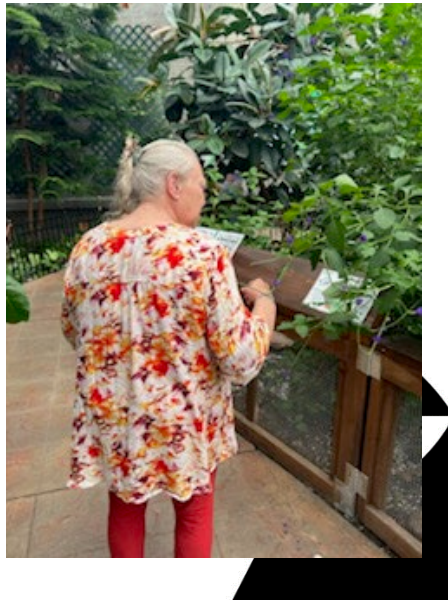


South Dakota Board of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired 2024 Annual Report

South Dakota
Department of Human Services

Division of
Service to the Blind & Visually Impaired



Dear Governor Noem:

On behalf of the Board of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired (SBVI), we thank you for your continued support to all citizens of South Dakota who are blind or visually impaired. We are proud to present the annual Board of SBVI's 2024 Annual Report outlining the many Board activities and the work of the SBVI rehabilitation counselors and teachers across South Dakota. The purpose of the Board of SBVI is to serve as an advocate for all individuals who are blind and visually impaired needing vocational rehabilitation and independent living services within the state.



Last year, I introduced myself as a legally blind person with a diagnosis of Usher Syndrome. This year, I would like to share more about myself through a podcast interview, "[Awkwardly Awesome](#)" hosted by Jason Freeman. Jason is a wonderful person who, like me, is an adult with a disability. The interview was fun, and I hope it provides more insight into the world of those who are blind and visually impaired. One of the takeaways from this podcast is understanding the mental health impact living with disabilities can have on a person. Sometimes, it can be a real struggle to stand up for yourself, which is why the Board of SBVI is so important; it can advocate for those who struggle to advocate for themselves.

I would like to acknowledge our Board members; each represents an individual or organization that supports South Dakota citizens who are blind or visually impaired. Each Board member provides valuable expertise and guidance toward goals in support of the State plan, reviewing consumer satisfaction service outcomes, and much more. Fifty percent of members are blind or visually impaired, and membership includes current or former clients of the Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

This report reflects the effort, time, and passion of each member of this Board and the fact that the work of many hands really does make a difference. In closing, our Board thanks you for your continued support, not only for those who are blind and visually impaired but for all persons with disabilities and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ryan Groeneweg". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ryan M. Groeneweg, Ed.S., BCBA

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BOARD OF SERVICE TO THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

The mission of the Board of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired is to promote independence, employment, and full inclusion for all citizens who are blind or visually impaired.

The Board, or State Rehabilitation Council as defined in the Rehabilitation Act, is an advisory council appointed by the Governor. The Board advises the Division of SBVI on responsibilities related to effectiveness of programs and policy and procedures. The Board meets four times per year and at least 50 percent of members must be blind or visually impaired. All board meetings are open to the public.

Name	Hometown	Representation
Ryan Groeneweg – Chair	Sioux Falls	Business and Industry/SILC
George Seamon	Pierre	State Education Agency
Carla Miller	Sioux Falls	Parent Connection
Burdette Clifford	Mission	American Indian VR Services
Deb Ver Steeg	Sioux Falls	Disability Advocacy Group
Richard Crawford – Vice Chair	Sioux Falls	Business and Industry
Krystal Stuwe	Hoven	Parent of Child with Disabilities
Cherie Gerry	Sioux Falls	Vocational Rehab. Counselor
Felicia Alspach	Pierre	Workforce Dev. Council
Ronda Williams	Pierre	SBVI Director– Ex Officio
Jeff Nelson – Member at Large	Garretson	Business and Industry
Nichole Nelson	Aberdeen	Community Rehab. Program
Cole Uecker*	Pierre	Client Assistance Program
Mike Hommel	Webster	Business and Industry
Kelly Deckert	Brookings	Business and Industry
Pamela Fisher	Rapid City	Disability Advocacy Group
Kellie Hauglid*	Lyons	Vocational Rehab. Counselor
Chelle Hart*	Sioux Falls	Disability Advocacy Group
Elaine Fritz*	Renner	Parent of Blind Individual
Kendra Ringstmeyer*	Pierre	Workforce Dev. Council
Gaye Mattke*	Brandon	SBVI Director – Ex Officio

*Denotes members whose terms expired or resigned during 2024.

Board composition is defined in the Rehabilitation Act. Nominations for Board vacancies are solicited from organizations representing people with disabilities, including the South Dakota Association of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind of South Dakota. In addition, the Division seeks representation by current or former clients of the vocational rehabilitation program.

The Board advises the Division of SBVI regarding performance on eligibility, the extent, scope, and effectiveness of services, and functions performed by SBVI that assist

individuals with disabilities to achieve employment outcomes. The Board also assists with development of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Unified State Plan and evaluates the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program including consumer satisfaction and the statewide needs assessment. Board members recommend the format for public forums and serve as facilitators of the forums which are held to obtain input for the state plan.

Board of SBVI is waiting for one appointment from the Governor's office for a representative from the Client Assistance Program, who resigned on November 27, but is willing to remain on the Board until a replacement is appointed.

BOARD COMMITTEES

Executive Committee – The Executive Committee consists of the Board Chair, Vice Chair, and Member at Large. The Executive Committee plans agendas for Board meetings and handles decisions between regularly scheduled meetings and other activities assigned by the Board.

Strategic Planning and Policy Development Committee – Members of the Strategic Planning and Policy Development Committee provide input on strategic planning and policy development and evaluate state plan updates, consumer satisfaction survey results, and SBVI policy revisions. Recommendations from the committee are brought to the full Board.

Public Relations Committee – The Public Relations Committee recommends activities to promote the programs and services offered by SBVI and assists SBVI in designing and conducting outreach activities.

BOARD MEETINGS

Meetings during the reporting period were held on the following dates via the Dakota Digital Network (DDN) with conference rooms located in Rapid City, Pierre, Aberdeen, and Sioux Falls with the option to attend virtually by computer or phone:

March 15, 2024
September 20, 2024

June 14, 2024
December 13, 2024

Based on advice of the Board, meetings were held via the DDN teleconferencing system with sites hosted for members to participate in person or remotely during the report period. This format was convenient for the public to attend either in person or via video conference. Meetings are open to the public; a public comment period is incorporated into each meeting agenda and are held at accessible locations or via video/audio conference. Meetings are announced through the State of South Dakota Board Portal and posted at SBVI offices. Meeting dates are determined by the Board; agendas and minutes are posted on the Open Government Board Portal at:

<http://boardsandcommissions.sd.gov>

The Executive Committee reviews the draft agenda with the Director of SBVI and recommends topics prior to distribution. Topics are chosen based on priorities identified by the Board and the Rehabilitation Act.

During the report period, topics addressed by the Board of SBVI included:

- WIOA State Plan Goals and Strategies Updates and Progress
- Board Activities Planning and Implementation
- Rehabilitation Services Administration Findings and Corrective Action Plan
- Consumer Satisfaction Survey Results

STATE PLAN GOALS AND STRATEGIES

The following goals and strategies were approved for the SBVI portion of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan 2024 - 2027:

Goal 1: Increase VR client successful employment outcomes.

Strategy 1.1: Improve timeliness from application to service provision to ensure client engagement.

Strategy 1.2: Increase counselor/client engagement as full partners in the development of services.

Strategy 1.3: Decrease unsuccessful closures through consistent client/counselor engagement and emphasizing the value of service provision.

Goal 2: Improve quality guidance and counseling services to Vocational Rehabilitation clients.

Strategy 2.1: Provide counseling skills training to increase comfort and skills level of counselors.

Strategy 2.2: Improve consumer satisfaction results and follow up with respondents who express dissatisfaction with SBVI services.

Strategy 2.3: Prioritize counseling and guidance by aligning duties with clear expectations for committing time to provide counseling to clients on a consistent basis.

Goal 3: Increase awareness of and access to SBVI services.

Strategy 3.1: Expand outreach in communities to include organizations such as National Federation of the Blind of South Dakota, SD Association of the Blind, Lions Clubs, Sertoma, Rotary, Kiwanis, Optometric Society, and local referral sources.

Strategy 3.2: Annually conduct activities that promote services for individuals with vision loss including those from minority backgrounds, such as individuals working with local Lutheran Social Services Center for New Americans and tribal vocational rehabilitation programs.

Strategy 3.3: Update and ensure accessibility of the SBVI website and outreach materials and procedures that staff utilize to promote services to clients, referral sources, employers, and other entities.

Goal 4: Build capacity to increase staff engagement, expertise, and retention of qualified staff.

Strategy 4.1: Create individual development plans with counselors based on training and development needs.

Strategy 4.2: Cross train staff to ensure sustainability and build expertise.

Strategy 4.3: Provide mentoring opportunities for newer staff with a focus on understanding blind culture.

Goal 5: Strengthen the agency's ability to provide quality services to minority populations in South Dakota.

Strategy 5.1: Provide training opportunities to SBVI staff on culturally relevant service provision and cultural sensitivity.

Strategy 5.2: Collaborate with Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation programs to ensure that eligible individuals are served in an effective and efficient manner on reservations and tribal lands.

Strategy 5.3: Inform minority populations of vocational rehabilitation services and the role of SBVI to meet the needs of those who are blind or visually impaired in these populations.

Goal 6: Improve coordination of services to facilitate the transition of students from high school to postsecondary education and/or training in preparation for employment.

Strategy 6.1: Increase the number of potentially eligible students referred by SD School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Outreach Consultants and Vision Transition Specialist.

Strategy 6.2: Increase the provision of pre-employment transition services to students with visual impairments through outreach to public and Tribal schools across South Dakota.

Strategy 6.3: Promote participation in transition activities such as Project Skills, Project Search, Youth Leadership Forum, Rehab. Center for the Blind Transition Week, and Employment Skills Training, for students who are blind or visually impaired.

BOARD ACTIVITIES

Governor's Awards for Employment of People with Disabilities

Governor Kristi Noem recognized the achievements of businesses, individuals with disabilities, and other South Dakotans for their contributions toward the employment of people with disabilities at the 2024 Governor's Awards ceremony on September 24, 2024, in the state capitol rotunda.

Gov. Noem presented awards to the following 2024 recipients:

- Arlene Poncelet, Ft. Pierre – Distinguished Service
- Michael Svatos, Mitchell – Outstanding Employee with a Disability
- Justin Minnaert, Madison – Outstanding Individual with a Disability
- Dakota Fluid Power, Rapid City – Outstanding Private Employer (Small Employer)
- Compass One Healthcare/Rapid City – Outstanding Private Employer (Large Employer)
- Prairie Lakes Wellness Center, Watertown – Outstanding Public Employer
- Cherie Hill, Onida – Outstanding Transition Services



The Governor's Awards ceremony is co-sponsored by the Board of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired, Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Statewide Independent Living Council, and the Department of Human Services. Two Board of SBVI members served on the Review Committee to select award recipients.

South Dakota Disability Awareness Month

National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) celebrates the contributions of America's workers with disabilities past and present and showcases supportive, inclusive employment policies and practices. In recognition of the important role people with disabilities play in a diverse and inclusive American workforce, the theme for NDEAM 2024 was "**Access Good Jobs for All.**"

NDEAM events were held in eight communities around the state, as well as an event made available statewide through a virtual Zoom presentation. Education and awareness activities were held in person and virtually, addressing topics related to workforce and disabilities. One member of the Board of SBVI served on the Review Committee to select activities and determine financial support. The Board of SBVI sponsors NDEAM events on an annual basis.

White Cane Safety Day

White Cane Day marches were held in October in local communities in Sioux Falls, Brookings, Rapid City and Aberdeen, hosted by blind organizations, mayor's committees, and blind peer support organizations, as well as staff at the SD Rehabilitation Center for the Blind to educate the public about white cane laws. SBVI also developed a video interviewing users of the white cane which was shared on the DHS Facebook page.

Authors of Grandpa's White Cane met with third graders in Spearfish throughout the month of October to share information about the importance of white cane awareness.



Public Relations/Education

Outreach activities are a focus of the Board of SBVI to ensure citizens with vision loss have access to services. Activities are conducted to educate the public about accessibility for people with vision loss.

A public forum was held on April 26, 2024, in conjunction with the National Federation of the Blind of South Dakota convention in Rapid City. There were approximately nineteen individuals in attendance and discussion was held about currency readers, Newline availability in South Dakota, and SBVI staff updates.

The Board of SBVI sponsored a booth at Disability Awareness Day during the South Dakota Legislative Session in the capitol rotunda in Pierre. The South Dakota Association of the Blind and National Federation of the Blind of South Dakota members are invited to participate in this opportunity to educate lawmakers about issues related to blindness. This year Disability Day at the Capitol was held on February 28, 2024.



VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

The Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program provides individualized rehabilitation services that result in optimal employment outcomes for citizens who are blind or visually impaired. Vocational rehabilitation counselors specializing in blindness and low vision provide services throughout the state of South Dakota. The VR program reporting reflects data that the Rehabilitation Service Administration tracks based on a program year, July 1, 2023– June 30, 2024, also known as State Fiscal Year 2024 (SFY 2024).

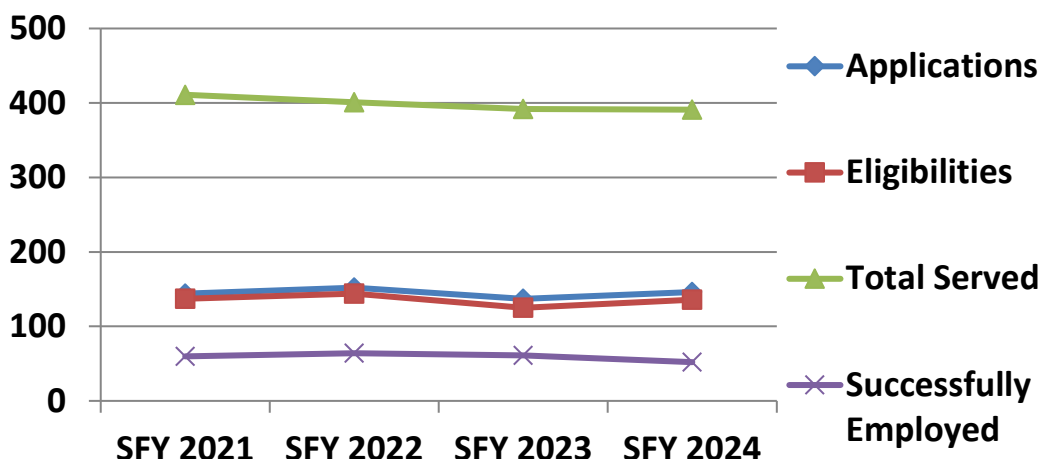
Program Year Performance

- 391 people were served through the SBVI VR Program in the most recent state fiscal year.
- 52 people were successfully employed through the vocational rehabilitation program, a decrease from 61 people the previous program year.

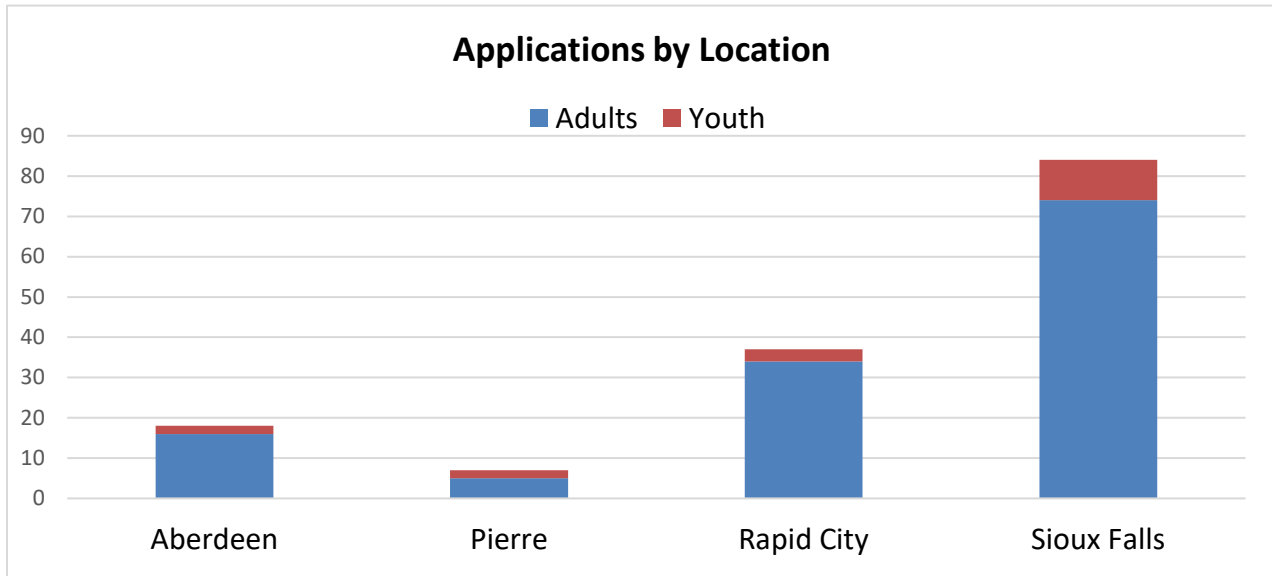
The 2024 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium Report, a compilation of data from multiple sources such as the Social Security Administration and the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, identified South Dakota in the highest quartile for employment rate for people with disabilities in the nation at 50.8 percent. This is very similar to last year’s rate of 51.2 percent and well above the national average of 44.5 percent. This highlights the work ethic of people with disabilities in South Dakota, as well as the willingness of businesses in the state to hire people with disabilities. There is more work to do; however, as the employment of people without disabilities is 79 percent.

SBVI Vocational Rehabilitation Caseload Summary

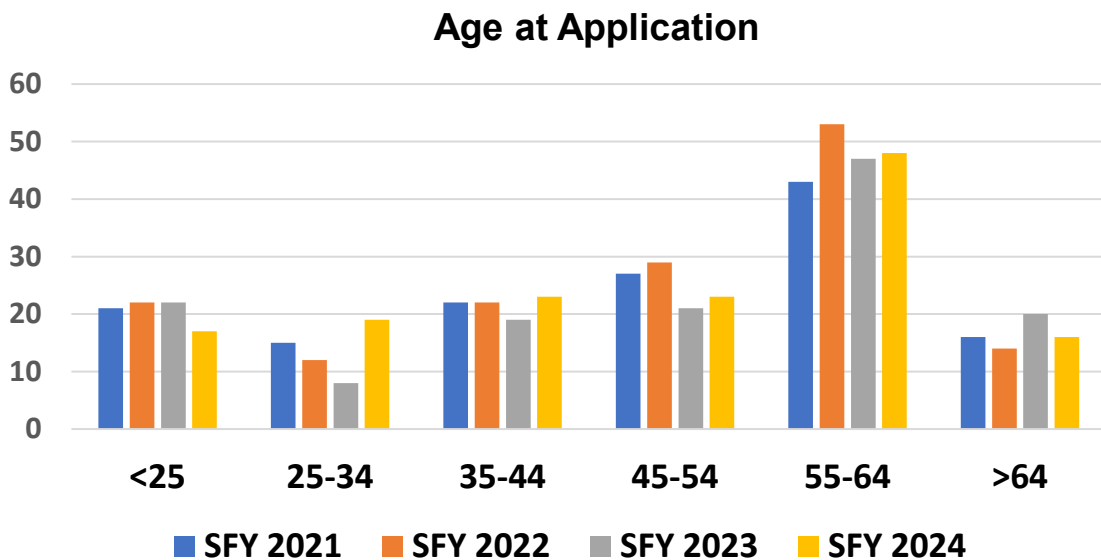
The following chart illustrates the number of people who have applied for and received services from the SBVI Vocational Rehabilitation program over the past four years. SBVI counselors saw a slight increase in the number of vocational rehabilitation applications in the most recent Program Year. There were 146 applications, 136 eligibilities, a total of 391 individuals served, and 52 clients exited as successfully employed.



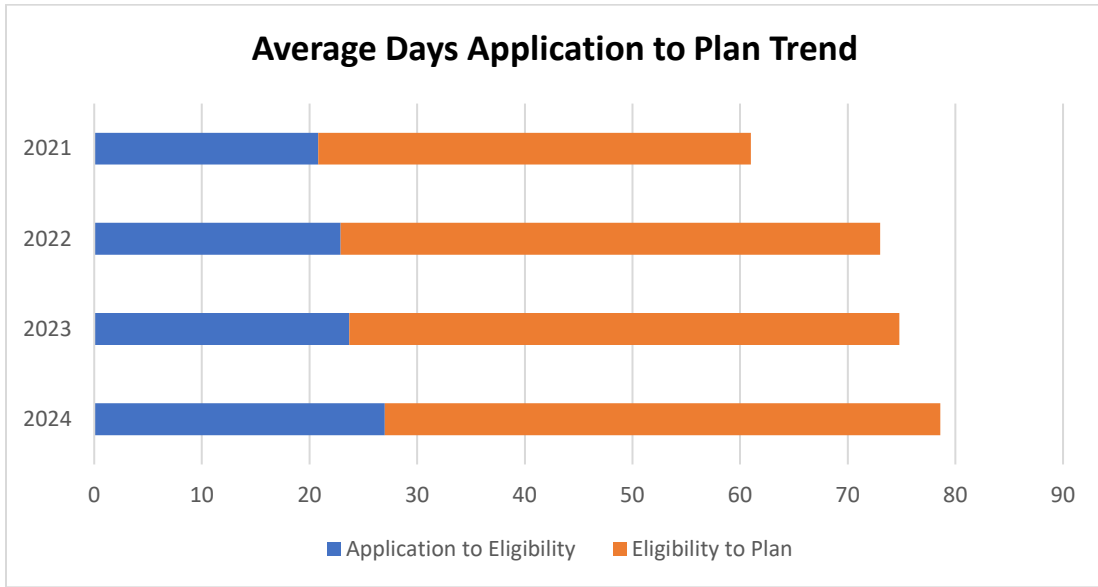
SBVI received 129 new applications for VR services from adults and 17 from students and youth. Youth is defined as individuals in the vocational rehabilitation program under the age of 25. Sioux Falls obtained the most applications of adults and youth, for a total of 84 new applicants in that district.



Although SBVI can accept applications from individuals starting at age 14, historically most applicants who apply for services are between the ages of 55-64 due to the progressive nature of their vision loss as indicated in the graph below. SBVI did experience 137 percent increase in applicants between the ages of 25 – 34 (from 8 to 19 applicants).



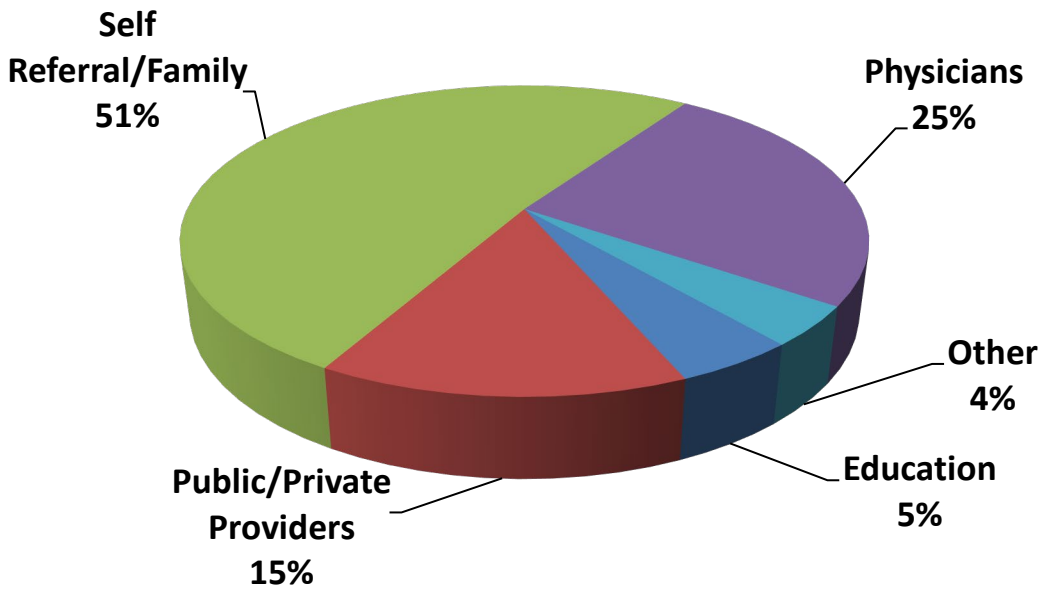
Trends in Timeliness of Services



In state fiscal year 2021, the average days from application to plan was 60 days. This has increased in state fiscal year 2024 to an average of 78.6 days, an increase of 31 percent, impacting timeliness of services.

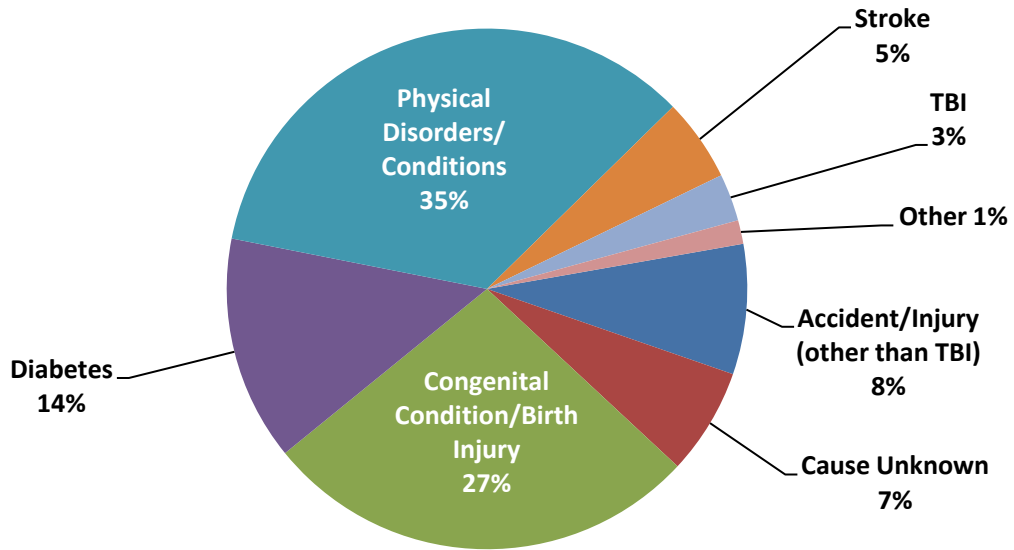
A goal for SBVI is to minimize the number of days between application to plan, focusing on maintaining client motivation and keeping them engaged in services. Recent training was provided, and ongoing technical assistance is critical in meeting the goal to expedite service provision.

Referral Sources



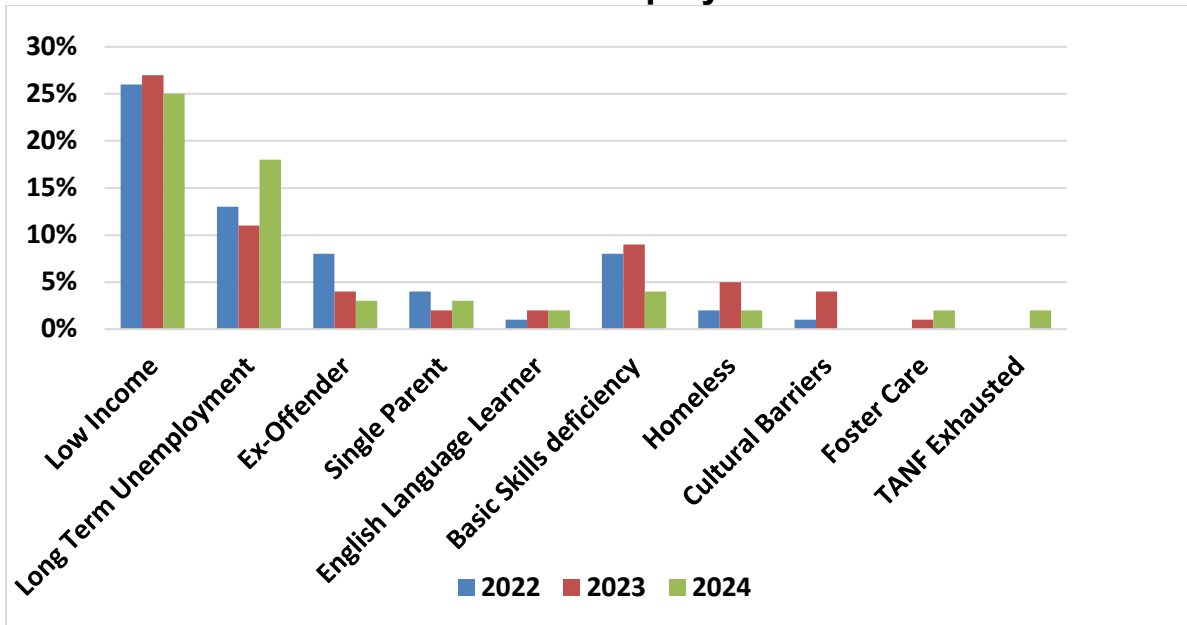
Referrals from self/family/friends remain the largest source for applicants, at 51 percent. Physicians and public or private providers are the next highest referral sources, totaling 40 percent.

Causes of Impairments



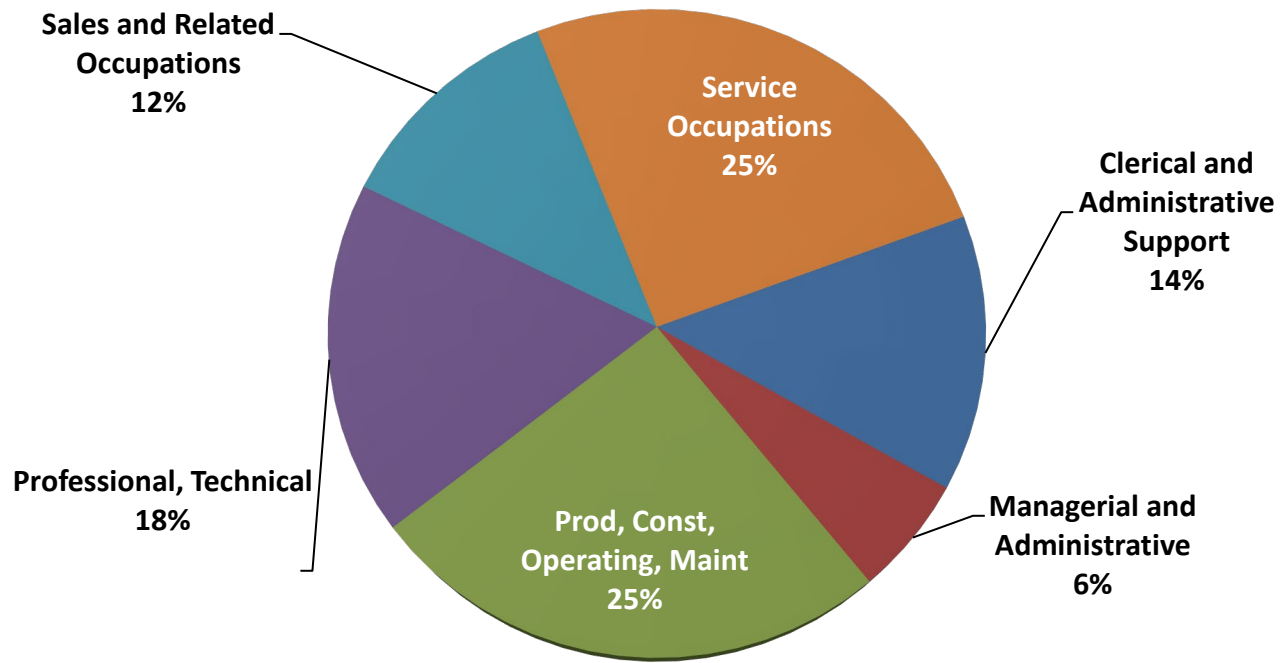
For VR clients determined eligible for the program, the cause of visual impairment for most of them was due to either a physical disorder (35 percent), congenital condition/birth injury (27 percent), or diabetes (14 percent).

Barriers to Employment

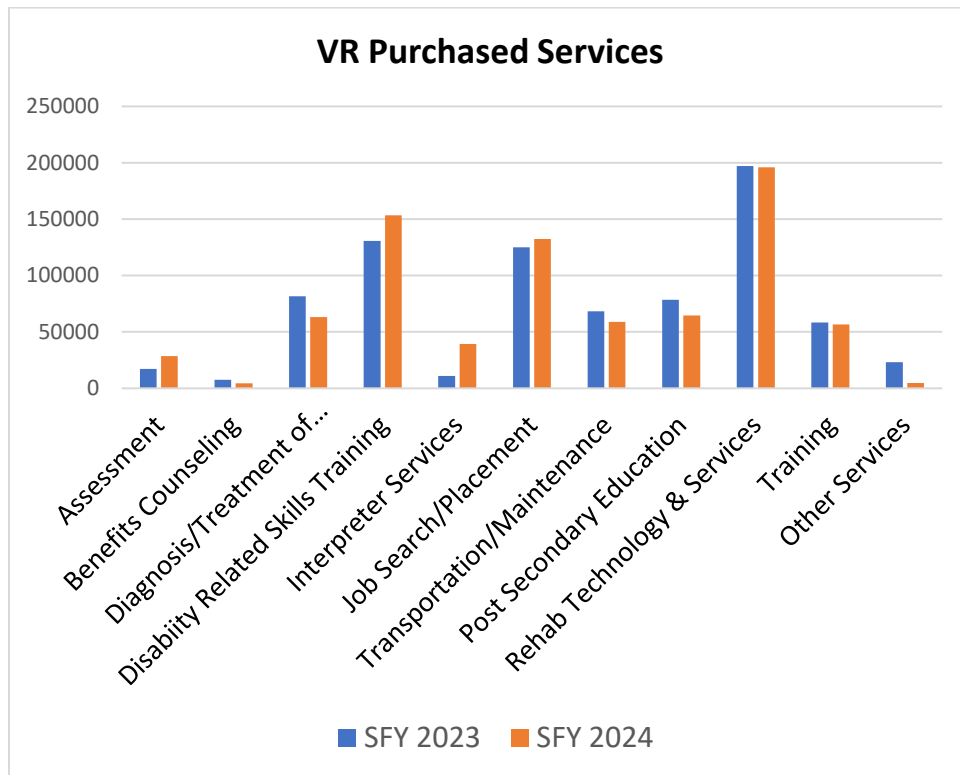


SBVI identifies barriers clients are experiencing that impact their ability to obtain work without assistance. The above chart shows the percentage of clients who are experiencing these barriers when SBVI first develops a plan of services with them. The main barriers to employment clients are experiencing include low income and long-term unemployment.

Occupations Of Individuals Successfully Employed

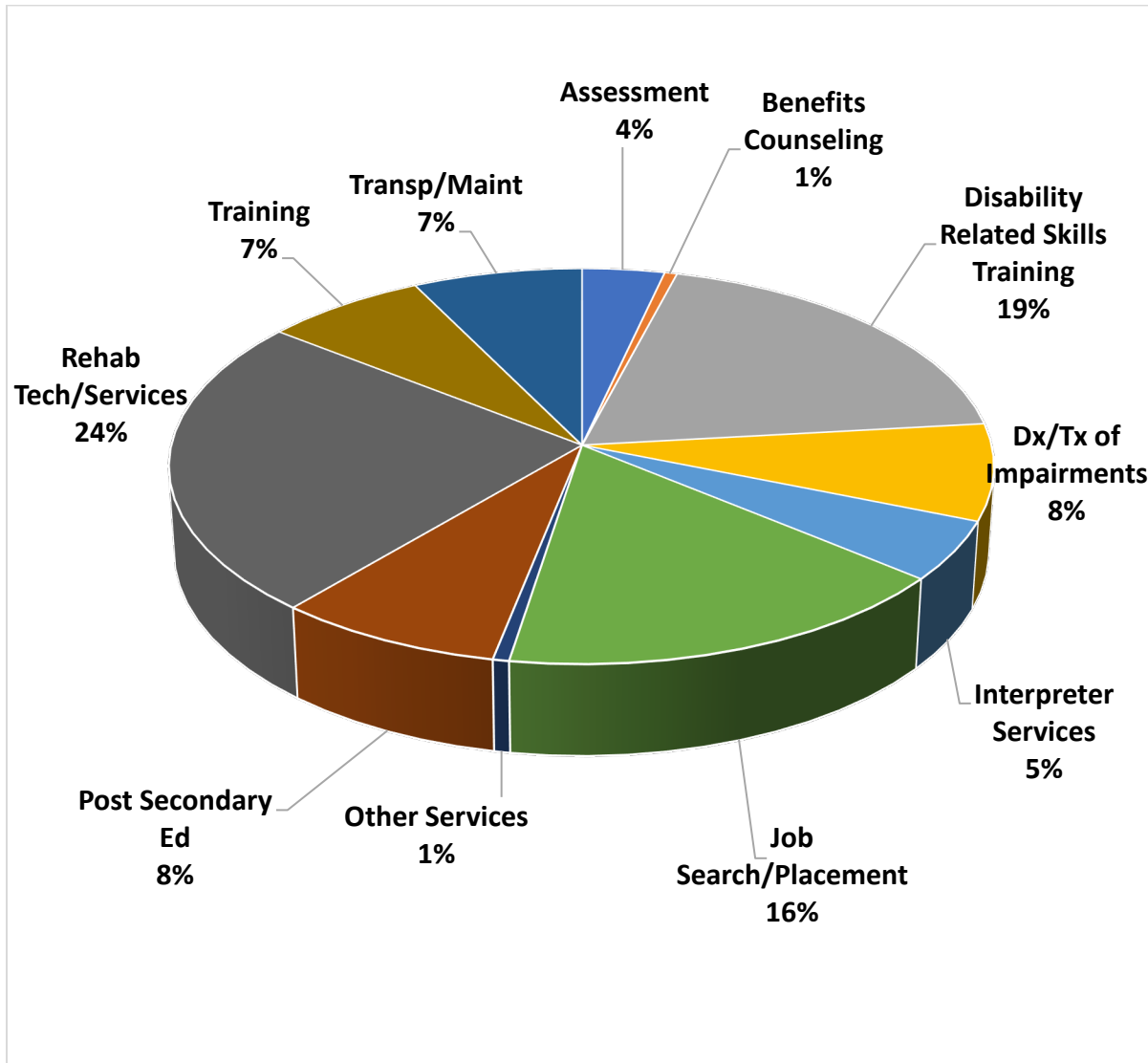


The Vocational Rehabilitation program helped 52 individuals to achieve their employment goals. This chart reflects the occupations of people successfully employed, with half of the individuals in service, production, construction, operating and maintenance occupations.



SBVI spent \$801,758 on 89 different services compiled into eleven categories for VR clients. Looking at trend data from the previous year, there is a noticeable increase in disability related skills training and foreign language and American Sign Language interpreter services. There was a slight decline in diagnosis and medical restoration services from the previous year.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services Provided

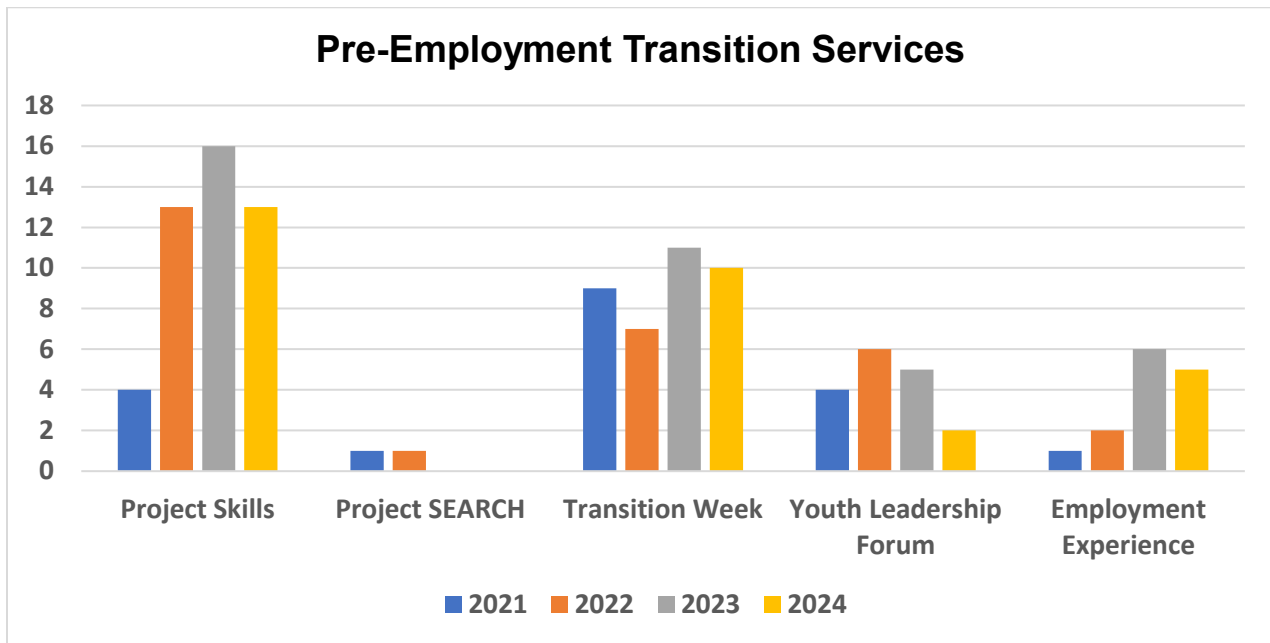


The above chart reflects the wide variety of services SBVI provides to assist clients to obtain or maintain employment. SBVI assists clients to overcome their vision-related impediments to employment by providing diagnostic and treatment services (8 percent) to improve their vision, and disability related skills training (19 percent) and assistive technology devices and training (24 percent) to overcome their employment barriers and increase independence. Training (7 percent), post-secondary education (8 percent), and job placement services (16 percent) result in clients obtaining competitive integrated employment in their community.

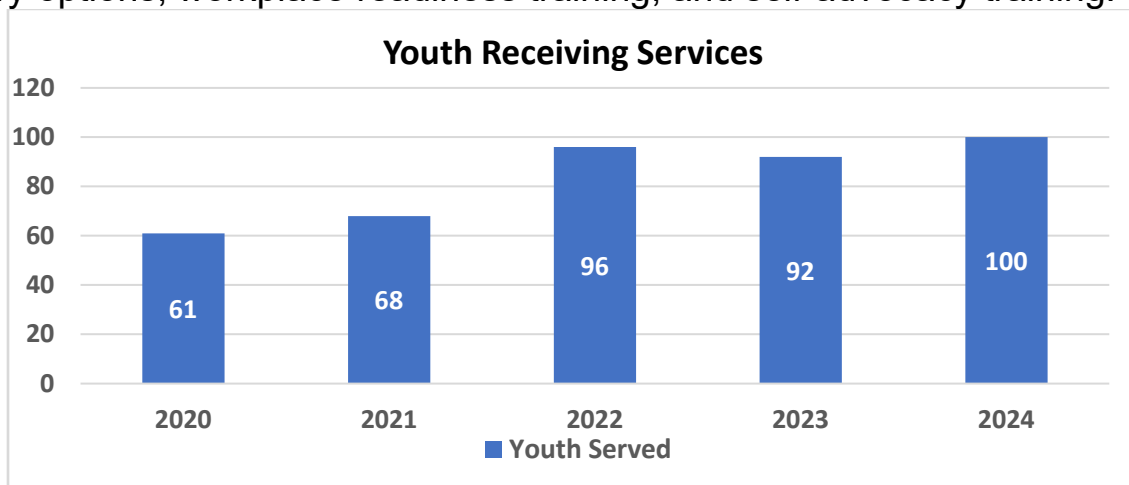
Employment Data of Successfully Employed Clients at Closure

Total Cases	Average Weekly Hours	Average Weekly Wage	Average Hourly Wage
52	32	\$635.95	\$18.76

SBVI clients who received services and were closed successfully employed average a 32-hour work week, with an average hourly wage of \$18.76. This is a 3 percent increase from last year’s average hourly wage of \$18.22, which results in a higher average weekly wage of about \$636. This is an impact of over \$1.7 million in annual income for 52 individuals.



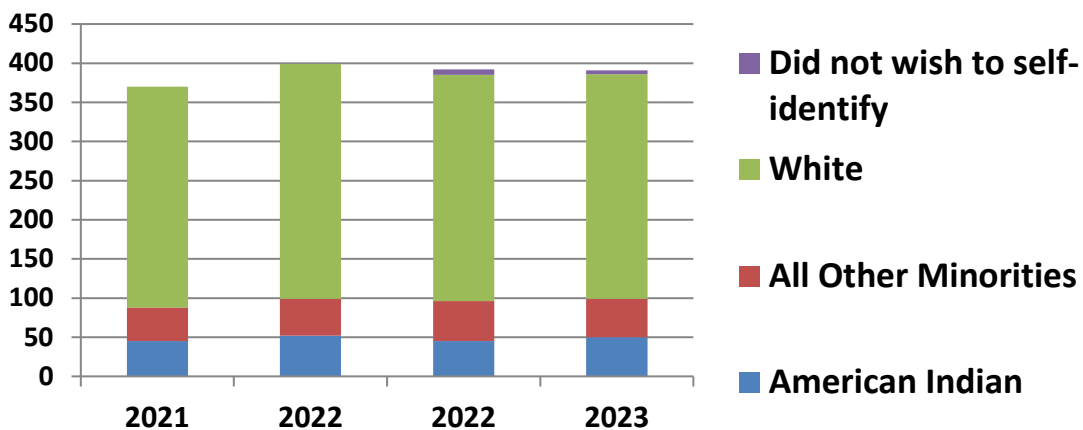
The activities shown in the graph above illustrate planned services in Individualized Plans for Employment to secondary school students. These activities provide job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on post-secondary options, workplace readiness training, and self-advocacy training.



SBVI has worked closely with public schools and the SD School for the Blind and Visually Impaired to increase employment experiences for youth ages 16-24. SBVI collaborates with the Division of Rehabilitation Services, Departments of Education, Labor and Regulation, and Social Services to assist with identifying eligible and potentially eligible students with disabilities and their need for services as young as 14 years of age. The result is a slight increase in youth receiving services from SBVI.

Services to Minorities

According to the 2020 United States Census Bureau’s census data, South Dakota’s minority (non-white) population is 19.3 percent, a 5 percent increase from the 2010 census. The largest minority group in South Dakota involves American Indians making up 8.8 percent of the state’s total population. This year, 12.8 percent of individuals served by SBVI were of American Indian descent, over 25 percent of all individuals served reported coming from a minority background and 5 participants did not wish to identify their race or ethnicity.



The Board and Division of SBVI work to address culturally relevant services for minority populations through numerous initiatives. The Director of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe Vocational Rehabilitation Program is a member of the Board of SBVI, and SBVI has relationships with the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation programs in South Dakota. Counselors also provide outreach to Bureau of Indian Affairs schools located in their territories.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Client Satisfaction Survey Analysis

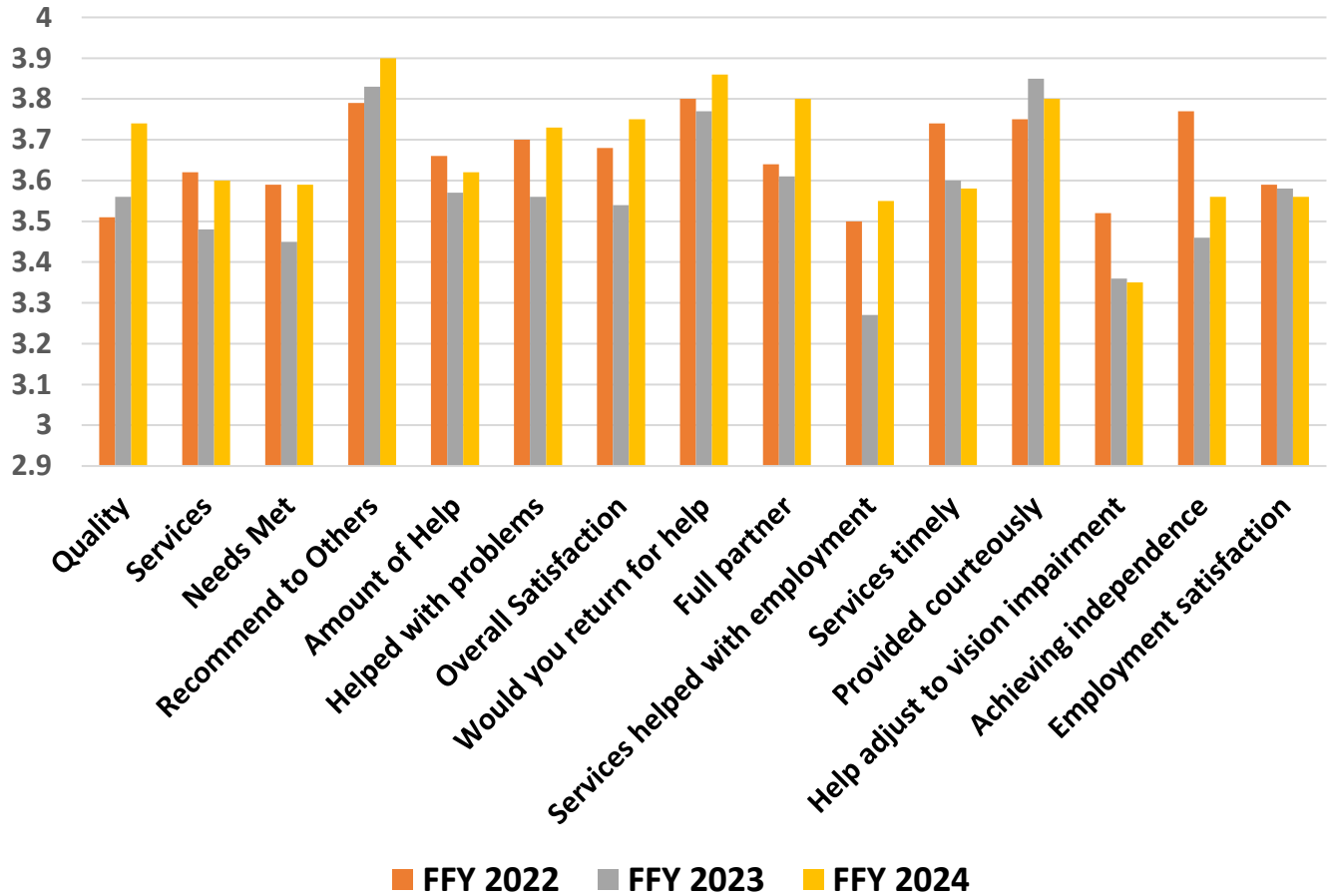
SBVI partners with the Board of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired to conduct an annual client satisfaction survey, which consists of eight core questions that contribute to a composite satisfaction scale: The Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8), Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, and Nguyen (1979). An additional seven questions were developed with the help of the Board of SBVI, and consumers rated their satisfaction level from 1 (Poor) to 4 (Excellent). This is the 15th year that SBVI has conducted this annual survey.

Between October 1, 2023, and September 30, 2024, the survey was sent out to 101 individuals who received services and were closed from the SBVI vocational rehabilitation program during the past federal fiscal year. Surveys were sent via mail, email, or they were contacted by phone, based on their preference.

Of the 101 questionnaires, 45 were returned, resulting in a 45 percent response rate. Average ratings were identified over the course of four quarters. This data gets shared with the Board of SBVI on an annual basis. Along with the survey ratings, previous clients have an opportunity to provide comments and feedback.

Satisfaction Survey Questions	Average Rating
1. How would you rate the quality of service you received?	3.74
2. Did you get the kind of service you wanted?	3.60
3. To what extent has our program met your needs?	3.59
4. If a friend needed similar help, would you recommend our program to him/her?	3.90
5. How satisfied are you with the amount of help you received?	3.62
6. Have the services you received helped you to deal more effectively with your problems?	3.73
7. In an overall, general sense, how satisfied are you with the service you received?	3.75
8. If you were to seek help again, would you come back to our program?	3.86
9. Were you a full partner in the process to determine your employment goal and services to be provided?	3.80
10. Do you feel that the services provided by your counselor were necessary to obtain or keep your employment?	3.55
11. Were information and services provided to you in a timely manner?	3.58
12. Were information and services provided to you in a courteous manner?	3.80
13. Did the services help you adjust to your visual impairment?	3.35
14. How beneficial were services in assisting you in achieving more independence?	3.56
15. How satisfied are you with the employment that you obtained as a result of Vocational Rehabilitation Services?	3.56

Satisfaction With VR Services Trend Data



This year showed an increase in satisfaction in most aspects of the survey. Compared to the previous two years, results show improvement in quality services, services helped with their problems and employment, they were a full partner in decisions regarding services and their goals, they would recommend our services to others, and overall satisfaction. Satisfaction was lower with help adjusting to their vision impairment, timeliness of services, and achieving independence.

Finding Goal Solutions



Nick Pavel worked for a company helping to package items and some customer service for several years when he was unexpectedly laid off in January of 2024. Prior to this position, Nick held positions with Midco Connections as a customer service representative and was a Communications Assistant for Communications Services for the Deaf, transcribing phone calls in real time between Deaf/Hearing Impaired clients and others. Nick's natural helpful nature, easy, outgoing personality, and nothing-is-impossible outlook make him a natural in customer service positions.

Nick applied for SBVI in February 2024, taking the lead in his own job search. He had a goal of applying for a minimum of "3-5" jobs per week and worked with his VR Counselor through Counseling and Guidance and updating his resume and customized cover letters for various positions. Nick landed a couple of phone interviews, and after some reflection with his VR Counselor, Nick made the informed choice to add an Employment Specialist to the team.

In March of 2024, he began to work with Shana, an employment specialist through Goodwill, who helped facilitate a greater number of jobs applications. This continued until June 2024 when Nick accepted a position with Goal Solutions in Sioux Falls. To support him, Goal Solutions worked with DakotaLink to evaluate accessibility of their proprietary software with the screen reader program, JAWS. Without JAWS, Nick would be unable to successfully navigate a computer. After internal reprogramming, Goal Solutions made the software accessible. DakotaLink identified other devices that were beneficial to him. As a result, Nick can perform all the same job duties as his sighted peers.

Nick works as a customer service representative, taking inbound calls helping customers address their issues, take payments, answer questions, and more. Adapting to this job has been a big challenge, but his employer has been patient, offering additional training and troubleshooting during his onboarding process, resulting in Nick taking calls independently.

Thanks to the services and supports of SBVI, DakotaLink, and his employer, Nick works full-time, and can keep up with the company's mandatory overtime. After four months of employment, Nick enjoys the job and the workplace culture of Goal Solutions. He has integrated well with the team and can't wait to see how far he can grow with such a great company!

INDEPENDENT LIVING BLIND PROGRAM (ILB)

Rehabilitation teaching services from Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired can assist persons with vision impairments in the use of compensatory skills and assistive technology can help the person live safe, productive, and independent lives. Staff evaluate the individual's skills and provide instruction in compensatory skills for the person to remain in their home.

Rehabilitation teaching combines and applies the best principles of adaptive rehabilitation, adult education, and social work to the following broad areas: home management, personal management, communication, activities of daily living (ADL), leisure activities and indoor or short distance orientation skills. The specialized rehabilitation teaching services listed below include simple devices and techniques that improve the individuals' quality of life. Services are planned and provided on an individual based on the person's needs, interests, and personal goals.

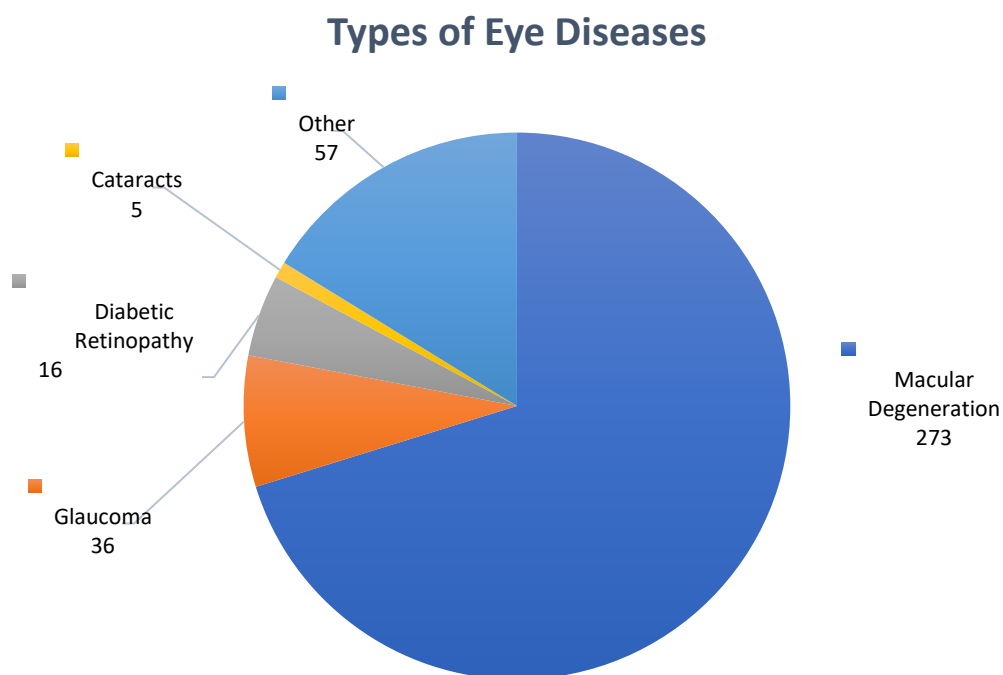
In FY 2024, the ILB program assisted 387 individuals with vision loss compared to 413 in FY2023. Staff closed 191 cases in 2024 compared to 201 in 2023. The chart below provides information on the types of services provided to people in 2024.

Type of Service and Description	Number of People
Communication Skills – training in the use of the telephone, handwriting guides, telling time, reading, or writing braille, etc.	325
Daily Living Skills – training in the use of adaptive aids and assistive technology for daily living	290
Low Vision Devices & Services – training and acquisition of items such as magnifiers, solar shields, video magnifiers, (CCTVs) travel canes, insulin gauges, various talking equipment, adaptive cooking items, etc.	370
Counseling – Peer, individual, or group counseling to assist with adjustment to visual impairment and blindness	55
Low Vision Exams – Evaluations to identify strategies and devices for enhancing visual performance	125

Advocacy Training – participation in advocacy training activities such as consumer organization meetings and peer support groups	11
Referral to Other Agencies – Referral to other service providers, programs, and agencies.	301
Orientation and Mobility – Travel training and learning to access public or private transportation to travel safely and independently.	67

Types of Eye Diseases for People Served

Macular degeneration was the primary cause of vision loss in 273 (71 percent) of the 387 individuals who received services in 2024, as reflected in the following chart. When reviewing the primary types of eye diseases among the people served in the IL program, macular degeneration occurs more frequently than others listed. Macular degeneration is an eye disease that results in blurring of the sharp, central vision needed for straight-ahead activities such as seeing faces, driving, reading, and sewing. It affects an individual's ability to see fine detail but causes no pain, which means it can be undetected for a while.



Lila's Accomplishments and Success Story

Rehabilitation Teachers provide training along with adaptive devices to encourage the individual to use their remaining vision which helps them complete activities of daily living. The picture to the right is an example of someone using a lighted stand magnifier to read text. She is wearing colored eyewear to manage indoor glare which is common with eye diseases. Her story about her vision loss experiences and accessing Independent Living Services follows:



When Lila's daughter contacted SBVI, she reported her mother was struggling with Macular Degeneration and Glaucoma. Lila was living in her own home at this time and felt very isolated. After visiting with Lila in person, it was clear she was having difficulty reading anything printed but also struggled being identified as a person with vision loss, being able to call if she had an emergency, using her appliances, controlling glare, and she was seeing things that were not there. Through services, Lila was trained in a white support cane for self-identification. To read print material, she was trained in a 3x stand magnifier, 3.5x handheld magnifier and a CCTV from the SBVI Lease program. Lila was educated about glare, and we determined yellow solar shields were needed to help control this debilitating side effect of eye disease. Lila was also trained in markings on her appliances which allowed her to use them independently. Lila was referred to the Telecommunication Adaptive Device program and received a Latitude Mobile Alert System. Training in how to use this allowed her to move around more independently without fear of falling and not being found. Lila also chose some recipes that were special to her to be printed into a larger font that she can read. Lila was referred to South Dakota Accessible Library Services and listens to books on tape and on the BARD Mobile app. Lila was also trained in a bible app on her iPhone which provides her with daily devotionals. She was given a large print calendar and bold writing pens to keep track of special dates and appointments.

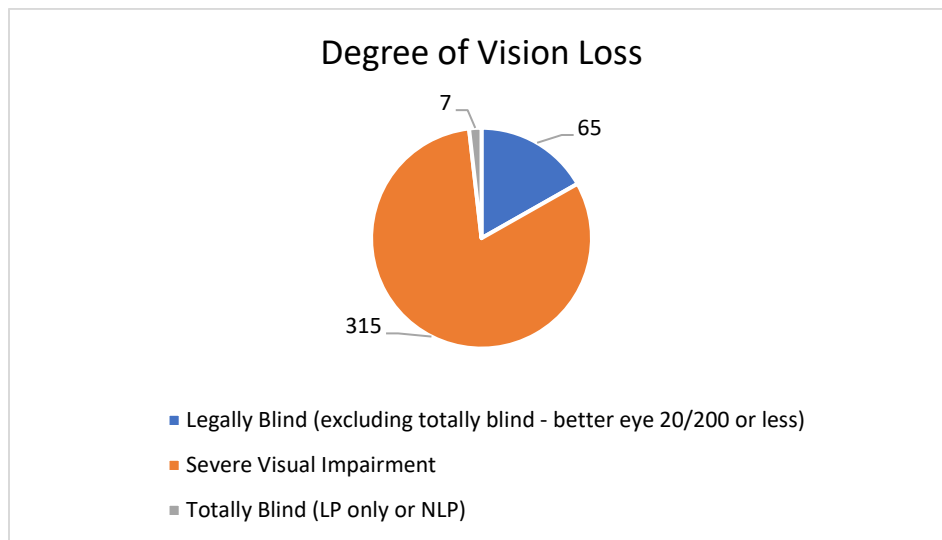
Her biggest struggle was the vision loss phenomenon of seeing things that she knew were not there. Through support and adjustment counseling from the Rehabilitation Teacher, Lila learned that she was experiencing a condition called Charles Bonnet Syndrome. The Rehabilitation Teacher provided Lila with education about Charles Bonnet Syndrome which included a fact sheet of information. Lila has stated that the fact sheet not only helped her but also her family and friends to better understand what she is experiencing. Since learning more about vision loss, Lila moved into an apartment which allows her to be more social. Isolation can contribute to Charles Bonnet Syndrome alongside the difficulty of her vision impairment. Lila also uses the

solar shields mentioned above to control glare and help minimize the visions that she is experiencing.

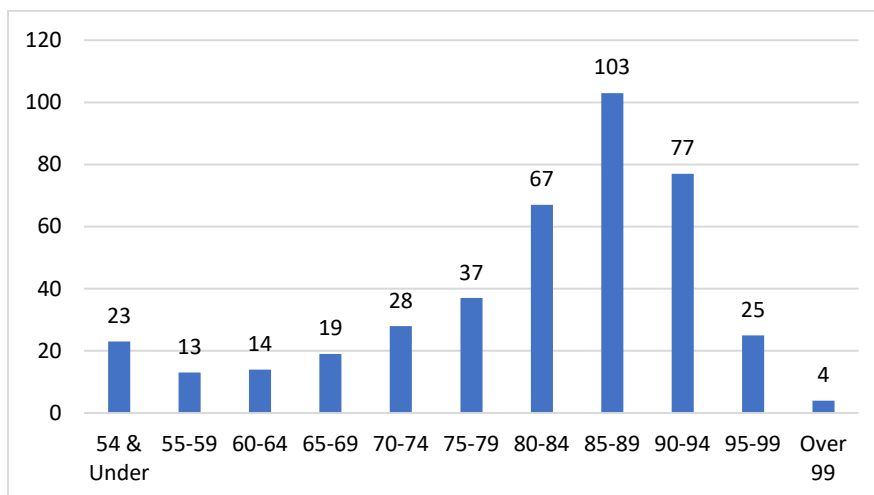
Lila attends yoga a couple times a week now. She recently attended the South Dakota Association of the Blind Convention and had such a great experience that she became a member. This will increase her social activities and help her learn more about her vision loss. Since receiving training from the Rehabilitation Teacher from the Independent Living Program, Lila is more comfortable and independent in her apartment and confident in her abilities to remain on her own.

Degree of Vision Loss

The next chart explains the degree of vision loss experienced by the 387 individuals (over age 55) served in 2024. Only seven people served in the program experienced total blindness. Individuals with some remaining vision are experiencing varying degrees of severe visual impairment, which makes up 380 or 98 percent of the people served.



Age Range of ILB Individuals Served in FY 2024



The target population for the ILB program is individuals over 55; however, Rehabilitation Teachers also served 23 individuals under age 55 experiencing vision loss. As reflected in the chart above, 276, or 71 percent, were over the age of 80, with 4 people aged 100 or more.

Satisfaction with Independent Living Services

Citizens who receive services from the ILB program can provide feedback through a satisfaction survey, which is sent to them a few weeks after the end of their services. Survey responses assist SBVI in assessing whether services are effective in helping citizens maintain or regain their independence. A phone call to the respondent occurs if they indicate more services are needed or if they have questions about their devices. One hundred seventy-nine surveys were sent out to those whose services ended during the 2024 fiscal year. Eighty-four people responded to the survey, which is a 47 percent response rate. Phone calls were made to people who didn't respond to the paper survey to increase the feedback about services. Below are several comments from surveys returned to the agency:

- As a previous property owner, I am very grateful to see tax money spent on such a well-run state agency. I appreciated everything she received and really valued the services. Spoke highly of the services, staff professionalism, and the CCTV Lease program.
- Keep up the great help to all.
- I am thankful for them!
- Great service
- Satisfied with all the devices and services I received. I know how to reach SBVI and would do so through my doctor who referred me initially. Dr. speaks highly of SBVI services.
- Biggest help provided was the educational aspect of the services.
- When staff came out on a stormy day with slick & icy roads, I think she outdid herself. She helped me get equipment & machines to help me through DakotaLink. Without them I would not be able to answer this survey.
- Wonderful service & so very fun & friendly. I may try listening to books.
- It just helped me a great deal in daily life.
- We appreciate her help, but it wasn't able to change my problem, but she tried and was very pleasant.
- Still wish there was a way I could read piano music again. But with macular degeneration, double vision & distorted vision in R eye - it is a big problem!
- With macular degeneration it is hard to compensate the deficiencies adequately. I feel you've done all that is possible. So, I'm quite satisfied with the services provided. I will have to do the rest to adapt to the situation.
- It was all good and thank you very much.

Electronic Video Magnification (CCTV) Lease/Loan Program

SBVI created the CCTV Lease/Loan Program in 2004 with memorial funds explicitly donated for providing devices for older citizens that could not be purchased using the limited Older Blind grant funds. The CCTVs provide a magnified image with a substantially higher resolution for individuals with low vision. What started out as a pilot project with 24 units has resulted in a program that many people rely on to do many tasks throughout the day.

As technology changed, SBVI expanded the type of machines available to include optical character recognition (OCR) which magnifies and offers auditory output of the printed information. A few machines have no monitor to project the print but only read the text of the document. CCTV units may be leased for \$30 per month or loaned at no cost for those who meet financial need criteria. The CCTV Lease/Loan Program has 201 machines available but has purchased over 425 machines since it started. The magnification systems from this program have demonstrated significant service to an estimated 1,534 older citizens with low vision since 2004.

REHABILITATION CENTER FOR THE BLIND

The South Dakota Rehabilitation Center for the Blind (SDRC), located in Sioux Falls, SD, offers essential services to South Dakota residents who are blind or visually impaired, facilitating the development of adaptive skills necessary for achieving independence and employment. Within the Center, South Dakota Vocational Resources serves as a specialized employment program that assists individuals with disabilities in acquiring job skills. Together, these programs provide comprehensive tools, training, and technology, empowering individuals to overcome the challenges posed by vision loss or other disabilities that affect their ability to work and live independently.

Adaptive Skills of Blindness



The Rehabilitation Center for the Blind offers daily classes focused on teaching adaptive skills for individuals with blindness. In 2024, the Center served 21 men and 31 women, including 8 high school transition-age students who participated in Transition Week. The demographic breakdown of trainees included 60 percent women and 40 percent men, with an average age of 32 years.

Among the participants, 31 percent were classified as blind, 12 percent legally blind, and 22 percent visually impaired, while 35 percent were staff members in new employee training. Additionally, 45 percent of trainees had at least one secondary disability. The most common secondary disabilities this year were congenital conditions/birth injuries, diabetes, amputations, anxiety disorders, and other unspecified conditions.

Referrals for training came from all district offices, with 66 percent originating from the Sioux Falls office, 25 percent from Aberdeen, 6 percent from Pierre, 3 percent from Rapid City.

Low Vision Clinics

Low vision evaluations with Dr. Nick Wenande are conducted on the second Wednesday of each month. In 2024, a total of 11 clinics served 51 individuals, marking a modest increase from 48 participants in 2023. This increase can be attributed to a higher number of clinics held this year compared to the previous year. Among the participants, 43



percent were referred from the Older Blind Independent Living program, while 57 percent came from the Vocational Rehabilitation program.

Assistive Technology (AT) Walk-in Clinics

Assistive technology plays a crucial role in enabling individuals with visual impairments to work remotely and maintain connections. In 2024, a total of 96 individuals participated in assistive technology training, which included AT walk-in clinics as well as support via telephone, FaceTime, email, and video conferencing platforms such as TEAMS and Zoom. This reflects a decrease from 119 participants in 2023, attributed to several factors, including the retirement of the assistive technology instructor and the transition period of three months during the hiring of a new instructor resulted in a temporary suspension of the AT clinic. This support system empowers individuals to access technical assistance as needed, beyond the confines of scheduled classes at SDRC.

Transition Week 2024

Transition Week was held June 9-13 with 8 students in attendance. This year's theme, "Reach for the Stars," provided students with valuable insights into the numerous opportunities available to individuals with visual impairments. Throughout the week, students explored various options, including Project SEARCH, which focuses on career pathways in the healthcare field, and post-secondary education with accommodations. They also engaged in job and career search collaborations with the Department of Labor, apprenticeships, work experience programs, and career exploration and assessment options with the Department of Rehabilitation Services.

In addition to these opportunities, students gained practical knowledge through business tours, exploring fields such as business management, marketing, film production, music production, and event planning. The week featured sessions on Skills of Blindness, Employment Skills training, mock interviews, cover letter and resume writing, and participation in the World of Work peer support group, which addressed critical topics such as disability disclosure and other essential work-related issues.



South Dakota Vocational Resources

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors from the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) and the Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired (SBVI) refer individuals to Employment Skills Training (EST) for a range of purposes, including assessments, accommodations evaluations, computer skills development, career changes, exploration of career options, and interview preparation.

The adaptive skills of blindness classes are designed to help clients with vision loss acquire essential independent living skills, while EST focuses on preparing them for future employment or higher education. The Center collaborates closely with the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and the client to determine the most effective steps to achieve their employment goals. Additionally, the Employment Skills Supervisor, a Certified Brain Injury Specialist, provided support to 22 individuals with brain injuries in 2024. This role involved connecting with 208 various organizations, families, and service providers to help individuals with brain injuries access available resources.

In 2024, Employment Skills Training (EST) assisted 79 individuals, a big increase from 57 participants in 2023. All 79 individuals attended in-person training. The increase in numbers can be attributed to several factors, including presenting to vocational rehabilitation counselors about the benefits for individuals who attend the training program, and networking with entities who are working with individuals with some form of brain injury.



A panoramic picture of the Employment Skills Training area.

Job placement services were provided to 51 individuals in 2024, compared to 49 served in 2023 which is a slight increase from previous year which is due to the new employment specialist making strong connections with the field counselors to receive referrals. In 2024, 71 percent of individuals served had two or more disabilities, with 67 percent of those secondary disabilities related to mental health. This prevalence necessitates additional time to secure suitable competitive employment and to establish appropriate workplace accommodations.

Summary of Services

SDRC Service	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Transition Students	9	7	10	8
Low Vision Patients	48	50	48	51
Employment Specialist	26	47	49	51
Skills of Blindness	36	50	64	52
Employment Skills Training	83	82	57	79
AT Walk-in Clinic & First Friday Classes	87	104	119	96
Total	289	340	347	337

Satisfaction Survey Responses

Participants in the adaptive Skills of Blindness program are asked to complete a survey regarding their satisfaction with services. SBVI staff are not asked to complete a survey. The overall rating was 3.78 on a 4.0 scale, which falls between the ratings of (3) Agreed and (4) Strongly Agreed to the questions about the quality of services. With seasoned staff and a good understanding of teaching the skills of blindness, they are often praised by participants that they provide an environment where students are encouraged and helped to build their self-confidence.

Responses received for the question, “What did you like best about the program?”

“The positivity & ability to increase my confidence when crossing the streets or cooking. Instead of saying, 'I can't,' now I can say, 'I can.'”; *“The teachers change their lessons for each individual's needs. They taught what you needed to know and also what you wanted to learn. Everyone was welcoming and accepting!”*; *“The instructors made it fun and very interesting. They make the course adjustable to each individual.”*; and *“I like the cooking part because cooking gave me a sense of confidence.”*

The Employment Skills Training (EST) area uses a similar format of questions and narrative responses to obtain information about the quality of services. The overall rating was a 3.77 on a 4.0 scale, which falls between the ratings of (3) Agreed and (4) Strongly Agreed.

When asked the question, “What did you like best about the program?” responses included:

“Skills training is designed to provide employees with the targeted training they need to gain the knowledge and abilities necessary to fulfill the specific job.”; “Being able to improve skills and learn new things.”; “I greatly enjoyed getting to know the people in training - teacher and students, along with collecting knowledge on some tasks I struggled with, such as mastering the cash register.”; “I was able to build up my self-esteem and believe in myself of learning more things in life.”; and “Mary did an excellent job addressing my concerns and questions. She was also very patient and listened attentively.”

When asked how EST can be improved - the main response was *“nothing”*. One client responded, *“EST has helped me realize quite a few things about what I want now and for my future. I wouldn't change a thing.”*

From Class to Community: Empowering Students Through Real-World Experiences

Community Training Events provide students with valuable opportunities to apply the skills learned at the Center in real-world settings. Students enjoyed lunch at Rosie’s Café followed by a bowling session at Sports Bowl. During their visit to the restaurant, students practiced essential orientation and mobility skills. They navigated the space to locate their table and utilized assistive technology by using an app on their phones to read the menu. Students also demonstrated proper table manners, including identifying food items on their plates, and effectively communicated with peers and staff throughout the meal. Additionally, they read the final bill using Seeing AI and processed payment with a card.

At the bowling alley, students further honed their orientation and mobility skills. They successfully navigated the entrance, approached the counter to collect their shoes and bowling lane assignments, and found their designated lanes using tape on the floor as a guide. They concluded the outing by practicing the use of a credit card reader to pay for their shoes and games. These experiences not only reinforce learned skills but also encourage independence and confidence in community interactions.



USD Medical Students

Four USD medical students participated in 3 days of cultural immersion at the Rehabilitation Center for the Blind, August 21-23. The cultural immersion program provides experiences to students so they can learn about disabilities, different cultures, and organizations they are unfamiliar with. This annual event helps expose a new group of doctors to the services provided by SDRC. The medical students then create a poster of what they have learned and present it at an event that is open to the public.



A group photo of the medical students with their Acrylic Pour and Easel projects from Creative Arts and Home Mechanics during their time at the Rehab Center.

The medical students, accompanied by clients and staff, traveled downtown via the Sioux Area Metro to participate in the Sculpture Walk. They also engaged in a unique dining experience at a local restaurant, where they enjoyed lunch while blindfolded, allowing them to apply the skills they have learned in a practical setting. Feedback provided by medical students included the following, *“I am truly so thankful for this experience. I’ve learned and experienced so much in 3 short days. I’m a better person and medical student because of this”, “Great experience! It really makes you think critically about public space accessibility”, and “Really liked getting their perspective on things to do in office visits and treating everyone as an individual. I learned how to be a better medical student and doctor with my patients who have limited vision.”*

City of Sioux Falls Presentation

The city requested to learn how they can better design intersections with accommodations that would assist people who are visually impaired to travel safely within the city. The SD Rehabilitation Center for the Blind staff provided a hands-on training experience for the City of Sioux Falls staff to demonstrate what it is like to

travel as a pedestrian with limited or no vision. They were asked to go under the blindfold and use a white cane with staff assistance to cross various intersections to learn about the challenges facing people with vision loss. They also learned about services offered by the Department of Human Services, Division of Service to the Blind and Visually Impaired. The various positions that participated in this experience were the Human Relations Specialist, Senior Assistant City Attorney/ADA Coordinator, Principal Engineer, Traffic Operations Engineer, Street Maintenance Supervisor, and Street Operations Manager. This is a great example of working together to create equal access for all.



Rehabilitation Center White Cane Walk

The South Dakota Rehabilitation Center for the Blind hosted a White Cane Awareness Walk with students from the center and staff to raise awareness about vision impairment and celebrate the independence of individuals who are visually impaired. For blind people, the white cane is an essential tool that gives them the ability to achieve a full and independent life. It allows them to move freely and safely from place to place—whether it's at work, at school, or around neighborhoods. Students created signs to promote the event, and refreshments were graciously provided by SD RehabACTion following the walk.



Making Lemonade out of Lemons

Yeshua, who is visually impaired due to retinitis pigmentosa, successfully collaborated with a job coach to secure employment while running his own coffee business. As a Spanish speaker learning English, he faced unique challenges in his job search. Initially, he expressed interest in production or warehouse positions. However, as we explored various opportunities, it became clear that these roles were not a suitable match. We then identified a Juice Barista position, which aligned perfectly with his background in food service. After attending the interview together, Yeshua was hired on the spot.

Following his acceptance of the job offer, training was scheduled. His training included support from his job coach, who helped procure necessary equipment including a talking scale and a three-pronged liquid level indicator, Braille labeling in the kitchen, and orientation and mobility training for navigating the store.

Additionally, an interpreter facilitated communication during his initial training. Since starting on March 28, 2024, Yeshua has thrived in his role, gaining confidence and proficiency.



Harnessing Hope

Alexsis Van Wormer, a 2021 high school graduate from Deuel County, has a passion for animals and aimed to study horsemanship at Montana Western. However, after relocating, her rapidly deteriorating vision forced her to leave school and return home. “Basically, my brain has stopped communicating with my eyes, and no one knows why,” she explained. Struggling with depression and frustration over her unexplained vision loss, she sought help from vocational rehabilitation services, which eventually lead her to the South Dakota Rehabilitation Center for the Blind. Though her self-esteem had taken a hit, she was determined to return to school and pursue a career working with horses, despite being told this was an unrealistic goal.



The initial weeks of her training were challenging as she adjusted to living alone in a training apartment—a significant adjustment for someone accustomed to living with a large family surrounded by animals. At the Center, she underwent Skills of Blindness training, which included using a white cane and adapting to independent living. Despite challenges, she excelled in classes and discovered a

talent for braille, ultimately becoming dedicated to pursuing a braille certification through the National Federation of the Blind.

After completing her Skills of Blindness training, Alexis participated in the Employment Skills Training program, exploring career options like veterinary technician and business management for a braille transcription business. Through proactive research and networking, she connected with local veterinary professionals and learned about essential accommodations for her education that she had previously been unaware of.

Emerging with renewed confidence, Alexis returned to her family farm and enrolled at Lake Area Technical College in Watertown. She began classes this fall, thriving as she continues to chase her dreams. Alexis’s inspiring journey—from struggle to success—exemplifies resilience and the unwavering pursuit of one’s passions, proving that hope and possibility can flourish, even in the face of adversity.

BUSINESS ENTERPRISE PROGRAM (BEP)



The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) is a source of pride, providing individuals who are blind the opportunity for self-employment in food service. This includes operating cafeterias, coffee shops, and vending routes. The Randolph-Sheppard Act authorizes State licensing agencies to recruit, train, license, and place these individuals as operators of cafeterias and vending facilities located on federal and other properties. In South Dakota, SBVI is the state licensing agency, empowering these individuals to conduct specified activities in facilities through permits or contracts.

SBVI has permits for food and vending services at the following locations:

- Earth Resources Observation and Science (EROS) Center, Garretson.
- General Services Administration in Federal Buildings in Sioux Falls, Aberdeen, and Huron.
- US Postal Service facilities in Sioux Falls, Huron, and Pierre.
- SBVI also has an interagency agreement with the South Dakota Bureau of Administration for vending machines in multiple State buildings in Pierre.

Two vendors were licensed with the Business Enterprise Program in January 2023.

Dan Munce operates a vending route with machines in various locations in Huron.

Jeff Nelson manages the café at the Earth Resource Observation and Science Center in Garretson, SD.

The annual vendor's meeting was held in November 2024 through teleconference.

Jeff Nelson is the Chair of the Vendor Committee, and Dan Munce is the Vice-Chair.

Interstate Rest Area Vending

Through an agreement with the SD Department of Transportation, the BEP is responsible for vending at the South Dakota rest areas along Interstates 29 and 90.

Current contracts with third-party vendors for designated rest areas began in June 2022; contracts were awarded to vendors who bid to contribute the highest commission percentage from sales to the BEP. Current commission rates paid to the Business Enterprise Program range from 54 to 68 percent. Income from rest area commissions for June 1, 2023, to May 31, 2024, was \$68,707.00 for I-90 rest areas and \$17,134.00 for I-29, totaling \$85,841.00.

The revenue from rest area commissions has remained stable, providing a consistent source of income for the Business Enterprise Program. This stability is a testament to the program's resilience and adaptability in the face of changing economic conditions.



Tourism numbers decreased during 2023; however, spending was up 8 percent, according to the South Dakota Department of Tourism Annual Report 2023.

The rest area commissions are utilized to support the Business Enterprise Program. In addition, funds are used to purchase and repair equipment and assist with other expenses such as insurance, bookkeeping, and initial inventory for the vendors.

Earnings and Expenses

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gross Sales (Total Income)	\$251,625	\$137,960	\$123,784	\$167,379	\$151,962
Merchandise Purchases	\$109,779	\$52,277	\$57,532	\$81,491	\$64,102
Gross Profit	\$141,846	\$85,683	\$66,231	\$85,887	\$87,859
Total Operating Expenses	\$89,628	\$68,468	\$17,451	\$23,084	\$46,952
Net Proceeds	\$43,515	\$21,818	\$48,723	\$57,562	\$40,908
Levied Set Aside Funds	\$6,104	\$5,464	\$8,399	\$5,688	\$5,029
Net Profit to Vendors	\$37,411	\$16,354	\$40,324	\$51,874	\$35,879

Total Gross Income declined slightly from 2023 to 2024. Due to inflation, merchandise purchases declined over the past year, which positively impacted our Gross Profit totals.

Vendors' net income has decreased this year compared to the past three years. Despite these figures, expenses and product availability have negatively impacted vendor net profits.

Regardless of the current challenges, the Business Enterprise Program remains optimistic about the future. While net income is low, the program has been working with vendors to expand current operations with more machines and update third-party vendor agreements. This proactive approach demonstrates the program's commitment to growth and sustainability.

SERVICE TO THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED OFFICES

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