

NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



Division of Services for the Blind

DSB

Re-envisioning Our Future



2021 Annual Report



Services include, but are not limited to:



*Vocational
Rehabilitation*



*Independent
Living*



*Medical
Eye Care*



*Specialized
Services*



*Youth
Services*



*Business
Enterprises*

The NC Division of Services for the Blind (DSB), an agency under the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS), provides services to people who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind to help them reach their goals of independence and employment. This mission is in direct alignment with the mission of the NC DHHS goal to increase the health and well-being of all North Carolina citizens.

Mission of the *State Rehabilitation Council*

To develop and improve services for North Carolinians who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind.

Functions of the DSB *State Rehabilitation Council*

- Reviews and makes recommendations to DSB about the VR program's performance regarding eligibility, scope and effectiveness of services provided and functions performed that affect the ability of individuals served to achieve rehabilitation goals
- In partnership with DSB, develops and reviews the VR program goals and priorities and evaluates the effectiveness of the program
- Prepares and submits an annual report on the status of DSB's vocational rehabilitation program and makes the report available to the public
- Assists the agency in developing the State Plan and amendments and evaluations
- Reviews and analyzes the effectiveness of and consumer satisfaction with DSB's VR services and employment outcomes achieved by recipients of services

Our *2021 Annual Report*

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NC DSB *State Rehabilitation Council 2020-21*

Debra Pickens, Chair
Parent Training and Information Center

Cody Davis, Vice Chair
At-large/Blind, Recipient of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Willis Leonard Hatcher III,
Parent of a Child with a Disability

Celeste O. Hunt,
Directors of a Project carried out under Section 121 of the Rehabilitation Act

Tania M. Bowers,
Client Assistance Program

Vacant,
NC Optometric Society

Lauren R. Hoffman,
NC Optometric Society

Vacant,
NC Opticians Association

Frederick McEachern,
Advocacy Group for Persons with Disabilities

Denise Lyons Puryear,
Community Rehabilitation Services Provider

Vacant,
Department of Public Instruction

Dr. Ricky Scott,
Statewide Independent Living Council

Agreta Limerick,
NC Division of Workforce Development

Tevin S. Price,
Representative of Business/Industry/
and Labor

Ex-Officio Members

Cynthia Speight, Director
Division of Services for the Blind

Jordan D. Thomas, Area Supervisor
Division of Services for the Blind

NC DSB State Rehabilitation Council

Chairperson's Message



I am honored to present the North Carolina Division of Services for the Blind's (DSB) 2020-2021 Annual Report. The theme this year is "Re-envisioning our Future." How do we improve what we are doing for our consumers? I work for a non-profit organization with parents that have children with special needs and I have a child with special needs. We ask that question on a regular basis. We also asked that question during the DSB public forums we had this year. Consumers told us that they needed more information about resources available for individuals with visual impairments and deafblindness, including those who have challenging mental health experiences. Participants also want more information about

employment opportunities. Consumers shared their success stories and daily challenges and expressed the need to be able to connect more with their non-disabled peers. How do we educate more organizations and corporations on the abilities of our consumers? I wish I had all the answers, but I don't. However, I do have a "vision."

My vision is that we will find new ways of reaching out to our consumers at an early age and help them to better formulate their goals and vision by the time they graduate from high school. My vision is that we will increase the number of individuals served who achieve competitive integrated employment by 10% over the next fiscal year. My vision is that we will increase training opportunities for our consumers by 10% and monitor the individual outcomes on a regular basis.

I am excited to share in this report the accomplishments of the DSB VR program during this year and wish to thank the NC DSB staff members for their hard work, dedication and support of the theme "Re-envisioning Our Future." I would also like to thank the council members for supporting the work of the division and the many contributions made. We all have a VISION! The question is "what is our plan for the future?" In the words of John E. Lewis, "If not us, then who? If not now, then when?"

Debra Pickens, Chairperson

North Carolina DSB State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind

2021 Consumer Satisfaction Survey



Background

The consumer satisfaction survey was initiated to meet the mandate of Section 105 (c) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, which states that the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) shall, among performing other required functions:

Conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of and client satisfaction with:

- A. the functions performed by the designated State agency
- B. vocational rehabilitation services provided by State agencies and other public and private entities responsible for providing vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities under this Act
- C. employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals receiving services under this title, including the availability of health and other employment benefits in connection with such employment outcomes

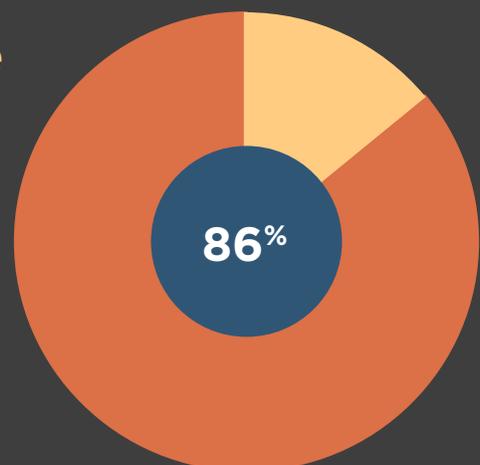
Overview

- Quarterly telephonic interview surveys contracted through North Carolina State University
- 100+ client interviews took place quarterly
- Proportion-to-population stratified random sampling

Satisfaction with VR Counselors and Staff

There was a decrease in satisfaction for seven items, the largest of which was: (c) Being available to meet with you as needed. Overall client satisfaction with the VR program was about 86% in FFY 2021 (-4% from FFY 2020)

Satisfaction with Overall Experience

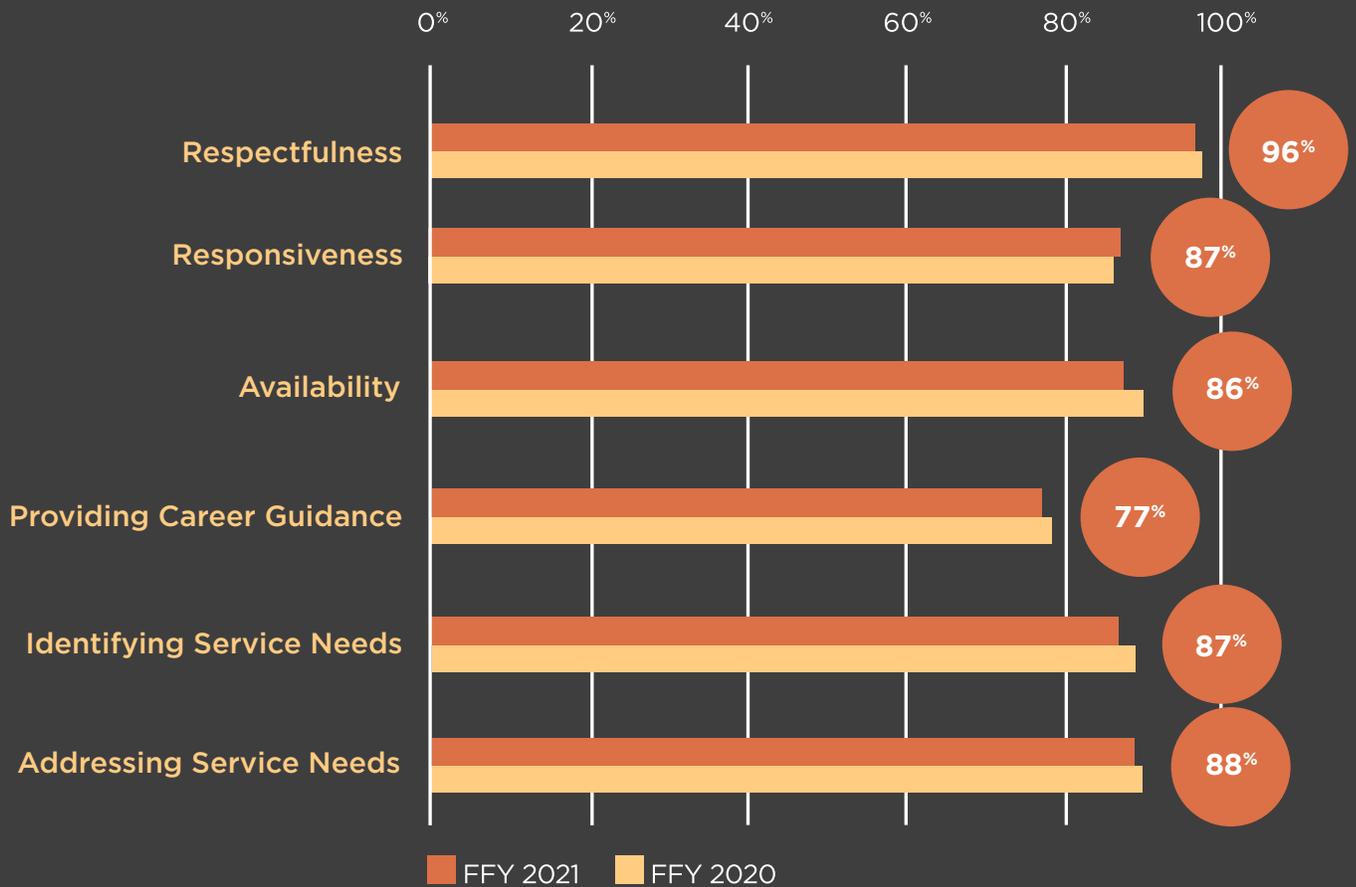


2021 Consumer Satisfaction Survey



Table 1 shows client satisfaction with VR counselors and other program staff.

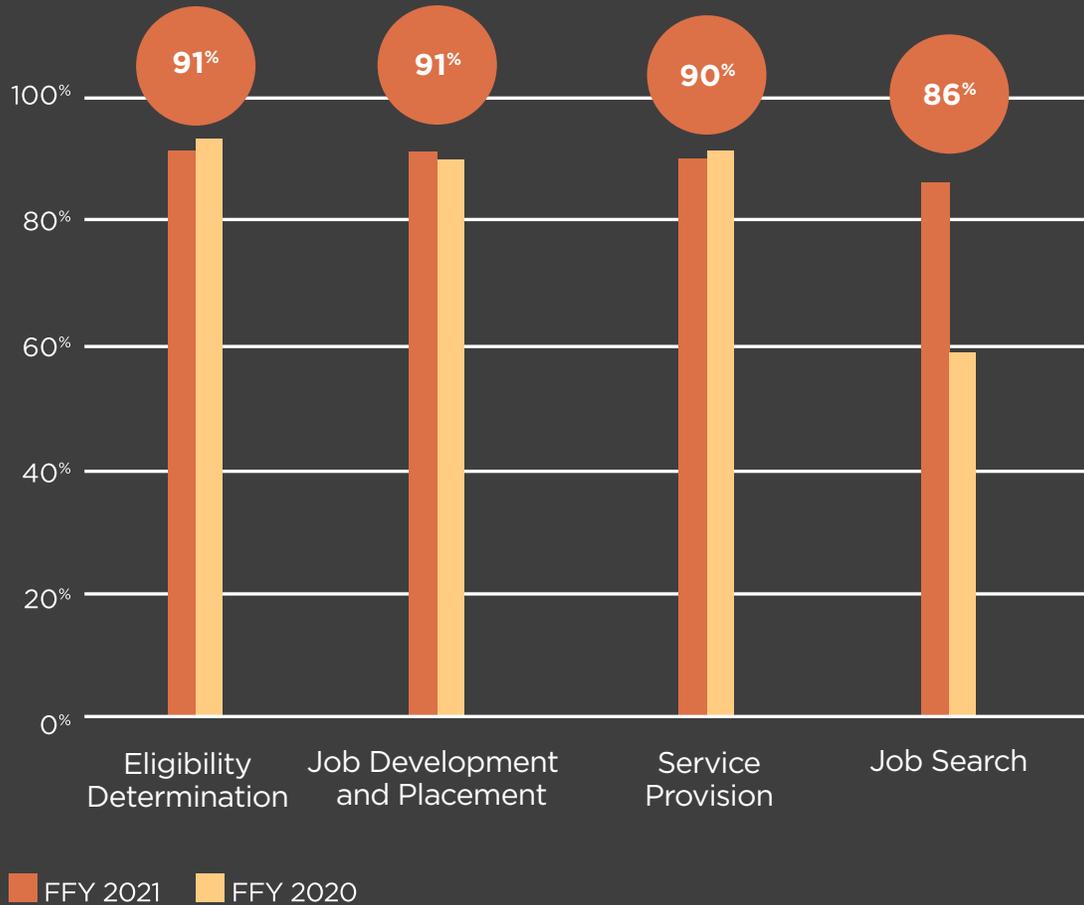
Table 1a- Satisfaction with Counselors and Staff



2021 Consumer Satisfaction Survey



Table 1b- Satisfaction with Timeliness of Services



2021 Consumer Satisfaction Survey

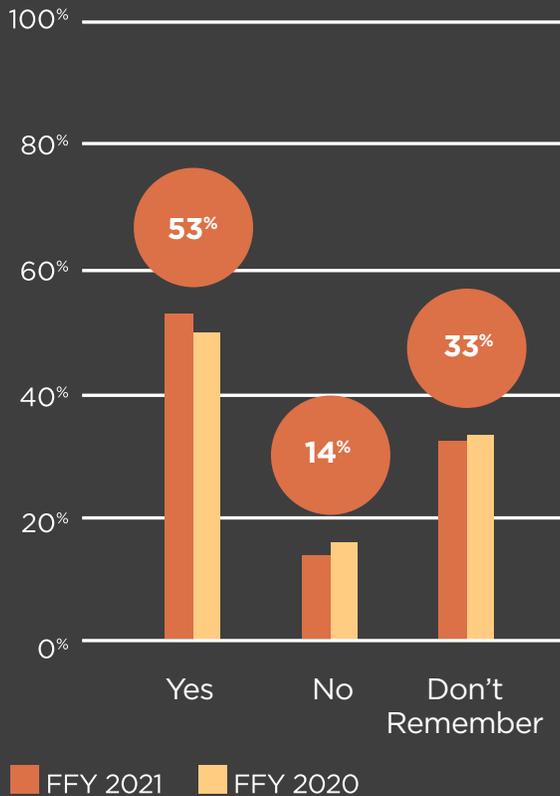


Client Assistance Program Information

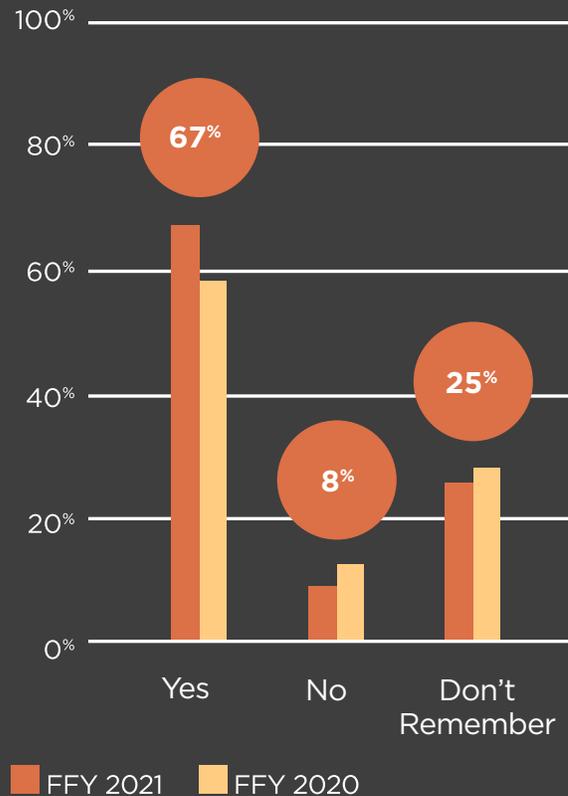
The second section of the survey asks clients if their counselor informed them about the Client Assistance Program (CAP) and their right to appeal agency decisions with which they disagree. For FFY 2021, there was an increase of 2.7% from the prior year in the percent that responded they were informed about the Client Assistance Program (CAP) and an increase of 8.6% in the proportion that were informed about their right to appeal agency decisions.

Table 2- Client Assistance Program Questions

Did your counselor inform you about program?



Did your counselor inform you about right to appeal?



Barriers to Employment

The third section of the survey asks the screening question of whether respondents were currently working. Those that indicated they were not employed were then asked to answer nine sub-questions regarding barriers to employment.

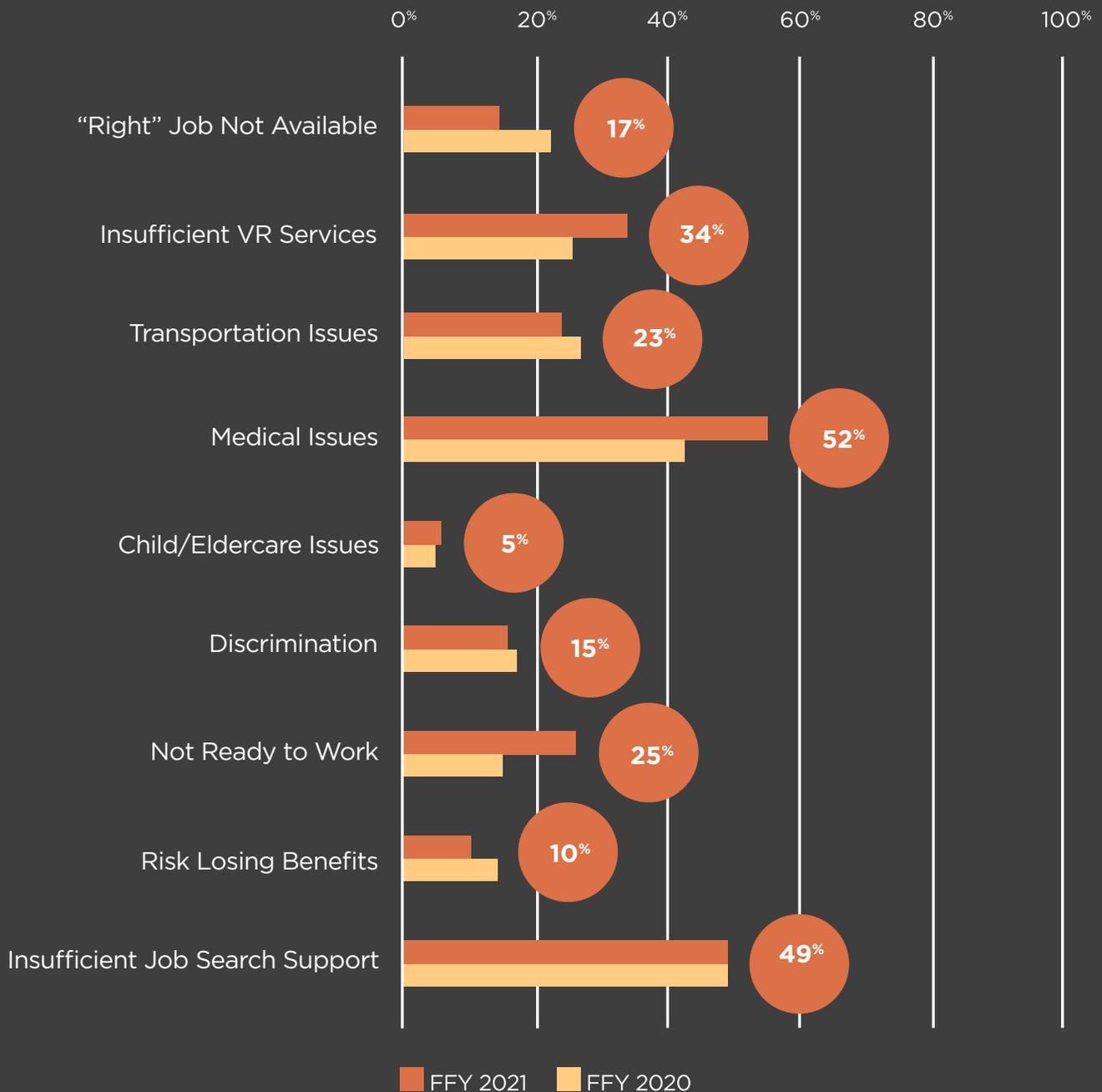
For FFY 2021, the barriers to employment most commonly reported were: (d) I have medical problems – 52%; (i) I need additional help with my job search – 49%; (b) I need additional VR services – 34%; (g) I am not ready to work – 25%.

2021 *Consumer Satisfaction Survey*



In comparing the results from FFY 2021 with the prior year, there was a notable increase in clients with medical problems (+10.4%) and those not being ready to work (+10.3%). In contrast, there was a decrease in jobs being available that clients want (-4.7%) and for whom a need for transportation (-4.3%) presented a barrier to employment.

Table 3- Barriers to Employment



State Rehabilitation Council



Goals and Progress

Competitive Integrated Employment

Goals	Progress
<p>1. Increase competitive integrated employment opportunities and outcomes for individuals with visual disabilities, particularly those with most significant disabilities, underserved populations, and individuals with additional barriers to employment.</p>	<p>In FFY 2021, DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Services provided services to 645 consumers with most significant disabilities. DSB worked hard to increase competitive integrated employment opportunities and outcomes for individuals with visual disabilities. DSB sponsored 24 work experiences for 20 different consumers. Community-based work adjustment services were provided to 70 consumers. Supported Employment Services were provided to 23 consumers. The average earnings/wages for those consumers closed in competitive integrated employment was \$14.78.</p>
<p>2. Increase opportunities for training and employment services for adults with visual disabilities, particularly those with most significant disabilities, and underserved populations.</p>	<p>In FFY 2021, 51 consumers with most significant disabilities were closed successfully in employment. DSB sponsored various trainings for 547 consumers, including post-secondary training and vocational training. Of the 547 consumers, 278 consumers were minorities. The Measurable Skill Gains Rate for PY 2020 in Q4: 25.7% which was a slight decrease from what was reported in PY2019 Q4: 28.0%. Assistive technology is constantly evolving. Assistive technology staff meets yearly for in-service training to maintain expertise in providing AT services to blind, visually impaired, and deafblind consumers. In SFY 2021, 526 DSB clients were served by Assistive Technology field staff. At the DSB Career and Training Center, 40 individuals took technology classes and 15 received specialized technology-only training.</p>

State Rehabilitation Council



Goals and Progress

Youth and Students With Disabilities

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Progress</i>
<p>1. Increase opportunities for training and employment services for youth with visual disabilities.</p>	<p>During FFY 2021, 542 students ages 14-24 were served by DSB's transition program.</p>
<p>2. Increase the provision of pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) for students with visual disabilities.</p>	<p>Outreach and community awareness of available resources for Pre-ETS students and youth with visual impairments and blindness continued to be a priority for DSB staff. A Pre-ETS Program flyer and a Transition Program flyer in English and Spanish were developed to enhance such efforts. Transition staff had the opportunity to educate and clarify student referrals through a virtual webinar with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and collaborate with school staff on our Pre-ETS and Transition programs and activities throughout the year. DSB had five Pre-Employment Transition Services Associates on staff across the state that assist with identifying potentially eligible students and increase the provision of pre-employment transition services.</p>

Capacity Building

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Progress</i>
<p>1. Increase internal capacity and develop the program infrastructure needed to improve service delivery for VR participants and employers.</p>	<p>The Exceptional Children's Assistance Center (ECAC) staff collaborated with DSB staff to provide Deafblind 101 training for 58 DSB staff in June 2021.</p>
<p>2. Increase collaboration with core Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and required program partners and community stakeholders to integrate and expand services for individuals with visual disabilities.</p>	<p>Collaboration continued to be a priority for DSB staff during FFY 2021. DSB staff attempted to maintain presence with the NCWorks Career and Training Centers, however this was limited due to the pandemic. DSB staff attended partnership meetings in person or virtually if offered.</p>

State Rehabilitation Council



Supported Employment

Goals and Progress

Goals	Progress
<p>1. Increase outreach to identify individuals who are most significantly disabled and require supported employment services to achieve a successful competitive integrated employment outcome including outreach to consumers who reside in rural areas who may also be underserved.</p>	<p>For FFY 2021, DSB sponsored Supported Employment services for 23 consumers. The prior year there were 44 consumers sponsored for Supported Employment cases however, the pandemic caused many consumers to be hesitant to move forward with services involving an employment setting. DSB had 49 approved vendors available to provide Supported Employment to consumers who are most significantly disabled; 4 new vendors were added to the approved vendor list this FFY 2021.</p>
<p>2. Provide supported employment training for new counselors.</p>	<p>Mandatory Best Practices training has been provided to new counselors. This training is largely focused on assisting consumers to address and overcome barriers to employment and identifying career-based employment. A specific component pertaining to supported employment is included in the training.</p>
<p>3. Continue efforts to identify and expand the number of community rehabilitation program providers focusing on areas across that state that have limited resources.</p>	<p>DSB has 49 approved vendors that can provide supported employment to consumers who are most significantly disabled, four were added to the approved vendor list this FFY 2021. DSB provided sensitivity and awareness training for community rehabilitation program staff and supported employment service providers pertaining to working with individuals who are blind or have visual impairments including exposure to assistive technology and adaptive devices. The training is known as New Employee Sensitivity Training (NEST) and takes place twice a year at the DSB Career and Training Center. In addition, our Assistive Technology Consultants and Deaf Blind Specialists have provided numerous trainings to the community rehabilitation program staff and supported employment providers in order to increase their knowledge on assistive technology and adaptive devices.</p>

DSB *Vocational Rehabilitation* Program



The NC Division of Services for the Blind's Vocational Rehabilitation (NC DSB) program provides vocational and rehabilitative services to individuals who are visually impaired, blind or deafblind to help them obtain, regain, maintain, or advance in employment. Services offered through our Vocational Rehabilitation program assist with reducing or removing barriers to employment. We believe that with the right supports and accommodations, the individuals we serve can be employed in competitive and integrated environments.

DSB is comprised of a strong team of case managers, counselors, and specialists that can assist an eligible individual with vision loss to be successful in the workplace and continue to live independently. Those specialists include Business Services Representatives, Community Employment Specialists, Orientation and Mobility Specialists, Nursing Eye Care Consultants, a Rehabilitation Engineer, Assistive Technology Consultants, Assistive Technology Instructors, the DSB Career and Training Center staff, including a Vocational Evaluator, as well as Deafblind Specialists. These services are coordinated through our Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Independent Living Rehabilitation Counselors and Social Workers for the Blind. In addition to the above, all support staff in the area and district offices, as well as the team of administrators in the state office, strive to find ways to assist people to achieve successful employment outcomes.

VR Case of the Year: Quendi Cruz Garcia

Quendi was first referred to DSB in 2015 by Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services due to her rare eye condition caused by Neuromyelitis Optica, an autoimmune condition affecting the optic nerves and spinal cord. Quendi's first episode resulted in her losing her vision completely and losing all feeling in her body. After a two-week hospital stint, Quendi went into remission and regained her vision. However, the medications she took during that time induced Glaucoma. Quendi attended early college in Wilmington NC and transferred to UNCW in 2016. She embarked on a career path of Recreational Therapy and completed work experiences with Easter

Seals and participated in mock interviews to prepare for career opportunities.

Quendi received the following Vocational Rehabilitation Services that assisted her with reaching her employment goal: Guidance and Counseling, Pre-ETS Services (including Self-advocacy, Work based learning experience, Job exploration, Job Readiness, and Counseling on transition to higher education), Job Development/ Job Placement Services, Sponsorship of Post-Secondary Training, and Assistive Technology Services.

Quendi graduated December 2019 with a B.A. in Recreational Therapy and gained her Certified Therapeutic Recreational

Specialist (CTRS) license in February 2020. The pandemic caused her to delay going to work for a few months. However, Quendi began her dream career with UNC Health Systems on November 30, 2020 as a full-time Recreational Therapist in the Behavioral Health Unit. Quendi reports that she has encountered some challenges in her first year due to the pandemic, but she was up to the challenge. During this period, she also worked with COVID patients in the Behavioral Health Unit, providing Recreation Care Therapy. Quendi is loving her new job. She has full benefits and is using the tuition assistance

program offered by her employer to work toward a Master's in Health Care Administration. She is an Ambassador for The Sumaira Foundation for NMO (Neuromyelitis Optica) representing North Carolina. Quendi has an autoimmune disorder called Myelin Oligodendrocyte Glycoprotein and she participates with the MOG support groups throughout the US. Quendi is also currently pioneering her own MOG teen and women's support group as well! DSB congratulates Quendi on her success and we look forward to seeing her continue to achieve her goals.

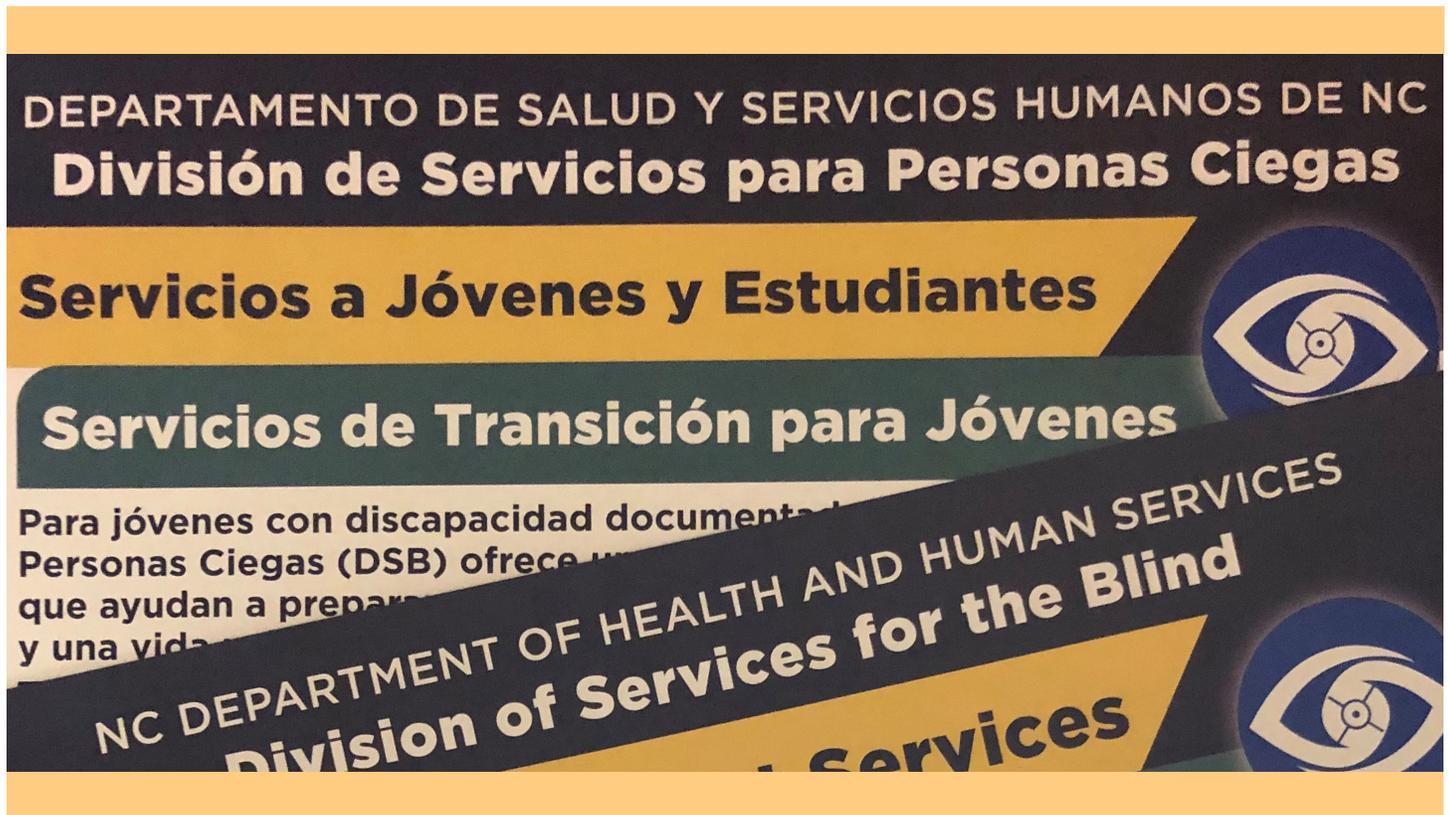


Quendi Cruz Garcia pays homage to her Mexican Heritage while at UNCW.

DSB VR Highlights for FFY 2021

- *DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Services were provided to **2,130** individuals with blindness or low vision.*
- *DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Services created Individualized Plan for Employment with **222,1** consumers with blindness or low vision.*
- *DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Services provided services to **645** consumers with the most significant disabilities.*
- *DSB Vocational Rehabilitation achieved **358** competitive integrated employment.*
- *The average earnings/wages for those consumers closed in competitive integrated employment was **\$14.78**.*
- *DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Services provided services to **542** transition students.*

DSB *Transition Services* for Youth



DSB Youth and Student Services flyers.

Despite having to operate under confinements of a global pandemic for FFY 2021 the Transition Program offered plenty of exciting opportunities for students to engage, explore, and connect. Involving the youth with career professionals and employers continued to be a valuable activity for all involved.

Transition staff implemented virtual informational interviews with our students and young adults to increase their knowledge about a vocation and guide them in exploring career paths. For example, informational interviews were set up with a crime scene investigator, a business owner, a director of finance, a massage therapist, an aerospace

engineer, and a broadcast radio/voice-over professional to name a few. Such interactive and meaningful experiences helped shape the students' understanding of the world of work and connected them to real-life professionals.

The staff worked hard to provide interactive activities, utilizing outside resources and speakers in addition to DSB specialists. The training enabled the students to increase their ability to self-advocate, explore careers, build workplace readiness skills as well as receive information on training and educational opportunities after high school. It provided a great platform for students to meet and socialize.

DSB, in partnership with DVRS, continued to solicit Pre-ETS contracts for the delivery of a range of Pre-ETS activities throughout the state. Seven active contracts were available and DSB added a unique program targeting students with secondary disabilities utilizing music as a tool to engage and deliver Pre-ETS activities.

A unique five-day virtual interactive event, the Blind & Socially Savvy, was implemented for our Pre-ETS students statewide. This innovative soft skills development and leadership training program focused on coaching the use of social cues and body language, mingling/networking skills, learning protocols for asking for and refusing help in public spaces,

and navigating low expectations. The students also participated in informational interviews and virtual tours.

Outreach and community awareness of available resources for Pre-ETS students and youth with visual impairments and blindness continued to be a priority for DSB staff. A Pre-ETS Program flyer and a Transition Program flyer in English and Spanish were developed to enhance such efforts.

Transition staff had the opportunity to educate and clarify student referrals through a virtual webinar with DPI and collaborate with school staff on our Pre-ETS and Transition programs and activities throughout the year.

Outreach and community awareness of available resources for Pre-ETS students and youth with visual impairments and blindness continued to be a priority for DSB staff.

DSB Transition Services for Youth Highlights for FFY 2021

The Transition staff was creative in providing several virtual youth group trainings including:

- ***Getting Ready to Move Beyond High School - Summer Youth Transition Program - 2021,***
- ***Mini Center: Pre-ETS-Career Exploration & Postsecondary Training, Virtual Transition Summer Program,***
- ***Job Club for Youth***

DSB *Business Enterprises* Program



The Division's Business Enterprises Program, authorized by the federal Randolph Sheppard Act, provides training and employment opportunities for legally blind individuals who wish to pursue a career in vending and food services. Three students are currently enrolled in the training program and two consumers have been evaluated for the next training cycle. North Carolina Business Enterprises (NCBE) has 47 operators who manage 144 facilities on state, federal, and private properties.

Operators continue to experience a negative impact on their businesses due to the pandemic as state and federal facilities have not resumed normal operations. During FFY 2021 total gross sales from all BEP food service & vending facilities amounted to \$5,966,813.90 in comparison to \$5,116,982.60 in fiscal year 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, RSA awarded a \$532,578 grant to the Business Enterprises program to make financial relief and restoration payments to operators to offset their losses that occurred during calendar year 2020. These funds were issued to eligible operators in August 2021.

DSB *Work Adjustment Services and Supported Employment Services*



During FFY 2021, DSB sponsored 24 work experiences for 20 different consumers. These experiences were in a variety of workplace settings such as thrift stores, restaurants, radio stations, YMCAs, grocery stores, non-profit foundations, and one with the DSB Career Training Center. Consumers worked in a variety of roles to learn skills ranging from case management, engineering, teaching techniques, customer service, media production, and basic workplace expectations.

DSB Work Adjustment and Supported Employment Highlights for FFY 2021

- **70** consumers were served in *Community-Based Work Adjustment services*
- **23** consumers were served in *Supported Employment services*

DSB *Independent Living* Program



Independent Living Services

The Division of Services for the Blind is unique and fortunate to have 54 social workers on staff who are primarily located in the local Department of Social Services offices throughout North Carolina. Social workers provide services to eligible individuals who are blind, visually impaired and deafblind to assist them in managing daily living activities with the intent of reducing or preventing institutional care. Social workers also foster relationships with other agencies and organizations to advocate for the specialized needs of consumers and their families. They work with local agencies to identify resources and build support systems within the community that are so important for individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind, such as home health, targeted housing and mental health agencies, support groups, civic groups, doctors, charities, disability advocates, senior centers, adult care facilities, hospitals, community colleges, food banks and local school systems. The services are offered in all 100 counties in North Carolina.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Social Workers for the Blind were on the front lines in DSB to find the people in their communities with a visual impairment who were struggling to remain independent. The social workers had to be creative in how they served their consumers.

For example:

- They had to practice social distancing and wear masks, which was difficult at first.
- They made sure consumers had their independent living aids, so they did porch drop offs at the consumers' residences. Instead of doing hands-on training in person with consumers, the social workers did telephone instruction with some of the aids that were purchased for them.
- During this time there was a lot of social isolation with the consumers. Telephone support groups were developed, and the social workers made sure that they contacted their consumers and linked them with other consumers that may not have had any social contact with others.

With the help of social workers, people who might otherwise become isolated due to vision loss were able to interact with others in support group settings across the state. They learned to function more independently by taking on roles of responsibility within the group settings and establishing strong friendship bases with others who are experiencing some of the same challenges. Throughout the group process, teaching and learning took place by the sharing of success stories. The social workers are often told by their consumers that feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and isolation are alleviated or may have altogether become a thing of the past.

Success Story: Lucy Plyler

Here is a brief story about Lucy Plyler, a Social Worker for the Blind, that shows her going above and beyond the call of duty to make someone's life better. As SWB's, we often must think outside the box and use every resource at our disposal to help consumers live a safe and independent life. A great example of this type of circumstance happened in early September of 2021. Lucy Plyler, assigned to Cleveland County, had a homeless gentleman apply for the Medical Eye Care Program for cataract surgery. This gentleman had been homeless for over 10 years and was concerned about recuperating from surgery in a tent that he used for a home. The area where he stayed had a serious issue with violence and property crime among the homeless community. Lucy got to work in her community using every available local resource she could to find this gentleman an apartment with rent paid for 10 months and charged at a reduced rate after that point. When she was telling me what she was doing, I contacted a local ministry and had a box spring, mattress, and bed donated to him. When I arrived at the apartment with some donated clothing and bedding, Lucy had the gentleman stocked up with food, small appliances, personal items, and even a television that she donated herself. He had a closet full of new clothes and toiletries, plenty of food, and even vouchers to get additional furniture from a local thrift store. For the first time in 10 years, this gentleman went to bed in an air-conditioned apartment with plenty of



Photo of a homemade tent that was previously occupied by Lucy's client.

food and a warm, safe place to sleep. Lucy mobilized her community, and because of her actions, a man who been living out of a backpack for 10 years now has a soft bed to sleep in, entertainment, food, and a safe place to recover from eye surgery. I know what we do makes a difference to our consumers, but I rarely get to see the actions of one social worker organizing her community and achieving such dramatic results in a few days. The picture above is where the consumer was living.

Success Story: Amy Hull

This story came from Amy Hull, the social worker in Jones County. There are good people who help others without there being a cost. I have a client in Jones County that has been working toward a degree in nursing. The client needed a video magnifier for studying and very little funds available to purchase a new one. The client reached out to me to find out if anyone was selling a used video magnifier. I had just happened to see an email message from an independent living counselor in another county that knew of a person selling a video magnifier. I gave the information to my client. The client made contact and explained to the person selling the video magnifier why they needed the equipment. After a nice conversation the person selling the video magnifier decided to gift it to my client. My client was very appreciative and able to continue toward their degree in nursing.

DSB Independent Living Services Highlights for FFY 2021

2,920 consumers received services including counseling, basic instruction in adaptive techniques for daily living and assistive devices, assistance in securing health services available through Medicaid, Medicare or other public/private providers and guidance on living safely within their homes. Most of the services provided are without regard to income and at no cost to the consumer.

Independent Living Older Blind and Rehabilitation Programs

These programs provide comprehensive services to individuals to assist them with achieving their goals of independence in the home and community. This year, the pandemic posed ongoing challenges to normal business operations related to providing comprehensive training and adjustment services. All 14 Independent Living Rehabilitation Counselors across the state continued to rise to the occasion and offered remote Daily Living Skills Classes. Additionally, counselors found creative ways to provide individualized services while maintaining safety protocols. As a result of the counselor's persistence, there were numerous success stories. Two of these amazing stories are below.

Success Story: C.S.

Could you imagine being in the beginning of your college career, enjoying the freedom and independence of not being sheltered, actively participating in extracurricular activities, and being completely immersed in your education? Sounds like the typical undergraduate student awaiting the great adventures college life brings. Now imagine, being a college student adjusting to off campus living, when someone attempts to rob and kill you for materialistic items you possess. Scary situation, right? Unfortunately, this happened to C.S.'s house, a 19-year-old who was simply enjoying his sophomore year of college when someone entered his home, shot him in the face leaving him to his fate.

On July 15, 2020 a new way of living began for C.S. He describes his initial reaction to his incident as devastating. He felt lonely, depressed, and helpless. He moved back home with his parents and they started researching resources in the area to help assist with his adjustment to blindness. Calling upon DSB, C.S. immediately was open to working with the ILR counselor. From COVID being a hinderance to receiving in-person services, the ILR counselor, C.S. and his family were able to

use a video platform and phone calls to provide training.

Through communication skills, adaptive kitchen techniques, assistive technology, personal resource management and self-care training, C.S. has been able to cook several meals in the oven and microwave, use Alexa to turn different appliances on/off in his home, organize and match his clothes, use Uber for transportation, advocate at the movies for accommodations, and so much more. C.S. is still in the process of learning and adapting. He is currently working on keyboarding skills, actively listening to JAWS, and various other things. In the last year, C.S.'s confidence has increased tremendously. He has started a clothing line with his friends called "Eat your Veggies." He is now discussing going back to school, living on his own, and potentially dating.

As C.S. copes with not having the ability to ever see again, he confidently lives every day with optimism. C.S. states he is reminded "If they turn the lights out, the show is still going on." In other words, when life knocks you down, pick yourself up and continue to live.

Success Story: Mario

Mario was happily engaged and working at a local pizza restaurant as the general manager when he suddenly lost his vision due to a retinitis hemorrhage. His life had changed virtually overnight, and he felt at a loss for what to do or how to move forward. In a short amount of time, Mario left his job at the pizzeria and fell out with many of his family members and friends. Although he still had the support of his fiancée and her family by his side, he still struggled with how to cope with his new way of life.

As he began to work with DSB and his Independent Living Rehabilitation Counselor, Mario stated that he was having a hard time adjusting to all the changes that happened since he lost his vision. With the loss of so much of his support system and his job, Mario was spending a lot of time alone while his fiancée worked two jobs. This isolation, on top of all the other changes in his life, was making it difficult for Mario to live a happy, independent life. However, the ILRC could see that Mario was determined to work on the skills needed to become more independent.

Then, days after taking his application for services, the nation and world were hit with a global pandemic, halting all in-person services for the safety of everyone involved. However, Mario did not let this set him back from getting the help he needed. His ILRC hosted a virtual Self-Advocacy Class to empower consumers with vision loss to know their rights and advocate for their needs. Mario attended almost every class, often joining while in doctors' office waiting rooms, determined to not miss a moment of learning. His dedication went so far that he even joined for a few minutes the day after undergoing major eye surgery.

After completing the self-advocacy class, the ILRC could already see a transformation in Mario's demeanor and confidence. He was more positive and energetic whenever they spoke. The class gave him the foundation he needed to start adjusting to his vision loss and accepting his current situation. It allowed him to be in the right mindset to continue his training by joining the ILRC's first round of virtual Daily Living Skills Classes. Again, the consumer's enthusiasm was evident by his dedication to joining the class at all costs, often being the first person to sign into the class and the last person to leave.

On the last day of class (whether virtual or in-person), it is customary to invite family members of the participants to join in celebrating their accomplishments. For the last day of virtual classes, Mario's fiancée joined and expressed how much of a change she saw in Mario due to the skills and confidence he gained in the classes. She stated that he almost seemed like a new person, a change that everyone in the class also noticed over the course of working with him for 7 weeks.

Shortly after the classes ended, Mario got his old job back as the general manager of the pizzeria, with plans to one day open his own pizza shop. His relationships with his close family had begun to heal and he had found adaptive ways to continue doing what he loves, including playing cards with his twin brother. In March of 2022, he will marry the love of his life.

DSB was able to give Mario the skills needed to succeed with independent living after his traumatic vision loss, but the tenacity and positive mindset of the consumer is what really makes this a success story.

DSB Independent Living Older Blind and Rehabilitation Programs for FFY 2021

- **27** *Remote Daily Living Skills Classes held with 193 participating consumers*
- **4** *Remote technology-specific trainings with 28 participating consumers*
- *Opened 191 new cases*
- *Conducted 28 remote outreach events*

DSB *Specialized Services*



Career and Training Center

The DSB Career and Training Center (CTC) continued providing remote instruction to consumers throughout the pandemic. In August 2021, onsite services resumed for the Adjusting to Blindness in a Learning Environment (ABLE) program, the Evaluation Unit and the Low Vision Clinic. The sound of canes tapping against doors and baseboards in the halls that had been silenced during the pandemic heralded the return of onsite participants. In-person enrollment was kept at a level that allowed for social distancing and proper sanitizing. Therefore, remote instruction also continued for individuals who could not yet attend in person.

Below are some of the highlights from the 2021 SFY:

- The Evaluation Unit updated materials including obtaining the braille version of the WRAT-IV (Wide Range Achievement Test) and obtaining an online version of the COPSsystem which assesses values, interests and abilities. While services were remote only, students capitalized on the keyboarding and technology skills they acquired during ABLE in order to hold a student-led meeting on Saturdays.
- Staff effectively collaborated so that the most effective instruction could be provided. Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists engaged in team teaching during remote instruction and an AT team met weekly to discuss roadblocks students encountered during remote instruction and to brainstorm ways to overcome obstacles.
- Orientation and Mobility staff conducted a training session for Duke University Medical System staff who assist individuals with making appointments and staff who greet them when they arrive.
- Students participating in ABLE made great strides. One student began volunteering with recycling efforts in his local community; with encouragement and support from Center staff, a student took and passed the substitute teaching certificate test; in only six weeks, a new ABLE student learned uncontracted braille, how to use the braille screen input on her iPhone with a Brailenote Touch and started to learn braille contractions; and a student in the Careers class successfully started her own tutoring business.
- The Center is providing internships for students in graduate programs for psychology and for assistive technology. Two of the interns are former ABLE participants who are growing and progressing toward long-term career goals.
- Two previous ABLE students graduated from the University of Massachusetts Assistive Technology program and became Certified Assistive Technology Instructional Specialists.
- The Center made strides in addressing the keyboarding training needs of participants which are essential prerequisites for most other areas of technology training. Bluetooth keyboards

were recommended for purchase by home counselors so the students could have access to full keyboards for practice.

- Instructors began utilizing the Typing Club program which is now being used remotely and in person.
- Just in time for the return to onsite services, new student computers were set up, which came with a current version of the Windows operating system.

SAVVY 2021: Envision the Possibilities.

Once again, the DSB Career and Training Center adapted to the pandemic and offered a fully remote summer program for Pre-ETS participants. Students were asked to think about their role moving forward in a society with a new normal. Ten students participated with Youth in Transition and two participated with College Prep. The Youth in Transition program emphasized the entrepreneurial mindset which involves thinking critically and creatively in order to adapt to a constantly changing world. The students were able to work in teams virtually and develop friendships. It was a fun month for the students as they learned and grew together, preparing for the next phase of their young adult lives.

Some of the activities included:

- Classes in cooking, techniques of daily living, orientation and mobility workshops, careers, education, writing and braille
- Presentations from InterAct Family Safety and Empowerment Center related to college experiences
- Afternoon interactive recreation activities and evening group activities to discuss readings
- Online conversations with Judy Schmidt, PhD about communicating with college professors and disability services
- Round-table discussion with college students or graduates about their experience as a student with a visual impairment
- A wide variety of inspirational speakers including a local former Center student who started a recycling project for Durham and a current college student at UNC-Greensboro who spoke about the challenges and opportunities for a student who has albinism
- A presentation by Kijuan Amey, a former Air Force jet pilot who lost his vision from a motorcycle accident while on leave. He is a motivational speaker and author. His book: *Don't Focus on Why Me: From Motorcycle Accident to Miracle* talks about never giving up and taking charge of your life and destiny.
- A presentation by the Carvers from Tennessee. The Carvers are a visually impaired couple who have a small business called Mountain Crafted, which offers personal care products with product labels in braille. One of the creators and owners of Mountain Crafted, Debra Carver, attended the Center over 40 years ago and was taught by our current braille teacher, Miriam Dixon. The Carvers spoke on the entrepreneurship mindset and their experience with starting a business.
- Social times were incorporated into the schedule where students could choose topics and engage in conversations led by their peers.

- The final presentation from the students included a “talk show” format. Participants’ families could ZOOM into the final presentation which also included talent show segments, descriptions of the classes, college prep activities, and opportunities for students to share their work products and art projects.

New Employee Sensitivity Trainings (NEST)

Remote portions of NEST were provided for two more groups. The response from participants was all positive, but certain

portions of the training were deemed by the instructors to only be useful if conducted in person. The improving situation with the pandemic during July allowed for in-person sessions to be held to cover the in-person material. Normally, two NEST sessions are held over the course of a year, about six months apart. In July 2021, four groups of participants completed their NEST training over the course of two consecutive weeks. And, these four sessions were held while the amazing CTC staff were simultaneously running the SAVVY program. Holding four separate groups was needed due to the large number of staff who now required the training and to allow for social distancing.

DSB Career and Training Center Highlights for SFY 2021

- **3,965** *hours of instruction were provided*
- **27** *ABLE assessments were completed*
- **40** *individuals were served in the ABLE program*
- **23** *low vision evaluations were provided*
- **66** *individuals were served by the Evaluation Unit*
- **39** *staff received remote NEST training*

Featured Success Story: from ABLE to Intern

When the Center returned to in-person services this year, they welcomed a new Assistive Technology intern, Christie Smith. Christie was not new to the Center, having completed the Center's Adapting to Blindness in a Learning Environment (ABLE) program in 2017. After completing ABLE, Christie enrolled at North Carolina Central University to obtain a Bachelor's in Middle Grades Education. She completed that degree in May 2019 and immediately entered into

the graduate school's Visual Impairment Training Program to become a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments. In the fall of 2020, Christie enrolled in a second graduate program so she could become a Certified Assistive Technology Instructional Specialist. Her internship with the Center puts her on the path to earning this certification. Christie will graduate in May 2022 and is looking forward to continuing to make a positive impact in the lives of individuals with visual impairments.



Intern Christie Smith

Assistive Technology Services

DSB offers assistive technology services through its seven district offices as well as the DSB Career and Training Center (the Center) to assist people who require assistive technology (AT) to be successful with employment, training, education, and independent living goals.

Assistive technology is constantly evolving which requires our staff to stay abreast of changes. This year, training was provided to staff on advanced iPad accessibility features including voice over commands and gestures, app switcher, magnifier, zoom controller, and spoken content; Zoom Text customization including a camera with ZT, touch screen with ZT, and multiple monitors; AT for multiple disabilities such as Natural Point with smart navigation mouse using head movements to navigate, Eye Gaze, and Smart Pen; and NCATP resources. DSB also implemented a new policy and procedure for hiring AT Instructor vendors to expand the network of individuals available to provide instruction to our consumers.

DSB Assistive Technology Services Highlights for SFY 2021

- **526** DSB clients were served by Assistive Technology field staff.
- At the DSB Career and Training Center, **40** individuals took technology classes and **15** received specialized technology-only training.

Success Story: Conquering Calculus at College With Assistive Technology and a Dedicated AT Instructor

Josue PazTomey is an amazing person who is accomplishing his goal of becoming a successful college student at the highest level. Josue took calculus this past semester at college without knowing for sure how he was going to pass. As a legally blind individual with no light perception, he was unsure how to use braille and other AT to complete equations, graph them and send them to his instructors in a readable format. With the outstanding help of our AT Instructor, Lacey Lammers, he is soaring in his calculus class.

Josue came to the Division of Services for the Blind Vocational Rehabilitation program in high school as a transition student. He was provided services at our ABLE program at the DSB Career and Training Center to assist with preparing him for college. From there he was accepted to college taking a full schedule. His VR counselor purchased him a device called a Braille Note Touch Plus (BNTP), a laptop, iPad and needed accessories to assist with being successful in college. The BNTP can be used as a braille computer, like a PC or Mac computer but using braille input.

Everything was going smoothly until calculus came along. How can math be done using braille and computer keyboard commands, let alone calculus with graphs? That is when his VR counselor referred him to Lacey Rubzin, our AT Instructor. It turns out Josue needed support for using his BNTP with knowledge of Keymath, Keyword, Mathtype, screen readers NVDA and JAWS and his computer to submit homework and graph equations. Josue

would need all this AT knowledge to complete his college level calculus class independently. Lacey provided training on the BNTP device that would provide him with the resources for being able to type math equations and graph! Lacey was able to learn the device, refresh her braille skills including Nemeth code. Nemeth Braille code for mathematics is a braille code for encoding mathematical and scientific notations linearly using standard six-dot braille cells for tactile reading by a visually impaired or blind person. Lacey also worked with the college to obtain some practice problems and came up with a lesson and plan for Josue to use to complete coursework. Lacey worked with Josue to complete and practice problems to prepare for ones presented for the college course. Lacey also created a YouTube Video Lesson: “BrailleNote Touch with Keymath intro - Youtube.” Success Abound! Recently, Josue emailed Lacey stating “I have great news! I have a 96 on my first test! I’m finding great success using the computer and the BNTP to complete my homework, and my quizzes and tests. Thank you so much for all your help and support throughout this process! I will keep you posted.”

Josue PazTomey is a wonderfully motivated individual that is adapting and learning how to have great success as a college student at the highest level including calculus! All he needed was the proper supports in place from DSB, especially a dedicated Assistive Technology Instructor named Lacey.

Assistive Technology is a Beautiful Thing When It Maintains the Livelihood of an Individual With Deafblindness

Tonia Gibb is a fiercely independent and intelligent woman who has enjoyed working for the state of NC since 2007. With much determination and deafblind assistive technology through DSB, she happens to have her dream job. She is the Human Resources Manager at the Division of Archives, History, Land & Water with the Department of Natural & Cultural Resources and wants to keep it that way. She also happens to have Usher Syndrome 2A. As a result, Tonia was born with the eye disease retinitis pigmentosa (tunnel vision) and progressive hearing loss. Tonia was struggling at work to communicate. She knows that communication is one of the keys to a successful career, so she desperately reached out to DSB to assist.

Tonia works 3 days in her office and 2 days teleworking from home. Her husband drives her to a bus stop for transportation to her office and she uses a cane and guide dog as well for mobility of her work environment.

Tonia was served by DSB throughout her career with the state of NC with services received from her VR counselor including attending the Career Training Center. There she learned how to use cane skills, and how to use and care for her guide dog. She also had sensitivity training on her current jobsite. Her hearing aids were 5 years old and not working properly. Hearing was like trying to understand speech while wearing ear plugs and only catching 50 – 75% of the conversation. That was frustrating! Recently, Tonia started having trouble at work missing important information and asking others to repeat themselves. She

was concerned she may lose her job if new aids could not be provided. Her insurance did not provide coverage for hearing aids.

Deafblind Specialist, Donna Rhodes, received a referral for assistance. Donna worked with Tonia and an audiologist to follow DSB policy to obtain a quote, collaborate with the VR counselor in retrieving justification, approval and authorization to acquire Tonia's hearing aids. Tonia was so relieved to receive her much needed new in the ear (ITE) Bilateral Phonak hearing aids! She also received an external mic to assist in a meeting environment either in-person or through a virtual platform to make understanding conversations clearer and loud enough for equal access to communication once again. She is amazed at the level of technology that is in hearing aids such as made for iOS (MFI) and made for android (MFA), Bluetooth and syncing with hearing aid apps.

Tonia stated "I LOVE the fact that I can answer my cell phone via the Bluetooth connection and not have to hold my phone up to my ear. That is so amazing! Thank you, thank you and thank you again for assisting me in getting these new and upgraded hearing aids. It is so very much appreciated more than you all will ever know." Tonia is grateful and realizes that these hearing aids were vital to maintaining her dream job. Now communication for Tonia is clear as a bell or a Phonak hearing aid with an external mic! Deafblind assistive technology and assistance from Donna proved to keep an independent woman independent.

Deafblind Services

Each year, DSB serves individuals with vision and hearing loss through the Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living programs. When someone experiences both vision and hearing loss, serious issues and self-doubt can arise. Many times, initial assessments are conducted with people who are skeptical of services since dealing with a dual sensory loss can be overwhelming. With the help of DSB services, individuals can feel empowered and thrive again.

DSB continues to work collaboratively with other entities serving people who are deafblind including the Division of Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DSDHH), the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), Deaf-Blind Project with the Exceptional Children Assistance Center (ECAC), the North Carolina Deaf-Blind Associates, the Deaf-Blind Advisory Council, the Statewide Interagency Team and Regional Interagency Teams which are comprised of staff from DSDHH, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services, and the Exceptional Children Division of DPI. In addition, the Division of Services for the Blind is a member of the National Community of Partners (NCOP) sponsored by the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC).

Although many of the usual in-person events with these organizations had to be cancelled due to COVID-19, we participated with several virtual events including Bi-annual or Quarterly meetings by Zoom. In addition, the Deafblind State Coordinator collaborated with ECAC and the DPI DB Project staff to provide DB 101 Training to our VR Counselors.

DSB Deafblind Services Outcomes

DSB Deafblind Services Highlights for SFY 2021

This year, in spite of COVID and some consumers refusing services unless in-person, DSB's Deafblind Specialists provided services to 194 individuals served by our programs. Additionally, they served 26 consumers through the National Deafblind Equipment Distribution Program through the collaborative partnership with DSDHH.

DSB *Medical Eye Care* Program



The Medical Eye Care Program's goal is to provide services to help save or restore sight and prevent blindness. The program offers financial assistance for individuals who have no comparable benefits and limited resources to pay for medication, eye treatments and surgeries. These services are rendered by our Nurse Eye Care Consultants and the State Ophthalmologist. During SFY 2021, 1,096 Medical Eye Care services were authorized for eligible North Carolinians. Only state funds are used for this program. The Nurse Eye Care Consultants also provide additional services that are not based on income eligibility. The services include but are not limited to low vision screenings, evaluations for video magnification systems, and diabetes education. Other program achievements are listed below.

DSB Medical Eye Care Program Highlights for SFY 2021

- **289** *individuals were provided low vision services*
- **633** *Eye Exams and Treatments and/or Surgeries sponsored*
- **231** *Medications purchased*
- **41** *Eyeglasses Purchased*
- **84** *Diabetic Education sessions provided*
- **6** *received chore services*
- **58** *Outreach Activities*
- **45** *Video magnifier evaluations*

Staff and Agency Achievements



The 2021 Superstar Awards will recognize employees who make a positive impact on the lives and communities of the people we serve by exemplifying NCDHHS values. Superstar award categories include:

Proactive Communication: Nominees in this category are open, inclusive and honest communicators who consistently share information and seek feedback from their team, other stakeholders and the people we serve. Nominees for Proactive Communication Superstar build trusting relationships that promote continuous improvement, increase team morale and enable joy at work.

People-Focused: Nominees for this category focus on delivering value to and making a positive impact on the people we serve. As they carry out their work with internal and external stakeholders, nominees for People-Focused Superstar are dedicated to improving the lived experience of the North Carolinians who depend on our services.

Teamwork: Nominees for this category made significant contribution to a team effort to improve the well-being of people we serve. Nominees for Teamwork Superstar should be an individual who was key to the success of a team effort and will be recognized for having an outsized impact on the overall success of a team project, program, or activity.

2021 Superstar Award Winners:

Homa Marashi | People-Focused Superstar

Hope Sprinkle | Teamwork Superstar

Jim Boitano | Teamwork Superstar

Jim Boitano | People-Focused Superstar

Debbie Richardson | Teamwork Superstar

Edith Jackson-Cabbell | Proactive Communication Superstar

Miriam Dixon | People-Focused Superstar

Cindy Meadows | People-Focused Superstar

Jordan Thomas | Teamwork Superstar

Lacey Lammers: The Stephen E. Sallee Assistive Technology Awards of Excellence. This award is provided to professionals who have supported people with disabilities through their efforts at advancing technology, and AT users who have made significant contributions in promoting the use of assistive technology.

Services for the Blind's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council (DEIC) was formed.

Staff Development



Training Activity

October 2020

- VR Training - All Vocational Rehab staff reviewed policy/WIOA/self-care/client relations
- NCWorks Partnership Conference
- Best Practices for New VR Counselors

November 2020

- DSB Annual Training
- CSAVR (Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation) Conference
- NEST (New Employee Sensitivity Training)

December 2020

- Annual Supervisors meeting reviewed Communication and Respect in the Workplace
- SOMA (Southeastern Orientation and Mobility Association)

January 2021

- Hadley Training All VR staff (New Assistive Technology for consumers)
- ATIA (Assistive Technology Industry Association)

February 2021

- 12 Net Summit VR Staff
- NELVT (New Employee Low Vision Training)

March 2021

The North Carolina Conference on Visual Impairment and Blindness

April 2021

Social Worker for the Blind In Service; CSAVR Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation) Conference

June 2021

- NEST (New Employee Sensitivity Training)
- DB 101 Ethics All staff VR and Deaf Blind specialist
- NELVT (New Employee Low Vision Training)

How to *Contact* DSB

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Charlotte District Office:	704-563-4168/1-800-422-1895
Fayetteville District Office:	910-486-1582/1-800-422-1897
Greenville District Office:	252-355-9016/1-800-422-1877
Raleigh District Office:	919-527-6740/1-800-422-1871
Wilmington District Office:	910-251-5743/1-800-422-1884
Winston-Salem District Office:	336-896-2227/1-800-422-0373
DSB Administration Office:	919-527-6700/1-866-222-1546

in Spanish 1-800-662-7030

<https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/dsb>



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NCDHHS is an equal opportunity employer and provider.

NC DSB's vocational rehabilitation program receives 78.7 percent of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2020, the total amount of grant funds awarded were \$14,705,354. The remaining 21.3 percent of the costs, \$3,979,975, were funded by state appropriations and non-federal receipts.