,950	\$5,492,619
Federal	-	-	-	-	-
Special	1,246,363	1,671,705	1,220,589	963,223	2,183,812
Total	\$6,238,557	\$6,912,696.30	\$6,520,276	\$1,072,173	\$7,592,449
FTE	27.75	27.75	27.75	-	27.75

OPTIONAL REQUESTS



Decision Package Summary	General Fund	Special Fund	Total
Teacher Salary Increases	108,950		108,950
Temporary Salaries		50,000	50,000
Additional Operating		142,500	142,500
Equipment Under 5,000		28,000	28,000
Additional IT Costs		20,000	20,000
New South Parking Lot		150,000	150,000
Cabinets in Rooms		55,000	55,000
Fire Alarm System		300,000	300,000
Remodel Break Room		55,000	55,000
Misc. Repairs (Doors)		10,000	10,000
Access Technology Position		152,723	152,723
Total	108,950	963,223	1,072,173

CHANGES TO THE EXECUTIVE BUDGET RECOMMENDATION

Assistive Technology Position - \$152,723.20

Creating another dedicated position at North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind to assess and teach assistive technology is essential to meet the growing needs of individuals who are blind or have low vision. Currently, the agency has only two staff members teaching assistive technology, which is insufficient to address the increasing demand for these critical services. This new role would provide students with personalized guidance in using tools such as screen readers, Braille displays, and accessibility functions on smartphones, enabling them to succeed academically and prepare for higher education or employment. For adults, access to technology training can help them maintain or gain employment, ensuring they stay competitive in the workforce.

The total cost for this position, including salary and benefits, is \$152,723.20 annually, but the return on investment is substantial. Expanding staff capacity will allow the agency to reach more individuals, ensuring students gain the skills and confidence needed to thrive in school while adults receive the support required to remain productive in their jobs. By focusing on teaching relevant, modern technologies, such as smartphone accessibility features, the position will help individuals stay connected and independent in today's digital world.

Funding this position will enable North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind to meet the rising demand for assistive technology instruction, empowering more individuals to achieve independence and success. This investment is a forward-thinking step toward greater inclusion, education, and economic opportunity.

CONCLUSION

At NDVS/SB, our mission is both straightforward and multifaceted: to address the unique needs of children and adults experiencing low vision or blindness. Achieving this mission requires a foundation of highly trained and dedicated professionals.

This budget request is focused on the active recruitment and retention of skilled staff. One of our most significant challenges over the next 2 to 4 years will be replacing retiring staff members who possess advanced degrees and decades of invaluable experience. Competitive salaries are a critical factor in this effort, but equally important is our ability to attract, develop, and shape future professionals in this specialized field.

In addition, meeting the complex needs of the individuals we serve demands an enhanced program for assessing and teaching the use of assistive technology for low vision and blindness. To better support citizens across the state, we are requesting funding to establish a new position dedicated to this vital area.

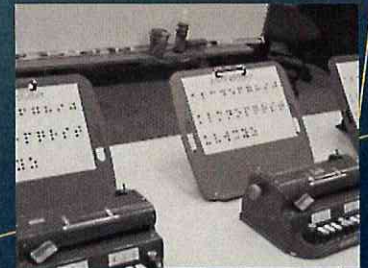
This total request of approximately \$7.5 million includes over \$2 million in special fund revenue, which significantly reduces reliance on taxpayer funding for ND Vision Services. We are fortunate to benefit from North Dakota's abundant mineral wealth, which contributes meaningfully to our budget.

Our strategy for success includes modest but strategic growth in our operating budget and funding for capital improvements designed to maximize impact. With the support of the North Dakota Information Technology Division, we have enhanced our business processes and service delivery, prioritizing efficiency at every level of our operations.

Serving the citizens of North Dakota is both an honor and a responsibility we take seriously.

Sincerely, Paul Olson

Superintendent



Cindy Williams explains what Assistive Technology can do for our students

