
BUDGET UNIT BRIEF – FY 2026

Fiscal Services Division

July 1, 2024



Ground Floor, State Capitol Building

Des Moines, Iowa 50319

515.281.3566

Department for the Blind

Department Overview

The Iowa Department for the Blind (formerly the Iowa Commission for the Blind), established in 1925, provides services to Iowans who are blind or visually impaired. Services are provided through the Department's three major service areas: Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Independent Living, and the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

Vocational Rehabilitation

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program assists blind Iowans in preparing for, obtaining, and retaining employment. Applicants are eligible based on visual disability, need for VR services, and intent to work. A VR counselor and an eligible individual jointly identify an employment goal and the services needed to achieve the goal. The VR counselors travel statewide to provide guidance and counseling to blind and visually impaired Iowans. The VR Program provides:

- Counseling and guidance to encourage blind Iowans to achieve their maximum potential.
- Funding to help blind students pay for blindness-specific services and technology so they may succeed while receiving training at postsecondary institutions.
- Advocacy and information to encourage the development of healthy attitudes and self-confidence.
- Policies that provide equal opportunity for blind students and workers in training.
- Equipment and technical expertise that enable blind students and workers to operate virtually the same information technology as sighted students and workers.

The Adult Orientation Center is a residential training program for clients of the VR Program. Located at the Department's central office in Des Moines, the Center provides in-depth blindness skills training to students so that they can return to their home communities to live independently and work competitively in the careers they choose. Students receive training in four areas:

- Development of self-confidence.
- Blindness skills, including cane travel, home and personal management, industrial arts, Braille, and computers.
- Job readiness.
- Public education.

The Department's Business Enterprises Program provides opportunities for legally blind clients of the VR Program to manage their own businesses. Clients manage a wide variety of food service operations, including restaurants, coffee bars, vending locations, highway rest area vending sites, and catering. The businesses can be found at federal, State, county, municipal, and private locations throughout Iowa.

More Information

Iowa Department for the Blind: blind.iowa.gov
LSA Staff Contact: Lora Vargason (515.725.1286) lora.vargason@legis.iowa.gov

Independent Living

Through the Department's Independent Living Program, elderly or multiply disabled persons who are blind learn the skills they need to live independently and participate actively in family and community life. By learning the alternative techniques of blindness, clients can live in their own homes instead of moving into care centers. Independent living teachers and service coordinators travel throughout the State to provide training and services aimed at bolstering independence. Training is offered in a variety of forums, including small group sessions held in communities and in homes on a one-on-one basis. Additionally, staff members provide in-service training to other service providers so the providers can meet the unique needs of blind Iowans.

Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

The Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped provides free reading materials to Iowans who cannot use standard print materials because of blindness, physical disability, or reading disability. The Library circulates books and magazines on cassette tape and digital media, in Braille, and in large print to eligible borrowers throughout the State. The Library maintains a collection of more than 88,000 books and provides more than 100 magazines to borrowers. The Library also distributes machines that play recorded books. Because the Library is a cooperating member of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS) of the Library of Congress, borrowers have access to all NLS services.

Individuals who are considered blind include those with vision losses that do not constitute legal blindness but are sufficient to prevent use of standard print with ease. Physically handicapped or reading-disabled persons also qualify for Library service.

Governance

The Commission for the Blind is the governing board of the Department for the Blind. The Commission consists of three members appointed by the Governor, subject to confirmation by the Senate. Members of the Commission serve three-year terms.

The director of the Department is appointed by the Governor, subject to confirmation by the Senate. The Director serves at the pleasure of the Governor.

Funding

The Department for the Blind receives an annual General Fund appropriation that is used to administer the three main service areas of the Department. The majority of the General Fund appropriation matches federal funds. Each State dollar provided for VR services matches \$3.69 in federal funds (21.3% State to 78.7% federal). These federal funds are subject to a maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement, meaning the State must spend an amount equal to or greater than the amount spent two years prior. For example, the MOE State funding level for federal fiscal year (FFY) 2021 must equal or exceed the level of State funding match reported for FFY 2019. If the State does not meet the MOE requirement, federal funds are reduced by the amount of the shortfall.

Related Statutes and Administrative Rules

Iowa Code chapters [216B](#), [216C](#), and [216D](#)
Iowa Administrative Code [111](#)

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