

**Innovative Strategies and Best Practices to Serve Youth who are Blind or have Low Vision: Summary of Strategies from State Partners**

# **Introduction**

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) was funded by the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) to gather best practices and innovative strategies in support of opportunity youth who are blind or have low vision. Opportunity youth are transition age youth who are disconnected from school and work and may face additional barriers such as justice involvement, homelessness, or foster care. MCB seeks to ensure that they are reaching and serving opportunity youth who are blind or low vision.

IEL reached out to almost a dozen states that were identified by consumers as having innovative practices and strategies to serve opportunity youth. IEL conducted interviews with seven state agencies and learned about their strategies to recruit, engage, and support youth, the barriers and risk factors that impact their ability to serve youth, their best practices and strategies to serve youth, their family engagement activities, and additional partners they work with to serve youth.

Most state agencies share the challenge of finding and engaging opportunity youth—just two states offered specific examples of how they work outside the educational system to support those youth. Nonetheless, the rich examples of how states overall are serving youth offer many examples and strategies that may benefit MCB as they continue to advance their services for this population.

# **About this Report**

This report includes a summary of what we learned from seven state agencies[[1]](#footnote-2) who generously shared information about how their staff serve youth who are blind or have low vision. All states offered best practices and strategies. Many states have created interesting and innovative approaches to engage youth. Here we present some highlights of best practices drawn from those interviews:

* Nebraska Commission for the Blind informs legislators about how funding can support outcomes for youth who are blind or have low vision and their families through vocational rehabilitation services. New Mexico and Iowa have also obtained grants specific to technology and instructional materials, respectively.
* New Mexico Commission for the Blind obtained a grant from the state’s Department of Health Services to provide access technology for school and home use to elementary students. That technology comes with training connecting them to the rehabilitation system before age 14 and incentivizes schools to connect with the commission, which also draws in youth and their families.
* Several agencies offer summer youth training. The New Hampshire Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation also allows a family member to attend portions of their summer youth training programs with the student, which increases family awareness and support for the youth.
* Agencies in New Mexico, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Virginia have created programs that connect their staff to parents of blind children and offer peer supports among parents to help them learn how to advocate for their children in the vocational rehabilitation system.
* Transportation is a barrier to some degree in all states, particularly those with larger rural areas. New Mexico addresses this challenge by paying family members to serve as drivers.

## **Methods**

IEL reached out to eleven state agencies for the blind, general, or combined that were recommended by consumer organizations for their strengths in providing services to youth and their innovative approaches to services. Of those eleven states, seven responded to this request for an interview.

Interviews took on average one hour and included questions about the work states have done, their barriers and successes, their family engagement activities, and their partnerships. The interview protocol is included as Appendix A.

Interviewees sometimes interchangeably used “student” and “youth” they serve, so strategies shared may reflect services to students only, or youth generally, but may not be specific to opportunity youth.

# **Summary of Results**

## **STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH OUTREACH, RECRUITMENT, AND SUPPORT**

### **Find and Recruit Opportunity Youth**

To find and recruit opportunity youth, VR agency staff typically work with the schools and begin with contact at an early age and maintain those connections over the years. The most common recruitment tactic across states was the practice of referrals from eye doctors; several states have mandates for ophthalmologists to refer children and youth to the blind or general vocational rehabilitation agency.

States like Nebraska have offices around the state and visit public schools to recruit youth. Arizona VR is working with the state department of education to develop a referral process to share names and contacts for youth aged 14 entering the 9th grade. In Iowa, staff work with local and state education agencies as well as the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School—as a consortium they are part of the Iowa system for the blind. The Iowa Department for the Blind (IDB) also works frequently with library services.

For opportunity youth who disconnect from school, it can be challenging to connect and states will work with social services and other state agencies. Virginia Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) in particular works with foster parents and social workers at ages birth through 22 to ensure those youth connect with VR upon reaching age 14. Virginia DBVI staff noted that providing technology to engage youth who are homeless can be a challenge, because their living spaces are not secure, so they work with social services to connect with these youth.

Recruitment efforts are support through a network of parents, eye doctors, teachers (general and teachers of the visually impaired), foundations for the blind, and local affiliates of AFB and NFB. Agencies may advertise through accessible web pages, media presence, and advertising at public meetings. As a small, rural state, New Hampshire shares literature about the program and also contracts with a service provider to support outreach.

Additional recruitment tactics used by New Hampshire include advertising on Facebook, offering innovative programming that includes technology, offering technology to youth, and identifying professionals who are blind and work in areas of interest of youth. New Hampshire staff use the local channel of Newsline for the blind[[2]](#footnote-3) –an app that is familiar to students– to announce in-person retreats and activities.

Some examples of innovative programming provided by the Virginia DBVI include:

* Leap into Linux – 15 students from across the state learned how to create their own website in Linux and make it accessible, used laptop and took home laptop with instructions and homework from the instructor (Virginia DBVI)
* Robotics Academy from Cyber.org – teach youth how to build robots, then held a Robot Rally, this hands-on effort has been successful (Virginia DBVI)
* Artificial Intelligence and Ethical Hacking from Intellectual Point (Virginia DBVI)
* STEM Warriors developed during the pandemic provides loaner laptop that youth can take home (Virginia DBVI)

The New Mexico Commission for the Blind (NMCB) has obtained a state grant to provide technology to blind youth under 18 for items like braille notes, video magnification, portable magnifiers, and other technology for with children younger than age 14. This incentivizes schools to connect with the Commission and stay engaged over time; the equipment remains with the child until they complete vocational rehabilitation, or the equipment becomes obsolete—ownership transfers to the youth. So far, NMCB has provided more than $1 million in equipment.

The NMCB focus is on literacy for school success. Junior and senior grade level students receive access to technology including a laptop to prepare for college and they learn how to use the computer before they begin. Again, this incentivizes parents and schools to refer youth to VR.

Many find services from the agency web page because NE provides services to all ages from birth and start working with children early on to guide them into VR.

### **Engage Opportunity Youth**

“If we can get them to come just once, then they see a community of peers, engagement between speakers and students, they reach back to us to learn what’s next and what else they can try.”

State staff understand the importance of creating engaging opportunities to draw youth in and to keep them connected to services. Most states offer opportunities for youth to meet college age students and professionals who are blind to model success. All states offer some type of exploratory activities for careers and offer them opportunities to learn about jobs that match youth skills and interests.

Similarly, all states described some type of summer or year-round employment program that helps youth enter short term internships or jobs in local businesses, local organizations, state, or city offices, or in the community. Youth also value the opportunity to connect with each other through training and group activities.

Following are specific examples of some of the activities that state agencies conduct:

* Virginia has made a “big push” for financial literacy. Youth learn how to balance a paycheck, use ABLE accounts, and work through social security requirements.
* New Mexico offers a summer transition to employment program, STEP, for youth ages 14-21 that offers a combination of technology, blindness training, and job experience for minimum wage, which provides a tangible incentive. Staff in New Mexico also attend individualized education program (IEP) meetings at schools and offer assistive technology and computers.
* Beginning at the early ages of 7-12, Nebraska offers a two-week summer camp, provides afterschool and weekend programming for skills training, and educates parents. For the 14–20-year-old youth, the staff host retreats that focus on leadership, advocacy, and social skills. In some parts of the state, they host monthly weekend programs.
* Both Nebraska and Hawaii offer “challenge” activities to youth. In Nebraska, this takes the form of a science and technology activities like a robotics building program and an accessible chemistry lab taught by a professional who is blind. In Hawaii, this includes adventure trips like river rafting in the Grand Canyon, hiking in different locations (difficult hikes), and visiting Yellowstone National Park. These activities are popular with youth and create incentive for other youth to join the program and learn about VR services, while also challenging public perceptions and those of the youth themselves about what they can accomplish.
* In Arizona staff conduct a Transition Road Show, which they literally take on the road to share information from blind services contractors to youth and families about programs they can participate in. The Road Show was held virtually during the pandemic with a strong turnout.
* Both Arizona and Hawaii staff encourage youth to participate in consumer organizations and conventions including the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and the American Council of the Blind (ACB).
* Despite the challenges of the pandemic and the switch to virtual events for most agencies, New Hampshire offered engaging events including online cooking classes, independent living skills, youth empowerment solutions, and interdisciplinary community engagement. Virtual events offered support for youth-staff conversations and allowed the youth to help plan and mold the programs.
* Iowa piloted a program to send VR teachers across the state to conduct braille training, business classes, a self-advocacy seminar–the VR teacher pilot offers another opportunity to make connections. Also, they are blind and serve as good role models.

While most of the activities above can engage youth in school, Iowa staff have recognized that while school-connected youth are attracted to VR for the potential funding for college, postsecondary education is not a strategy for opportunity youth (OY). Those OY face systemic and societal factors that lead to disengagement; their blindness or vision loss means they may have less skills to do the work to achieve the academics. They may drop out of school because they cannot do English or math, so the staff work with them to show them it isn’t due to lack of intelligence, and that the agency staff can help them get the skills to do the work.

Iowa staff build relationships with opportunity youth, then help them to advocate and get what they need, stay connected, and make them feel a part of something. Strategically, they work in integrated resource teams (IRTs), so everyone is on the same page for service coordination. Every counselor has a transition caseload, and this is leading to better results than when the agency assigned youth to transition counselors. By spreading youth caseloads across staff, there are more staff available across the state to support hose youth, attend IEP meetings, and work more effectively in urban areas.

### **Support for Opportunity Youth**

Supporting opportunity youth and students in most states involves the continuation of activities that engage those youth. All state staff noted the importance of building rapport with youth, establish connections and maintaining them through regular and frequent contact. By offering resources that youth find valuable, particularly career exploration and employment opportunities, youth are more likely to find VR services valuable. New Hampshire staff also offer incentives (gift cards) to youth who respond to outreach.

All states are focused on pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS). Most states also encourage youth to learn about credentialling and community college, visit college admissions, talk with teachers in their programs of interest, and conduct college tours. However, not all youth want to attend college, so agencies help them find internships and jobs.

On the job training (referred to as “training skills for Federal reporting purposes) is a great way to develop their skills. Staff help youth to find these training opportunities (including paid work) to learn about careers before finding a permanent job and closing them.

While finding job experiences is important, New Mexico offers counseling and guidance on SSI for eligible youth to ensure those youth continue to receive social security while working. Importantly, staff emphasize the importance of financial support combined with a career, rather than taking any job just to make money.

Most states also offer training on blindness skills that include advocacy and leadership skills. They also connect youth to role models who are blind. Counselors work with youth to create goals, ensure they attend IEP meetings, engage them at events, and encourage them to participate in various programs. Several states emphasized the need for skills building for youth, the need for positive experiences to build confidence, and the value of hands-on learning.

New Hampshire staff focus on six primary industries in the state that will lead to careers, not just jobs. They prepare youth to understand what the career path entails so they are aware and ready to accomplish that goal. The state office employed two motivated and aspiring students to work for their contractors as interns. The prospect of a 20 hour / week job encouraged youth to get involved—they will cultivate leadership skills, engage more in the program, and earn money.

“We want to open their minds and get them thinking about what they could be.”

As Iowa staff noted, Opportunity Youth will undersell themselves. They lack imagination about what they can do and their potential. For example, many OY say they want to be a special education teacher because it is the only job they have known a blind person to have. Agency staff expose them to many other careers/fields and get them dreaming about what they can be. They also help OY with skills needed to reengage with the education system, e.g., GED, adult literacy skills, and work closely with Title II partners to ensure those programs are accessible and welcoming to students. While it can be challenging to make workforce centers welcoming, adult literacy partners share a similar mindset to find ways for those who have disengaged to get into GED and postsecondary opportunities that align with their career goals.

The Orientation Center in Iowa offers career classes for transition age youth that help them meet academic requirements to graduate from HS and also their IEP goals—this is an extended curriculum that helps them graduate from HS. This Youth Adult Program focuses intensively on social skills to complete the IEP and move to the next state of life. The career instructors work with VRCs, VRTs, and workforce partners in the community to find job shadowing and networking opportunities. Try to match the young adult with their first choice so they can see what alternative techniques can be used in that setting and gain a role model. Also, the youth conduct informational interviews to learn what a particular job entails.

### **Long-term Engagement of Opportunity Youth**

“If youth stop attending, our staff reach out. It’s an indication that something in their life has changed—so, we work through those life challenges with them and get then back into programs.”

Long-term engagement with any youth requires regular outreach. Staff use phone, email, and text. For OY staff stay connected and in frequent contact so they can pick up on changes quickly that result from the transient nature of those youth. Staff stay in touch with youth and foster families; depending on the relationship, sometimes they “cling to” the VRC and will stay engaged wherever they go. For both OY and students, staff stay in frequent contact so they won’t lose them and have to start over again.

In New Mexico, the technology incentives help with maintaining connections over time with tangible benefits to youth and families.

In Nebraska, agency staff continue to find ways to change their offerings from year to year. They keep the youth connected to each other to share ideas and resources and they provide leadership training with different role models with different work experiences, backgrounds, and ideas to share.

Arizona staff emphasize good customer service and building relationships as key strategies.

In Iowa, in addition to offering direct role models with staff who are blind and sighted staff training, they also hire staff who are skilled at engaging youth. The agency has hired younger staff including temporary summer staff to work in the summer programs and weekend transition retreats to serve as role models for the youth. Also, they emphasize the value of hiring staff from diverse backgrounds—all levels of diversity including people of color—so youth can see themselves in the role models presented to them. Iowa has also hired consultants to provide motivational and pre-employment self-advocacy and skills training which attracts youth.

Hawaii staff emphasize building strong relationships between staff and youth through monthly contacts as well as mentors and youth to sustain connections long-term. Many youth stay connected and return for events such as the White Cane Walk, join Facebook groups, and attend the end of summer event.

### **Measures of Success**

All states mentioned the federal measures for tracking and reporting success in serving youth. In Virginia, they use the individualized plan for employment (IPE) to set up mini milestones that indicate progress toward an IPE goal. They discuss the progress and challenges of meeting these milestones with youth.

In New Mexico, in addition to tracking successful closures with employment for those youth who are VR consumers, they also look at participation rates in programs such as STEP.

Nebraska staff measure progress and long-term success in jobs; they track through the life span of the consumer.

Arizona staff record milestones along grade levels. In addition to employment, success is measured by participation, especially in summer activities.

In New Hampshire, staff look at other criteria including, whether the activity yields greater self-confidence of the youth (observational) such as trying something new (would like to find a tool to measure this) and correlation between program participation and goal achievement.

In Iowa, they focus on service provision to increase engagement, then track number of/units of services provided and level of engagement. For those receiving the least number of services, staff track and identify monthly those who are receiving the least, discuss why, and reach out to ensure they are not falling through the cracks.

## **BARRIERS AND RISK FACTORS**

State agency staff were asked to rate the impact of barriers on services to opportunity youth on a scale from 1 to 10. Responses to some categories were as low as 1 because those barriers have been addressed sufficiently by the state. For categories that ranked as high as 9 or 10, often states had identified ways they were working to address those barriers. (See Appendix B for the chart of barriers or risk factors and state ratings.)

The highest rated barriers included a lack of transportation resources and societal misperceptions of the capacity of blind people. For any barrier or risk factor rated high, we asked states to share their challenges and their efforts to address those barriers.

**Limited educational/IEP services:**

* Iowa works to increase literacy skills. Library launched Braille Babies to increase braille reading at younger ages, which changes perceptions about braille. They are viewed as a braille-biased agency, but they believe the education system is print-biased. They built an instructional materials center through a grant. They have library services for the blind within our agency, and they conduct outreach below age 14 that cannot be done through our VR agency. This has helped to increase literacy and engagement with STEM. Work with the Governor’s STEM council, fun fairs, and braille challenge events; bring on teacher externs through the STEM council so they learn about braille and accessible materials. Using the grant to make materials in schools more accessible to youth, thus impact directly the educational opportunities by providing students with the resources they need to get their education, feel engaged, and not drop out.

**Lack of access to information, printed materials and literacy:**

* In New Hampshire, staff identify which medium is best for the person including large print, braille, Fusion, or JAWS, then work with them in classroom to make sure their skills are honed.

**Lack of independent travel skills:**

* One agency addresses this primarily by reaching youth early and getting involved in the IEP to share information and resources. Having a counselor with a good understanding of blindness and skills that are needed will encourage the student and parent and organization that might otherwise resist the supports that are needed for kids; this gives greater exposure to the resources that kids need.
* Hawaii staff found that youth don’t like to use canes because of the image it conjures up, but in a group they are more willing to use a cane. Youth are required to use canes on hikes. Blind mentors will share personal experiences, including that desire to not use a cane, to connect and relate to youth.

**Transportation barriers:**

* In rural areas of Virginia youth have limited or no transportation options, not even paid ride services, while urban areas have bus and train options. The barriers are different. In one area that staff had to address issues that included changing bus routes and stations built in the middle of the road that required more orientation for people who are blind or low vision.
* The VR agency in New Mexico signs up individuals for paratransit, provides compensation to families to provide transportation, and advocates for better public transportation. During the pandemic, they provided transportation to youth to get the vaccine to address this barrier.
* In Nebraska, the agency supports transportation so youth can reach the program; however, transportation remains a barrier for reaching the workplace especially in rural areas of the state.
* New Hampshire works with a private organization “Future in Sight” to find transportation for youth. They make use of a volunteer driving program for medical appointments and rides to VR training as needed. Upon entering employment, VR does not support transportation, but they have found volunteer services available in more rural areas.

**Societal misperceptions of the capacity of blind people:**

* All agencies provide role models to youth to learn how to deal with society’s misperceptions of their ability and to connect youth with blind role models themselves.
* New Hampshire and Iowa staff work with youth through specific advocacy training to learn what they can do and that there are no limits if they want to achieve something; staff encourage youth to be creative.
* In Hawaii, staff facilitate group discussions with blind youth on how to deal with misperceptions. They also lead activities such as taking a group of blind youth on a 17-mile hike, joining a bar-b-que at the beach, and taking youth to restaurants to engage with the wait staff . For big events, they contact the media to highlight their camps, trips, and local events. While they still reach out to traditional media, social media has become a more prominent tool for information sharing including photos of events on Facebook.

**Technology access barriers:**

* The primary solution for addressing technology barriers in Nebraska is providing technology to youth from the commission for the blind.
* Virginia DBVI staff have learned that for OY the tech tools they offer must be portable; agency staff cannot give homeless youth a desktop computer or CC TV; even in foster care they may change homes and the technology doesn’t follow them. In homeless settings there is also the potential risk that people around the youth will not understand the use of technology, may steal from the youth to pawn the technology (even though the pawn shop can’t do anything with it).

**Failure to identify vision loss and refer for services early:**

* Even in schools, youth who require and receive extra test time and other accommodations may never self-identify as blind or visually impaired. In those cases, Virginia DBVI staff have tough conversations with these students about their disability self-identification as well as the systems they must navigate. School systems need to do a better job of educating youth about the reason for their ‘special meetings’ and what equal access looks like. For OY, they often do not know what their condition is, no idea what their acuity is, and no idea they need to see an eye doctor regularly. For homeless youth, visual limitations make them more vulnerable, so they may not share this information with their peers and will not use tools that could help them for fear of being recognized as having a disability and thus vulnerable but lose out on using supports

**Lack of access technology or adaptive tools:**

* Access technology is critical for youth who are blind or low vision to ensure access to schoolwork, social connections, environmental information, and pre-employment readiness. In Arizona the staff emphasize the effective use of tech so that youth gain knowledge through their ability to use tools. Staff encourage youth to become “Google ninjas” so they can get information when they need it.

**Lack of exposure to role models who are blind or have low vision:**

* For youth and adults in rural areas, there is a lack of understanding of this type of disability. In Arizona staff try to ameliorate this by catching youth as early as possible to connect them with good counselors and to engage youth through the summer programs.

**Lack of coordination of services between education and vocational rehabilitation system:**

* Staff from agencies in New Mexico and Nebraska attend all individualized education program (IEP) meetings in the K-12 system.
* At a systems level, Iowa Department of the Blind partner with the braille school and other educational partners within the local school districts. Also, they work with the general agency to “help us get in the door.” They work to bridge gaps in their relationships from both the management level and service line staff level. They have established many partnerships through the library and paraeducators to provide better education and retain youth in the system.

**Finding workplace learning experiences:**

* New Mexico uses a temporary staffing agency that also offers workers compensation coverage, another incentive for employers to hire blind youth. Finding workplace learning experiences can be challenging but using a temporary staffing agency establishes incentives that helps to eliminate those barriers.

**Misconceptions of youth with multiple barriers:**

* Nebraska staff noted that society holds misconceptions of students with multiple disabilities that these youth cannot be employed or independent. This requires more time/more work with this population and providing more training for VR staff to better support youth with multiple disabilities. Also, it requires working more closely with the developmental disabilities agency to provide additional supports and invest in these clients.

**Youth lack of readiness**

* Hawaii staff noted two types of youth readiness barriers. Youth may be afraid that they cannot achieve success, so they do not engage with VR services. Alternately, some youth believe they do not need services and avoid accessing them.

## **BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES**

State staff provided ratings on a scale of 1 to 10 about the impact of common best practices and strategies to support Opportunity Youth. The three most highly rated best practices or strategies included: independent living skills training using alternative techniques and access tools; youth summer programs for the blind; and exposure to role models who are blind or have low vision. Other strategies that were also highly rated included: orientation and mobility training; access technology training and equipment; adjustment to blindness groups, counseling, and other programs; comprehensive blindness training programs following high school; and coordinating services for those with multiple disabilities. (The full chart and ratings are included in Appendix C.)

Some states expanded on the reasons why some strategies were more challenging to provide. Other states shared examples of best practices that have been successful and may be replicable.

**Independent Living Skills training using alternative techniques and access tools:**

* For OY, especially those in unstable living environments, staff can bring them on campus for short lessons in kitchen or laundry room, but it’s a big barrier to not have place to practice when they return to their current living environment.

**Adjustment to blindness groups, counseling, and other programs:**

* In one state, this practice doesn’t occur because they are “putting out fires” due to immediate need

**Comprehensive blindness training programs following high school**

* Five states offer comprehensive services after high school to all who want it: Arizona, New Mexico, Iowa, Nebraska, and Hawaii.
* In New Hampshire the staff offer this support for those youth who want it; however, not many want this option.

**Low vision evaluations and assistance**

* Virginia provides portable items such as a handheld magnifier with a light, which youth can keep with them and not have as much worry about the item being stolen.

**Residential comprehensive programming for youth**

* Several states including Arizona, Nebraska, and Iowa offer residential youth summer programs.
* Although closed during the pandemic, in New Mexico they usually have a residential facility and dormitory with staff that provide critical comprehensive training that must be administered in a safe and appropriate way.

**Connecting with youth through K-12:**

* As noted previously, some state agencies require staff to participate in all IEPs at schools.

**Funding supports from the legislature:**

* The Nebraska Commission is adept at finding additional funding and supports. When more funding is needed, the agency approaches the legislature to get more funds.

**Individual attention:**

* As one staff person noted, the number one thing you can do is give attention to youth who are neglected. Build and maintain relationships and ensure your staff develop caring for the youth (but not over-attached). Help youth to fight for themselves to get the services they need, find services to get them what they need, and get those who need it into basic education classes.

## **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

### **Family engagement activities**

Each state approaches family engagement in slightly different ways depending on the types of programs they offer to youth. Agency staff offered different considerations for engaging parents. Although several states note that they do not work with parents after the youth reaches 18 years of age, some states continue to work with parents of older youth.

Virginia started a program called the “Parents as Coaches” committee – similar to a “parent ambassador” – through which parents offer advice and guidance to other families on things like getting a child to a location or how to help a child self-identify.

New Mexico staff work with families to offer supports to youth including jobs in family-owned businesses, transportation that may be compensated by VR, training in accessible technology, and training in benefits management for social security.

Nebraska staff begin to work with families of small children to build the connections early. They invite families to consumer conventions to see blind role models and create positive expectations for families.

In Arizona, staff encourage parents to participate in summer programs as well as the spring Roadshow to learn about all the different programs available.

In New Hampshire, agency staff used to believe that youth needed to be separate from their parents to be self-sufficient. However, their new approach allows the student and one other family member (or representative) to participate, to ensure that the student has their support system (adults) on the same page. Also, this helps the families to feel they are part of the process, and to gain a better understanding of the experience of the youth. Staff also offer the “Yes” self-advocacy training program to students in 9th – 12th grades through 1-hour seminars daily and with increasing complexity.

In Iowa, family engagement can be challenging, and more so with opportunity youth. Many factors that cause disengagement correlate with family issues. Staff look for ways to create engagement and build relationships with the family or guardians to make them feel comfortable, participate, and learn about what’s going on. This can be a financial challenge for those families as well, so staff created a fund from donations over the years that offers some flexibility to pay for support programs beyond what the state can fund such as transportation and pilot projects. Staff talk with parents in the summer about what they can do to support their kids in the year to come and to reflect on what has been achieved. Also, staff listen well and find ways to help families meet their needs so they can feel supported. VR services can be hard for anyone to understand, and if they are not HS graduates or from an immigrant community, they may not understand all the paperwork involved, so staff try to reduce fear around engaging with the government.

Hawaii offers “ohana nui”—a multigenerational approach. Staff begin to build family relationships with younger children and stay in touch with schools to collaborate on events. Sometimes they find 2 or 3 generations of clients who are blind on their caseload—each generation looks very different and they provide services to each as needed. Consumer groups are another resource for involving the family.

Nebraska staff also work with families to set high expectations long before youth begin looking for a job, focus on skills and training early. That includes preparing for them to attend school and savings for them to continue into postsecondary education to then find good careers.

### **Staying in touch with families**

State staff conduct an array of activities to stay in touch with families. These include:

* Conducting family events
* Attending local functions to present information such (e.g., Moose Lodge, Lions Club)
* Setting up booths at career fairs
* Working with business partners to share opportunities with families and offer ways to support youth obtaining work
* Newsletters, social media (Facebook), texting, letters, flyers, podcasts, YouTube, and other media

New Mexico staff pointed out that the best method to stay in touch is the youth and family’s preferred method of contact which may vary so is an important question to ask on a case-by-case basis. They meet in person with families whenever possible, and coordinate with families during IEP meetings.

In Virginia, Education Coordinators provide families with training and resources to benefit the parents (as well as the youth). These Education Coordinators work with families with youth from birth to age 22; youth have the option at age 14 to be referred to VR at which time foster parent, social worker, or juvenile justice worker are informed about VR services and encouraged to sign up.

Iowa staff work closely with their public libraries to offer programming to families. The agency created a family engagement podcast called Braille Bits[[3]](#footnote-4) to teach families and paraprofessionals and others in the orbit of these youth to learn braille and about its importance. They also offer training and resources for assistive technology, e.g., braille display, how speech works in a Mac, etc. to provide information and to use as a source of engagement—those things that are of value to families. In rural areas of Iowa, the lack of internet is an economic issue exacerbated by Covid, but programs have sprung up to provide Wi-Fi spots through schools. Iowa staff offered stipends for internet access for blind clients who need it to reduce isolation and increase technology literacy. Staff also worked with area education agencies to provide online courses for youth and to ensure the courses are accessible.

Iowa staff also advertise through Facebook, but they recognize that they connect to those families that are more connected—finding low-resourced families is harder. Most of the opportunity youth family connections comes through engaging in 1:1 conversations with families to learn what they need and to bring information directly to them.

### **Feedback from families on services**

Few states reported that they collect feedback from families about services. Those that do include:

* Virginia uses SurveyMonkey to collect input from the Parents as Coaches Committee, to learn what is working, additional areas of need for youth, patterns that parents notice, and considerations for a return to in-person meetings.
* New Mexico staff conduct exit interviews with families after closure. They also provide an anonymous consumer satisfaction survey after closure—this includes ten questions that ask about satisfaction with employment goals, access to technology, and more. They hired an outside polling company to facilitate the survey and they have about a 30% completion rate.
* In Nebraska, counselors in the western part of the state are required to conduct home visits with youth and families.
* New Hampshire hired a private vendor to conduct pre-post surveys about each activity to both quantify and learn how to improve the activity. Privacy is maintained and results are shared with families.
* In Iowa, staff conduct listening sessions and occasional surveys for activities such as the Braille Challenge.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

### **Partners to help with finding and recruiting youth**

In addition to the partners mentioned above to find and recruit youth, state agencies also work with

* Social services,
* General agency (for the separate blind agencies),
* Juvenile justice detention to offer low vision exams,
* With Parents as Coaches to identify additional stakeholders and engage new segments of the population,
* Native American VR agency,
* State health department,
* Developmental disabilities council, and
* Community relocation programs.

**Partners to provide services to youth**

States pointed to specific organizations in their state to provide services to youth as well as general types of partners that exist in nationally. General types of partners include employment service organizations, community rehabilitation programs and providers, schools, other state agencies, nonprofit agencies, NFB, AFB, and community disability agencies. Agencies partner with employers and pay for technology and accommodations to remove perceived barriers of employers. Employers are worried about liability and costs, so staff build trust and in turn employers promote their services.

Nebraska works with Easter Seals after training their staff on working with blind consumers.

Virginia works with Intellectual Point, an organization that teaches artificial intelligence, ethical hacking (testing vulnerabilities) and other tech jobs. In addition, the state pays for technology and training to reduce barriers for employers.

One state noted that in very small towns where there is a large proportion of businesses with 14c waivers, exceptions may be made for employment, but those situations re tracked to ensure that consumers don’t become entrenched in those programs.

**Finding new partners**

Expanding networks is important to agency staff, but some are limited in their outreach due to small size of the agency and limited number of staff. They offered strategies to expand networks and find new partners including:

* Career fairs to identify new partners, e.g., Parks and Recreation
* Counselors required to join many different groups to expand their employment network.
* Engage with CILs to buy in and then nurture that relationship
* Partner with other providers depending on the youth needs, e.g., mental health, job coaching, etc. based on the disability
* Attend different conferences and meetings that include stakeholder groups, such as conferences of teachers of blind students and WIOA meetings

**Partners on the wish list**

Several agency staff mentioned partners that they are seeking out or with whom they would like to develop a relationship. Those mentioned included

* Homeless serving agencies and homeless shelters
* NAMI
* Schools (where there are not established relationships or cooperative agreements)
* Juvenile justice
* Apprenticeship programs

## **OTHER THOUGHTS SHARED FROM AGENCY STAFF**

“Give yourself grace. There is not enough time to address everything, so prioritize and keep your focus. When you have something going well, then start the next project. Otherwise, you will end up with lots of burnout and turnover, staff will be exhausted. Don’t try to do it all at once.”

“The pandemic is continuing to shape programming. Blind youth will have a large hole in their education, which will provide gaps that will require remedial support for many years to come.”

“Elevate expectations [and maintain engagement] with parents. Persuade legislators to invest [in this issue] to eliminate issues of time and money. ”

“I have found that the road show that we do is unique. A lot of agencies are not doing it. Having other agencies engage with youth to do something during the summer exposes folks to diff programs, I would love to see this modeled in other places. ”

# **Appendix A. Youth Transition Services Interview Protocol**

YOUTH OUTREACH, RECRUITMENT, AND SUPPORT

1. What strategies, tools, or resources do you use to find and recruit Opportunity Youth and young adults who are blind or have low vision?
2. What strategies, tools, or resources do you use to engage with those Opportunity Youth that you have found or recruited?
3. After you connect and engage Opportunity Youth, how do you support them in identifying what successful employment looks like for them? In what ways do you support them to identify and achieve their goals?
4. What have you found to be successful strategies to keep youth engaged with you and the VR process over time?
5. How does your program measure success? Is there an evaluation process through the program that identifies if goals are met?

BARRIERS AND RISK FACTORS

1. I will read aloud a list of barriers and risk factors one by one. For each example, please answer on a scale of 1 to 10 how relevant and impactful is this barrier or risk factor to your work with Opportunity Youth.

* Failure to identify vision loss and refer for services early. [ANSWER: ]
* Limited educational/IEP services [ANSWER: ]
* Lack of access to information, printed materials and literacy. [ANSWER: ]
* Lack of independent travel skills [ANSWER: ]
* Lack of Transportation resources. [ANSWER: ]

Again, on a scale of 1 to 10 how relevant and impactful is the barrier or risk factor to your work with Opportunity Youth.

* Lack of family education and support. [ANSWER: ]
* Societal misperceptions of the capacity of blind people. [ANSWER: ]
* Lack of access technology or adaptive tools. [ANSWER: ]
* Lack of exposure to role models who are blind or have low vision. [ANSWER: ]
* Lack of coordination of services between education and vocational rehabilitation systems. [ANSWER: ]

Again, on a scale of 1 to 10 how relevant and impactful is the barrier or risk factor to your work with Opportunity Youth.

* Lack of coordination between blindness services and services to support other disabilities. [ANSWER: ]
* Lack of income for the family [ANSWER: ]
* Are there any other barriers or risk factors that we haven’t mentioned that you would add?
  + Please describe [ANSWER: ] and also rate this on a scale of 1 to 10.

1. For those barriers and risk factors that you rated high, as very relevant or impactful, what are you doing at your organization to ameliorate or address some of these barriers?
   1. [Prompt: re-read those that were rated high and ask about each one. Note taker should help at this point to add other highly ranked items if the interviewer misses one.]

BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

1. We have compiled a list of common trainings and tools that you might use when serving Opportunity Youth and young adults who are blind or have low vision. I will read this list and for each training or tool, please answer on a scale of 1 to 10 how relevant and impactful it is to your work with Opportunity Youth.

* Orientation and mobility training [ANSWER: ]
* Independent Living Skills training using alternative techniques and access tools. [ANSWER: ]
* Access technology training and equipment [ANSWER: ]
* Adjustment to blindness groups, counseling, and other programs [ANSWER: ]
* Braille instruction [ANSWER: ]

Again, on a scale of 1 to 10 how relevant and impactful to your work with Opportunity Youth is:

* Low Vision evaluations and equipment [ANSWER: ]
* Remedial instruction [ANSWER: ]
* Youth summer programs for the blind [ANSWER: ]
* Comprehensive blindness training programs following high school. [ANSWER: ]
* Coordinating services for those with multiple disabilities. [ANSWER: ]

Again, on a scale of 1 to 10 how relevant and impactful to your work with Opportunity Youth is:

* Mental health counseling [ANSWER: ]
* Exposure to role models who are blind or low vision [ANSWER: ]
* Economic assistance during VR case services including childcare, living expenses, etc. [ANSWER: ]
* Are there any other practices or strategies would you add that we haven’t mentioned already?
  + Please explain and rate on a scale of 1-10:

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

1. How do the families of Opportunity Youth who are blind or have low vision participate in your programming and/or services? Please share any examples of your successful engagement with families.
2. In what ways do you keep in contact with families? For example, what forms of outreach do you use to engage families?
3. How do you gather feedback from families on your program or services?

PARTNERSHIPS

1. Which partners do you work with to find and recruit Opportunity Youth who are blind or have low vision?
2. Which partners do you work with to provide services to Opportunity Youth?
3. How do you find those partners that you work with to recruit or support Opportunity Youth?
4. Are there partnerships that you wish you had but are unable to find? Please elaborate.

# **Appendix B. Barriers and Risk Factors Rating Chart**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Barrier or Risk Factor** | **AZ** | **HI** | **IA** | **NE** | **NH (combined)** | **NM** | **VA** | **Average** |
| Failure to identify vision loss and refer for services early | 6 | 7 | 9 | 4 | 9 | 3 | 9 | 6.71 |
| Limited educational/IEP services | 4 | 5 | 10 | 2 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6.43 |
| Lack of access to information, printed materials and literacy | 7 | 4 | 8 | 1 | 10 | 8 | 8 | 6.57 |
| Lack of independent travel skills | 7 | 9 | 9 | 1 | 8 | 7 | 9 | 7.14 |
| Lack of Transportation resources | 6 | 6 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 8.57 |
| Lack of family education and support | 6 | 7 | 8 | 10 | 5 | 5 | 9 | 7.14 |
| Societal misperceptions of the capacity of blind people | 7 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 7 | 8.86 |
| Lack of access technology or adaptive tools | 7 | 4 | 6 | 10 | 9 | 2 | 10 | 6.86 |
| Lack of exposure to role models who are blind or have low vision | 8 | 7 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 2 | 8 | 7.71 |
| Lack of coordination of services between education and vocational rehabilitation system | 6 | 2 | 10 | 8 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 5.86 |
| Lack of coordination between blindness services and services to support other disabilities | 5 | 3 | 3 | 10 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 4.71 |
| Lack of income for the family | 7 | 5 | 7 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 6 | 6.43 |
| Additional barrier: Finding workplace learning experiences |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Additional barrier:  Misconceptions of youth with multiple barriers |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Additional barrier:  Youth lack of readiness |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

# **Appendix C. Best Practices and Strategies Rating Chart**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Best Practice or Strategy** | **AZ** | **HI** | **IA** | **NE** | **NH** | **NM** | **VA** | **Average** |
| Orientation and mobility training | 7 | 5 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 8.57 |
| Independent Living Skills training using alternative techniques and access tools | 7 | 4 | 9 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 7 or 8 | 9.29 |
| Access technology training and equipment | 7 | 3 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 8.57 |
| Adjustment to blindness groups, counseling, and other programs | 6 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 7 | 8.71 |
| Braille instruction | 7 | 2 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 3 | 7.14 |
| Low Vision evaluations and equipment | 6 | 5 | 2 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 6.43 |
| Remedial instruction | 6 | 5 | 8 | 5 | 8 | 3 | 8 | 6.14 |
| Youth summer programs for the blind | 7 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 9 | 10 | 9.29 |
| Comprehensive blindness training programs following high school | 8 | 5 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 8.86 |
| Coordinating services for those with multiple disabilities | 6 | 7 | 9 | 10 | 7 | 10 | 7 | 8 |
| Mental health counseling | 6 | 5 | 7 | 5 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 6.86 |
| Exposure to role models who are blind or low vision | 7 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 9.43 |
| Economic assistance during VR case services including childcare, living expenses, etc. | 5 | 5 | 10 | 5 | 9 | 10 | 9 | 7.57 |
| Additional practice or strategy:  Residential comprehensive programming for youth |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Additional practice or strategy:  Connecting with youth through K-12 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Additional practice or strategy: Funding supports from the legislature |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Additional practice or strategy: Individual time and attention |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

1. Seven states participated in interviews: Arizona Rehabilitation Services Administration , Hawaii Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Iowa Department for the Blind, Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, New Hampshire Department of Education’s Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired, New Mexico Commission for the Blind, Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Newsline is an app created by the National Federation of the Blind for blind/low vision individuals to read newspapers; the app includes 550 newspapers ranging from local to major newspapers and international papers like Canadian global mail. It was expanded to include magazines like the New Yorker, Wall Street Journal, and Roll Call (from Capitol Hill in DC). It also includes ads from select sponsors like Target and Walmart and offers the weather forecast from your location. (<http://nfbnewslineonline.org/>) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Braille Bits and other podcasts produced by the Iowa Department for the Blind can be found here: <https://blind.iowa.gov/podcasts> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)