

March 10, 2025

NORTH DAKOTA VISION SERVICES/ SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND

A Division of the Department
of Public Instruction

HOUSE BILL #1013



Testimony to
the Senate
Appropriations
Committee



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Testimony - Paul Olson | 1 |
| Organizational Chart | 7 |
| Client Services Data | 8 |
| Current Biennium One Time Funding | 9 |
| Base Budget & Request | 10 |
| Optional Requests | 11 |
| Other Bills That May Affect NDVS/SB | 13 |
| Changes To The Executive Budget Recommendation | 14 |
| Conclusion | 15 |
| Appendix A - Quick Facts About NDVS/SB | A-1 |
| Appendix B - Citizen Testimony For HB1013 | B-1 |

Testimony

Paul Olson

Chairman Sorvaag and Members of the Senate 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). Paula Solheim, Business Manager, and I will provide testimony relative to HB 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 that, 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 database 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.

25-06-05. Services to nonresidents. Individuals who are blind or have a visual impairment and 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.

25-06-10. 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.

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.

Biennial Accomplishments:

- 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.
- Every two years, NDVS/SB organizes a conference for vision professionals in education and rehabilitation across North and South Dakota. In October 2023, this event was held in Grand Forks, providing essential professional development opportunities for public school teachers and vision specialists. National experts presented on a range of topics, ensuring that attendees, including our staff, stayed updated on the latest practices and skills.
- 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.
- This year, we updated our ND Expanded Core Curriculum Assessment (NDECC), a vital tool for assessing and planning instruction in areas related to the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC). The ECC supports students who are blind or have low vision in developing essential life skills beyond academics. The updated assessment was conducted during short-term programs, with positive feedback from IEP teams on its effectiveness in goal-setting.
- In April 2024, four high school students with low vision participated in an enriching trip to the Twin Cities, supported by a local church donation. This program targeted nine ECC areas, including orientation and mobility, social skills, and assistive technology. Highlights included navigating urban spaces, visiting Vision Loss Resources, and experiencing the total solar eclipse at the Science Museum.
- 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.



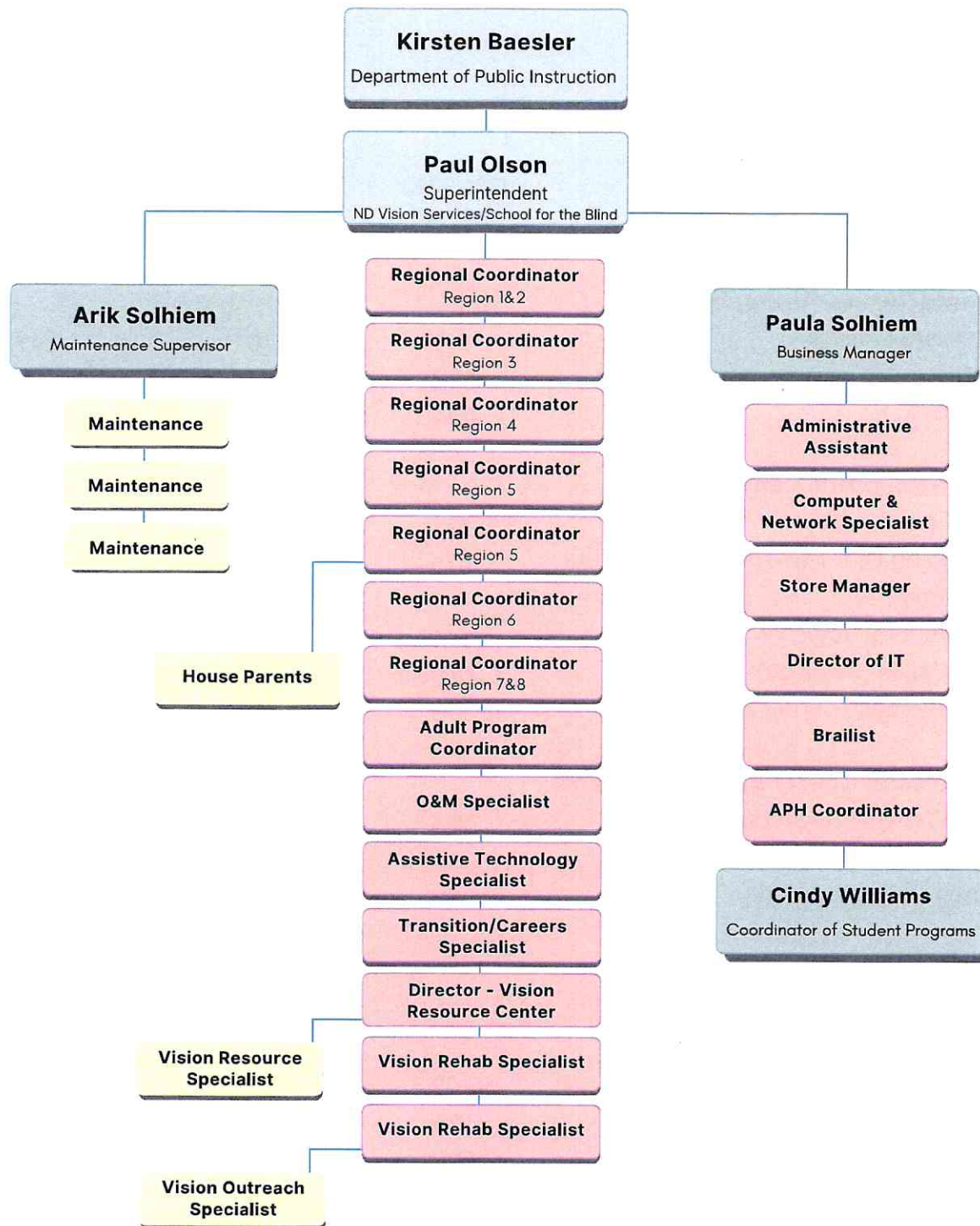
(Students explore the pumpkin patch)



(Senator Claire Cory & Representative Steve Vetter learn about Braille)

ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

NDVS/SB



CLIENT SERVICES DATA

Services Provided

2021-2023
Biennium

7/1/23 - 6/30/24
Annual

7/1/23 - 12/31/24
18 Months

Clients Served (Unduplicated):

| | | | |
|------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Infants/Students | 312 | 201 | 269 |
| Adults | <u>222</u> | <u>141</u> | <u>190</u> |
| Total | 534 | 342 | 459 |

Vision Resource Center:

| | | | |
|--|--------|-------|-------|
| New Loans | 1,125 | 270 | 427 |
| "Reaching Out" Newsletter (Circulated Quarterly) | 376 | 575 | 595 |
| APH Federal Registry | 314 | 270 | 346 |
| Store Sales (Invoices) | 388 | 171 | 231 |
| Braille Access Center (pages) | 14,146 | 3,589 | 5,841 |

Short-term Center Based Programs:

| | | | |
|------------------------|-----|----|----|
| Short Term Programming | 134 | 63 | 94 |
| Adult Week | 38 | 19 | 25 |
| Summer Programming | 38 | 20 | 27 |

Evaluations, Consultations and Instructions

(Services Provided):

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Consultations | 1,849 | 838 | 1,451 |
| Evaluations | 383 | 210 | 263 |
| Instruction | 9,629 | 4,481 | 6,881 |
| In-Service Training (Attendees) | 1,512 | 564 | 763 |

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 |



(Updated Student Commons Area)



(Newly remodeled Instruction Room)

Base Budget and Request

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 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 | \$5,408,637 |
| 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 |

Special Fund Projections 2025-27

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------------|
| Trust Land Funds | 1,530,000 |
| Rental Income | 334,180 |
| Charges for Services | 32,000 |
| Other | 30,000 |
| Total Projected Revenue | 1,926,180 |

Optional Requests

1. **Teacher Salary Increases:** This is to place teachers on the Composite Salary Schedule developed by HRMS for 2025-27. This includes wages, retirement, and payroll taxes. They are not classified employees.
2. **Temporary Salaries:** This request is to increase houseparent wages to \$16-18 per hour. We are anticipating 20% of staff to retire in the next 5 years. This will allow a cushion to hire temporary staff as vision professionals are in high demand and short supply nationwide.
3. **Additional Operating:** This request includes: \$6,000 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. \$13,000 for inflationary increases for outreach services to students/adults. Our property is on 10 acres of land, and we hire someone to apply chemical application to control weeds, \$5,500. We would like to add billboards to increase the number of adults/students we serve: \$40,000 (\$10,000 for six months). \$38,000 for lost revenue from Mayville State CDP.
4. **Equipment under \$5000:** This includes \$13,000 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 \$10,000 (2 new bottled water fountain fillers) These fountains are both used frequently. \$5,000 New lawnmower (zero turn) as the one we currently have will be over 6 years old.
5. **IT Costs:** This will allow NDVS to maintain the 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. This would also allow us to purchase a Smartboard on wheels to provide training to students/adults.
6. **New Parking Lot -South Side:** This lot is adjacent to UND parking. The parking lot that is currently there is over 25 years old and is very small and requires improvement in the driveway. Safety is a major concern for staff and visitors and when there are deliveries, given the current size and design.
7. **Cabinets/Furniture for Student Rooms:** This is to replace the kitchen cabinets (where the students reside) in the apartments, \$55,000. These items will be over 25 years old at the time of replacement.
8. **Replace Fire Alarm System:** In April 2022, SiteLogig inspected our fire alarm system. The old system is approaching 45 years old and needs to be replaced, as it cannot be updated.
9. **Breakroom renovation:** This request is to update our breakroom areas, so it is more accessible to our employees. Currently there is no sink which will need to be added.
10. **Misc. Repairs (doors):** This request includes the replacement of one door (#6) – a double steel door. This is located on the north side of the building going into our compressor room. This door is difficult to open and is over 45 years old.
11. **Access Technology Position:** The need for instruction in the use of specialized technology for students who are blind or low vision has grown exponentially. This request will fill a need for appropriate assessment and instruction in western North Dakota where we struggle to provide high quality, equitable services for students and adults who are blind or have low vision.

Other Bills That May Affect NDVS/SB

HB 1040 – Closing of PERS Main Defined Benefit Plan

Closing the PERS Main Defined Benefit plan could have a negative impact on the recruitment and retention efforts of non-teaching employees.

Audit Findings

An audit was completed by the State Auditor's Office in 2023. This is what the report stated: WHAT WE FOUND - This audit did not identify any areas of concern.

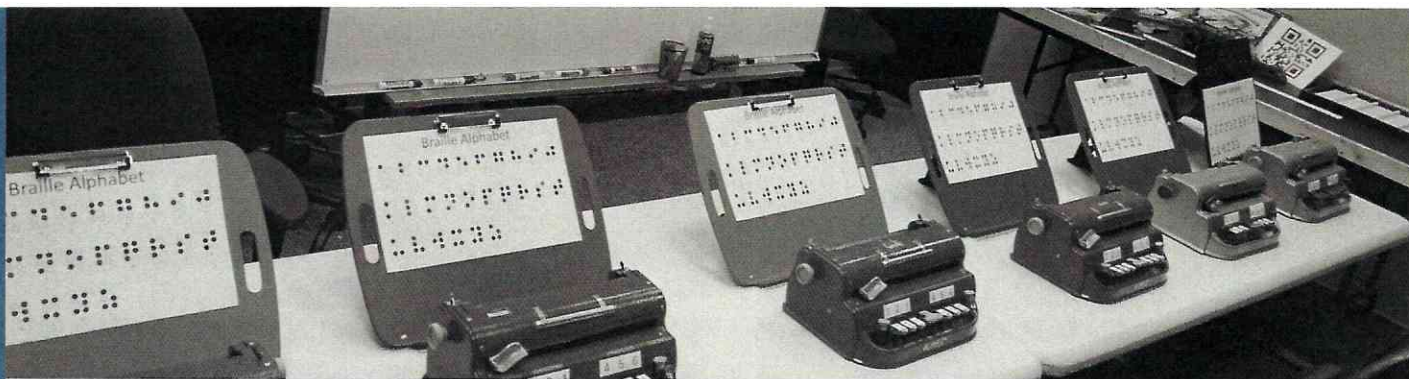
Changes to the Executive Budget Recommendation

1. 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.

One of our main focuses is 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

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 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, Rugby, Dickinson, 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 3 summer programs and 5 weeks for adult training.
- Some sources estimates 20,000 citizens in the state experience some level of reduced vision that is not correctable. Of those, the number of people who have severe visual impairments that negatively impact major life functions is estimated to between 4000 and 6000.
- NDVS/SB stands ready to assist those who seek our services to regain their independence and remain active and productive in their communities.
- We love what we do and are dedicated to helping students of all ages become CHOICE READY.



Citizen Testimony for HB1013

As an adult who has lived for many years with very limited vision, the people at the North Dakota Vision Services School for the Blind have been and will continue to be a valuable resource. When I call regarding a technology issue involving my computer or cell phone, they understand the importance of getting the problem addressed right away. The staff knows that without a working computer screen reader and cell phone, a person with sight loss is stuck. What they provide could never be given at the help desk of a computer store. When I retired after 35 years, I looked to NDVS to help me find and set up the same computer I had at my office. It happened. This was so very much appreciated.

It is the people there who understand adaptive equipment and who will let me know of a new product I might find useful. As a white cane user, I have received invaluable mobility training both while attending an adult week in Grand Forks and on site in my community. Confidence is built through successful training. During COVID, NDVS reached out across the state with weekly Zoom calls, focusing on the topics of technology, daily living skills and other areas brought up by those who participated. The staff share new ways to complete what may seem to be impossible tasks in working with someone who has newly lost their vision, or in my case, showed me a new way I had never considered. There is no one who willingly signs up for sight loss, but life happens and NDVS is a steadfast, soft place to land to receive support on the journey to acceptance. This is offered one-on-one or in a group. My life and the lives of countless others is better thanks to NDVS School for the Blind.

-Janelle F. Olson



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.