To: Laura Howard, Secretary Kansas DCF, and Laura Kelly, Governor

From: Tom Page, Chairperson KACSBVI

Re: KACBVI Annual Report 2020

March 17, 2021

Thanks to the Governor and the Secretary for empowering this advisory committee on services to the blind and visually impaired of Kansas. I am proud to report that as of our first meeting of 2020 I was elected chairperson and Nancy Johnson was elected vice chairperson. This election marks a first. This year has been the first time since this committee’s inception that both chairpersons have been blind or visually impaired (BVI) persons. Due to the pandemic we net exclusively by conference call during 2020. Thanks to the support of Barbara Mah and Dan Decker of KRS we were able to conduct the business of the committee.

Vocational Rehabilitation

\* Please see 2020 data provided by Mr. Decker

The data reported by Mr. Decker indicated that 2020 was substantially different from 2019 in terms of utilization of the VR program by blind and other disabled Kansans. The overall number of clients served dropped more substantially than amongst the blind. In relation to 2019 the other metrics provided did not shift substantially for blind clients except in an uptick in the number of blind clients in training programs. This is a welcome increase.

Mr. Decker reported that in the final quarter of 2020, process modifications had been made that should speed up the time between a person’s enrollment and their eligibility determination is made. This should streamline the client’s ability to begin working with a counselor and developing their IPE which directs much of the VR process from that point.

Mr. Decker and staff did present a version of the pending policy recommendation regarding maintenance during a residential rehabilitation program or dorm funding for clients in college programs. The State-wide Rehabilitation Committee approved the policy change in the spring and the policy was implemented in the final quarter of the year. Although the 30% client obligation that was adopted is higher than the amount recommended by this committee, we recognize that it marks a step forward. We will continue to work to reduce this number with the goal being to provide parity between Kansas and other neighboring states programs.

The Rehabilitation Services Administration monitoring report on the VR program also prompted some changes that should be recognized here including: changes to the means testing policy, elimination of any residency requirements to receive services, and changing the age at which transition services may begin. All of these changes were received favorably by the committee and I believe that these changes will improve services for blind Kansans.

Older Blind Independent Living

The program that serves nonworking age blind Kansans continues to assist its clients in remaining independent and in their homes. The program numbers have remained strong. The members of the committee recognize that this is an extremely important component of the services provided to blind Kansans and strongly recommend that the program be continued and strengthened wherever possible. In addition to the social meetings provided by this program the Independent Living Specialists work with the seniors in their homes teaching adaptive skills and techniques that are very important to the older blind of Kansas.

Business Enterprise Program

For the first time the committee heard from the management of the BEP program as part of our regular meetings. This ends a long period of “siloing” that had occurred under the previous management. The committee looks forward to working with the BEP program to strengthen the connections between this important program and the general VR program. We were all enthused to hear about the work that is now underway to grow the program which will eventually result in more blind Kansans enjoying access to these job positions.

Education Sub-Committee

Due to the pandemic, the education sub-committee members were not able to present at the VR counselor training sessions. We look forward to becoming able to do this in future trainings. The recommendations made by the committee in 2019 regarding changes to the intake assessment used by the counselors has yet to be implemented. We will continue to encourage the use of a skills based “functional” assessment and hope that this implementation can occur in the coming period. Similarly, the working group will develop a functional assessment for the older blind program to supplement its current satisfaction survey. We believe that pursuing this “functional” approach will provide much more robust monitoring data for both VR and the older blind program. This should help refine and direct the strategies employed by both.

Braille Sub-Committee

The Braille sub-committee has continued to investigate problems with braille education in Kansas. We have undertaken this task as we recognize that until BVI pre-k through 12 students receive adequate education in literacy, travel, and living skills the VR program will never be able to fully do its job. One of the committee members, Lyn Petro, has worked through this committee with the KSDE to remediate a problem with braille practice tests for the state assessments. As a result, the Kansas State Board of Education moved to increase the amount of the contract necessary to provide interim assessments produced in braille for students who are blind or are visually impaired as documented on the students’ IEPs.

Much of what the sub-committee has learned highlights the depth of the braille education challenge in Kansas. Currently there are a total of 92 students who use braille as their primary medium or secondary medium according to the most current data from American Printing House for the Blind (APH). Although , there are approximately 374 K-12 students in the state who have a primary or secondary condition of blindness or visual impairment (including the 92 previously mentioned) only 29 braille assessments have been requested for this school year. It appears that 7.75% of the students who are potentially eligible for braille, are receiving their testing materials in braille. We would like to see this percentage increase. Additionally, we are concerned the unemployment, recreation, daily living, and mobility of these students will be affected in their adult lives by not having braille services now..

Voting Access

During the last year existing inequities in the voting systems in our state became evident. Although there is at least one accessible machine per polling station the pandemic produced conditions which at best reduced a blind person’s ability to independently cast a private ballot. At worst blind people who could not access the paper absentee ballot or the paper only ballot in the democratic primary were completely disenfranchised. We heard from Mike Burgess of the Disability Rights Center of Kansas at our December meeting and we look forward to working to correct these issues in the coming year.

Committee Appointments

We encourage the Governor’s office to continue appointing individuals who have interest in improving services for blind Kansans to this advisory committee. We specially recommend that whenever possible persons who are blind or visually impaired be considered.

Specifically, an ophthalmologist with some knowledge of blindness, the Superintendent of the Kansas State School for the Blind, and representatives of not-for-profits serving the blind specifically Envision Incorporated and the Disability Rights Center of Kansas. Additionally, we recommend that a K-college teacher who is blind or visually impaired or parent of a child who is blind or visually impaired be appointed to the special education advisory committee, and that a blind person be considered for appointment to whatever committee advises the state on voting matters.

Thanks to all who have participated in the activities of the committee and those who KRS staff who have provided background support.

Respectfully,

Tom Page

Chairperson, KACBVI