

Legislative Oversight Committee

Summary Report on

South Carolina Commission for the Blind

September 2019



The SC Commission for the Blind provides individualized vocational rehabilitation services, independent living services, and prevention-of-blindness services to blind and visually impaired consumers, from children to older persons, leading to competitive employment and social and economic independence. The Commission's vocational rehabilitation department works with clients in developing a career path and obtaining the highest level of self-sufficiency possible. A needs assessment was conducted of the vocational rehabilitation department and the Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center and included several recommendations for improvements to the department and the center that the commission should continue to work on. The commission should also review ways to hire and retain qualified counselors. In addition, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides employment opportunities to blind consumers by training and licensing them to operate their own businesses in rest stop vending operations, snack bars, and cafeterias throughout the state.

Agency at a Glance

The SC Commission for the Blind states that their mission "is to provide quality individualized vocational rehabilitation services, independent living services and prevention-of-blindness services to blind and visually impaired consumers leading to competitive employment and social and economic independence." The agency is governed by a commission appointed by the Governor with advice and consent of the Senate. State law requires that the commission meet at least once a month. Such frequent meetings are not necessary to conduct the business of the commission and the long-standing vacancies on the commission make it challenging to ensure that a quorum of the board can meet. Accordingly, a change to state law to require bimonthly meetings would be appropriate.

- **Legislative Recommendation: The General Assembly should amend S.C. Code §43-25-10 to require bimonthly meetings for the Commission for the Blind.**

The agency had revenues of \$12.1 million for FY 16-17 primarily from federal funds and general funds. As of January 2018, the Commission had ninety-two filled positions out of 116.49 authorized FTEs and eighteen temporary employees.

Issues

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES (VR)

The primary program offered by the South Carolina Commission for the Blind is the vocational rehabilitation (VR) services program offered to assist consumers in developing a career path and obtaining the highest level of self-sufficiency possible. Services may include education assistance, vocational training programs, assistive technology devices, and any other assistance which removes barriers to employment. The VR division employs counselors who provide assistance to consumers as they gain the skills needed for employment. The results of a Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) conducted by the Interwork Institute at San Diego State

University were received by the commission in March 2016 and noted a decline in VR cases closed successfully. Other areas of concern under the agency performance section included the speed of services and low morale across the agency fueled by high turnover, low pay, high workloads, and lack of recognition.

- **Agency Recommendation: The South Carolina Commission for the Blind should continue working on recommendations which support the mission of the SCCB, as contained in the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA).**

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELOR HIRING AND COMPENSATION

A common complaint heard at the SCCB is that vocational rehabilitation counselors leave for better paying opportunities. As a result, the agency is left with vacancies which are difficult to fill and areas understaffed for extended periods. In its FY 19-20 budget request, SCCB requested \$210,000 in general funds to align vocational rehabilitation counselors and counselor assistant salaries with comparable position salaries within the state of South Carolina and to assist in promoting retention and improving turnover in these positions.

- **Legislative Recommendation: The General Assembly should consider increasing counselor and counselor assistant salaries at the South Carolina Commission for the Blind at a cost of \$210,000 in general funds. This increase would provide that the thirty counselor positions at SCCB would align with similar counselor positions within the state of South Carolina.**

ELLEN BEACH MACK REHABILITATION CENTER (EBMRC)

The EBMRC is a residential training facility located at the commission's offices in Columbia. The following are several recommendations which were included in the CSNA regarding the center:

- There is a significant amount of unused physical space. Explore options for maximizing the space (e.g. for training programs).
- Management needs to be more supportive of the program; more qualified staff need to be hired and better staff development needs to be offered.
- **Agency Recommendation: The South Carolina Commission for the Blind should evaluate the programs offered by the Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center, the unused space at the center, and the findings included in the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) in order to develop a strategic plan to improve the operations of the center.**

BUSINESS ENTERPRISE PROGRAM

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides employment opportunities to blind consumers by training and licensing them to operate their own businesses in rest stop vending operations, snack bars, and cafeterias throughout the state. The Randolph-Sheppard Act was established in 1936 and provides qualified blind individuals the opportunity to operate businesses on federal property by granting them priority on such property. In turn, the majority of states have established similar laws that included state, county, and municipal property. In South Carolina, there are currently over 100 vending facilities that range from small vending machine routes to a large facility contract at Fort Jackson. SCCB currently supports 92 blind vendors, and is working to expand the program with new military and state contracts. Blind vendors operate facilities along the state's highways in rest areas, in several state correctional facilities, and in several locations at the Savannah River Site. South Carolina currently oversees the third largest BEP in the United States.

Legislative Oversight Committee

South Carolina Senate



Report on South Carolina Commission for the Blind

September 2019

The SC Commission for the Blind provides individualized vocational rehabilitation services, independent living services, and prevention-of-blindness services to blind and visually impaired consumers, from children to older blind persons, leading to competitive employment and social and economic independence. The Commission consists of seven members, of whom three must have a visual acuity not to exceed 20/200. The agency had revenues of \$12.1 million for FY 16-17 primarily from federal funds and general funds. As of January 2018, the Commission had ninety-two filled positions out of 116.49 authorized FTEs and eighteen temporary employees. The Commission’s Vocational Rehabilitation Department works with clients in developing a career path and obtaining the highest level of self-sufficiency possible. In addition, the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides employment opportunities to blind consumers by training and licensing them to operate their own businesses in rest stop vending operations, snack bars, and cafeterias throughout the state.

I. Agency at a Glance

Mission

The SC Commission for the Blind states that their mission “is to provide quality individualized vocational rehabilitation services, independent living services and prevention-of-blindness services to blind and visually impaired consumers leading to competitive employment and social and economic independence.”

Governing Authority:

S.C. Code §43-25-10 creates the South Carolina Commission for the Blind and states that “the commission shall consist of seven members, one from each of the seven Congressional Districts, of whom three shall have a visual acuity not to exceed 20/200. The Governor shall, with the advice and consent of the Senate, appoint the members of the commission for terms of four years and until their successors are appointed and qualify.”

Position	Position Title	Current Members	Appointed By	Appointed Date	Expiration Date
1st Cong District	Member	Smith, Peter A.	Governor Marshall C. Sanford, Jr.	5/26/2010	5/19/2014
2nd Cong District	Member	Johnson, Judith E.	Governor Henry McMaster	5/5/2017	5/19/2021
3rd Cong District	Member	VACANT			
4th Cong District	Member	Sonksen, Mary S.	Governor Nikki R. Haley	3/6/2015	5/19/2018
5th Cong District	Member	VACANT			
6th Cong District	Member	Roberson, Rosemary	Governor Marshall C. Sanford, Jr.	6/2010	5/2014
7th Cong District	Member	VACANT			

State law also requires that the commission meet at least once a month. Such frequent meetings are not necessary to conduct the business of the commission and the long-standing vacancies on the commission make it challenging to ensure that a quorum of the board can meet. Accordingly, a change to state law to require bimonthly meetings would be appropriate.

- **Legislative Recommendation: The General Assembly should amend S.C. Code §43-25-10 to require bimonthly meetings for the Commission for the Blind.**

Operations/Programs

The commission offers a range of individualized services to consumers from its Columbia complex as well as its district offices around the state. Eligibility for most of the programs offered by the commission requires a consumer to meet legal blindness standards. These standards are a central visual acuity of 20/200 in the better eye with best corrective lens or a visual field of 20 degrees or less or having a progressive visual disability that will result in legal blindness.

The initial phase for all of the services provided by the commission begins with a determination of eligibility and an assessment of the concerns of the individual consumer regarding performing daily living tasks with vision loss. During an initial interview, information is obtained by counselors related to the medical history, family support, and current living situation of the consumer.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Department

This is the primary program at SCCB and provides employment-related services to all eligible visually impaired South Carolina residents ages 14 and up. Ages 14 to 21 receive pre-employment transition services to assist them in preparing for a future career path through education and training. Consumers receive services through the VR Program to assist them in developing a career path and obtaining the highest level of self-sufficiency possible.

SCCB also operates the Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center (EBMRC) where consumers attend classes in orientation & mobility, home management, manual arts, assistive technology, and receive counseling services for adjustment-to-blindness. These services may include education assistance, vocational training programs, assistive technology devices, and any other assistance possible to remove the barriers to employment that are created by their visual impairment.

Training & Employment Services

When a consumer has worked with a vocational rehabilitation counselor to develop a plan for employment and has received the necessary adjustment-to-blindness training through the EBMRC, they are usually considered “job ready.” At this time, they are referred to the Training & Employment program where an employment consultant will assist the consumer with resume building, interviewing skills, and beginning the process of working with employers to assist the consumer in obtaining employment. This program also provides community presentations and training to assist employers in understanding the needs of the visually impaired. The assistive technology professionals in this program work with consumers and employers to install necessary software and hardware to make it possible for a visually impaired person to perform the same work as a person without a visual impairment.

Older Blind Program, Children's Services, Prevention and Low Vision Clinics

The Older Blind Program provides services to eligible South Carolina residents aged 55 and older to reduce dependence on public services, provide seniors with the ability to remain in their own homes as long as possible, and reduce the isolation that a majority feel when they begin to lose their visual acuity. These consumers receive low vision aids, home management training, mobility training, and basic assistive technology assistance.

Children's Services assists legally blind children, ages 3 to 13. Counselors provide direct assistance with adjustment to blindness and vision loss and coordinate a variety of other community resources, which may also include providing assistance for children with multiple disabilities. Children's Services collaborates with other agencies, local school districts, and the SC School for the Deaf and Blind as appropriate. In addition to daily living skills, the services offered further ensures educational goals are met. Assistive low vision devices and technology are provided so that school assignments may be completed outside of the classroom. Children's Services also offers consultation, advocacy, and information and referral services.

The Prevention of Blindness program has only recently been reinstated to provide outreach across the state with services that include vision screenings, eye exams, financial assistance for cataract and detached retina surgeries, and educational services. Educating the public on eye safety and preventative measures that can be utilized for early detection of visual conditions can very often prevent blindness.

The SCCB Low Vision Clinic Program provides quality services for visually impaired individuals so they may effectively utilize their remaining vision. The Clinics are held at several SCCB locations across the state each month. Services provided include a low vision evaluation and training in the use of prescribed low vision aids. The aids often provided include, but are not limited to, basic handheld lighted magnifiers, digital magnifiers, monoculars, low vision glasses, and special sun filters.

Business Enterprise Program

The Business Enterprise Program operates under the federal Randolph Sheppard Act of 1974. This Act requires qualified blind individuals be given a priority to operate vending facilities on Federal properties. The majority of states also require this same priority for State buildings and in some locations, counties also offer the same priority. The licensing agency in each state is responsible for providing the training and support for the vendors to be successful in operating their facility. In South Carolina there are currently 110 vending facilities that range from small vending machine routes to a large military facility contract. SCCB currently supports 83 vendors and is working to expand the program with new military and state contracts. South Carolina currently oversees the third largest Business Enterprise Program in the United States.

Outdated Policies and Procedures

We noted that several departments at the commission have outdated policies and procedures manuals. The manual for the Vocational Rehabilitation Consumer Services area is currently being updated to comply with federal law changes. The commission should review all operational areas to determine if the written policies and procedures governing those areas need revision or updating. If changes are necessary, those changes should be completed as soon as possible.

- **Agency Recommendation: The South Carolina Commission for the Blind should update the written policies and procedures governing all areas of its operations, as necessary.**

Finance:

Revenues

The South Carolina Commission for the Blind had revenues of \$12.1 million for FY16-17 primarily from federal funds and general funds. During FY 15-16, SCCB carried forward \$994,449 from the prior year and during FY 16-17 the agency carried forward approximately \$1.04 million from the prior year. Therefore, although expenditures exceeded revenues for both years as shown in the table below, the agency had carryforward funds available to cover these expenditures. The table below shows revenues and expenditures by fund for the last two fiscal years.

Fund	FY 15-16		FY 16-17	
	Revenues	Expenditures	Revenues	Expenditures
	\$	\$	\$	\$
Federal Funds	7,319,940	7,529,829	8,489,530	8,433,247
General Fund	3,147,333	3,137,787	3,498,525	3,730,608
Operating Revenue	63,952	42,828	73,143	20,435
Operator Benefit Account	16,766	0	15,587	0
Sale of Assets	4,316	0	19,565	0
Donations	<u>1,620</u>	<u>10,732</u>	<u>4,084</u>	<u>4,637</u>
Total	10,553,927	10,721,177	12,100,433	12,188,928

Budget Request

The commission is requesting recurring state funds in the amount of \$125,000 in its FY 18-19 budget request to be used in the Children's Services Program (\$25,000) and the Prevention of Blindness Program (\$100,000). Both of these programs are 100% state funded. These funds will help bring the prevention program back to pre-recession funding levels. In addition, the commission is requesting \$195,000 in non-recurring funds to purchase a customized mobile unit to provide assessments, vision screening, and testing to allow a team to bring these services to rural area consumers.

Staffing

As of January 26, 2018, the commission has ninety-two filled positions out of 116.49 authorized FTEs and eighteen temporary employees. The commission has seen some fluctuations in its level of filled positions over the past several years. For example, at June 30, 2015, the number of filled positions dropped to eighty-three. The table below shows the level of filled positions and temporary positions at the dates shown.

Date	Filled Positions	Temporary Positions
1/26/2018	92	18
1/31/2017	96	23
6/30/2016	96	22
6/30/2015	83	20
6/30/2014	91	23

Conversion of Temporary Positions to FTEs

To comply with an initiative from the Department of Administration's Division of State Human Resources, the commission is converting 9.64 temporary positions to FTEs with an effective date of February 2, 2018. These conversions will improve service delivery to consumers and allow the agency to provide services in line with changing federal and state regulations. In addition, these conversions will allow the employees to participate in benefit programs which would otherwise not be available. According to an estimate prepared by the commission, these conversions will increase expenses by no more than \$54,700 per year.

District Offices

The SC Commission for the Blind operates eight district offices as well as its Columbia complex. These district offices provide services to consumers who may have difficulty obtaining transportation to the Columbia office. The numbers of employees at each of the district offices as of February 21, 2018, are shown in the table below.

Office Location	Number of Employees
Aiken	2
Charleston	7
Columbia	82
Conway	2
Florence	3
Greenville	9
Greenwood	3
Rock Hill	2
Walterboro	1
Total	111

II. Issues

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

The primary program offered by the South Carolina Commission for the Blind is the vocational rehabilitation (VR) services program offered to assist consumers in developing a career path and obtaining the highest level of self-sufficiency possible. The focus of the VR program is to ensure that every visually impaired citizen in the state wishing to obtain employment is provided the tools and services to reach their goal. These services may include education assistance, vocational training programs, assistive technology devices, and any other assistance which removes barriers to employment. The VR division employs counselors who provide assistance to consumers as they gain the skills needed for employment. The table below shows the amount spent for this program for the last three fiscal years.

Fiscal Year	Total State Funds	Total Federal Funds	Total Funds Spent
FY 14-15	\$992,012	\$3,917,488	\$4,909,500
FY 15-16	\$741,847	\$4,494,481	\$5,236,328
FY 16-17	\$1,025,087	\$4,884,051	\$5,909,138

Results of Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment

The results of a Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) conducted by the Interwork Institute at San Diego State University were received by the commission in March 2016 and noted a decline in cases closed successfully. The table below shows the numbers of referrals, active cases, cases closed successfully and unsuccessfully over the past three fiscal years.

Status:	FY 14-15	FY 15-16	FY 16-17
Referrals	677	696	714
Active Cases	1,227	1,108	1,043
Cases Closed Successfully	153	107	85
Cases Closed Unsuccessfully	299	329	210

General agency performance was reviewed, and according to the assessment, although SCCB has consistently met most federal standards over the past five years, there has been a significant drop off in the past three years in the number of cases closed with an employment outcome. The report states that possible explanations for the decline include reductions in force, office closures, staff turnover, and ending the practice of taking “Homemaker” and “Unpaid Family Worker” closures. According to an SCCB official, the commission had a practice of making “Homemaker” closures in its VR program in past years. However, the homemaker status was eliminated under WIOA and has resulted in a decline in the number of successful employment closures for SCCB. According to information supplied by SCCB, the five most common standard occupational codes in which employment outcomes for federal fiscal years 2015 through 2017 were classified are as follows:

#	Standard Occupational Codes	Occupations Included
1	Office and Administrative Support Occupations	Administrative support, financial clerks, answering service operators
2	Management Occupations	Food service managers, general managers, IT managers
3	Sales and Related Occupations	Cashiers, retail salesperson, childcare workers
4	Production Occupations	Assembly line, bakers, laundry workers
5	Building and Grounds Cleaning & Maintenance Occupations	Janitors, landscapers, personal care workers

Other areas of concern under the agency performance section included the speed of services and low morale across the agency fueled by high turnover, low pay, high workloads, and lack of recognition. The report mentions that staff recognized that the VR program was “turning in a positive direction” and staff were generally hopeful that their concerns would be appropriately addressed. The CSNA was required as a mandate under the federal program which provides the main source of funding for the commission’s VR department. The researchers who conducted the assessment solicited information from four primary stakeholder groups: consumers of SCCB, community partners of the commission such as educational institutions, SCCB staff, and representatives of businesses operating in the state. The results of the CSNA are to be used by the VR agency in the planning of programs and services and the establishment of goals and priorities.

- **Agency Recommendation: The South Carolina Commission for the Blind should continue working on recommendations which support the mission of the SCCB, as contained in the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA).**

Changes Brought about by WIOA

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law on July 22, 2014, representing the most significant reform to the nation's public workforce development system in nearly 20 years. WIOA replaced the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and required extensive changes to the provision of services for workforce development for several state agencies. WIOA regulations require that state agencies partner to offer services to consumers and better utilize resources across the state. The partnerships must have formal agreements or memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that provide details and specifics on services available to consumers of all agencies.

Representatives of SCCB participated in the development of the WIOA Unified State Plan, which outlines a four-year workforce development strategy for the state. The agencies participating in the State Plan are the Department of Employment and Workforce (DEW), the State Department of Education, Office of Adult Education (OAE), the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department (SCVRD), and SCCB.

Under the Unified State Plan, the state agreed to realign all cooperative agreements to comply with WIOA mandates and build meaningful reciprocal partnerships with various federal, state, and local agencies and programs. In addition, SCCB agreed to coordinate with other agencies such as the Department of Disabilities and Special Needs (DDSN) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), that are not a part of the workforce development system to ensure people with disabilities receive appropriate services.

According to an official with the commission, in order to comply with WIOA, written agreements or memorandums of understanding (MOUs) have been established between the commission and the following agencies:

- SCWorks locations under DEW
- South Carolina Department of Education
- South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department
- Various school districts within the state
- South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind

Under the agreement with SCWorks, the commission as a required partner agrees to provide access to its VR program through SCWorks' locations around the state. The purpose of the collaboration outlined in the agreement include increasing access to and opportunities for the employment, education, training, and support services that individuals need, particularly those with barriers to employment. In keeping with the priorities of WIOA, the partners agree to jointly fund the infrastructure costs of the one-stop SCWorks through partner contributions based on federal cost principles.

In addition, the commission is in the process of establishing agreements with all 81 school districts in the state through the OAE of the State Department of Education. Under these agreements, the commission and districts agree "to partner together to ensure the successful transition of eligible students with disabilities, from school to rehabilitation and employment." Per the agreement, SCCB will be available via phone during Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, scheduled appointments, and/or email to provide consultation, application, and eligibility information about VR services. In addition, SCCB transition counselors will provide vocational

rehabilitation counseling and guidance to eligible students with disabilities. These services will be provided with the written consent of the parents or adult student.

Transition Services

According to an SCCB official, one of the biggest challenges brought about under WIOA was the requirement of a 15% set-aside for pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) for teenagers. The funding for this mandate must come out of existing federal funding and must be spent in five areas, as follows:

- Career Exploration Counseling
- Work Based Learning Experiences
- College Exploration Tours
- Self-Advocacy Skills Training
- Work Readiness Training

Pre-ETS are provided to youth ages 14 through 21 and include activities such as internships, employer tours, job shadowing, and college tours. In addition, services include training on social and soft skill development and daily living skills that support employment training. The commission provides these services to youth internally through transition VR counselors, but also externally through the CareerBOOST (Building Occupational Opportunities for Students in Transition) program. CareerBOOST is a partnership between the commission, SCVRD, local schools, the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina, and other related agencies.

As a two-year pilot project, SCCB hired three contractors to provide the CareerBOOST program to groups or individually around the state in collaboration with local schools and in other local community settings. In school settings, the programs are offered in special education classrooms to students with a range of disabilities. If a visually impaired youth participates, SCCB will pay for the program. Between October 2016 and September 2017, SCCB spent \$753,990 to provide the program to 896 youths. In September 2018 the pilot program will be assessed for future use.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Hiring and Compensation

A common complaint heard at the SCCB is that vocational rehabilitation counselors leave for better paying opportunities. As a result, the agency is left with vacancies which are difficult to fill and areas understaffed for extended periods. According to the agency, the turnover rates for vocational rehabilitation counselors and for the agency overall were as follows over the last five fiscal years:

FY	Turnover Rates for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors at SCCB	Turnover Rates for All Employees at SCCB
FY 12-13	12%	7%
FY 13-14	35%	10%
FY 14-15	24%	11%
FY 15-16	18%	7%
FY 16-17	12%	7%

The turnover rates for vocational rehabilitation counselors are higher than the overall turnover rates, and for some years considerably higher. One reason given for the difficulty in hiring is that other agencies hire

individuals with similar qualifications at a higher pay level. The preferred qualifications for a counselor at the commission include a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) designation, and specialized experience. However, master's degrees from other areas are accepted, and work towards the CRC certification will be considered, since many times counselors are hired directly out of college.

We obtained a salary comparison from the Division of State Human Resources comparing the average annual salaries for two job classes used by a number of state agencies that hire counselors, such as the SC Vocational Rehabilitation Department (SCVRD), the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Social Services, and the Commission for the Blind. The average annual salaries for the counselors employed by SCCB in these two classes were significantly lower than the salaries for counselors employed by SCVRD. Specifically, the average annual salaries at SCVRD are higher by approximately \$8,500 per year for a Human Services Specialist I and \$5,800 per year for a Human Services Coordinator I.

Counselors working at SCCB and SCVRD perform similar duties, in that the core service provided is vocational rehabilitation counseling. In addition, under WIOA, these two agencies work collaboratively under the Unified State Plan as well as a memorandum of understanding. The Commission for the Blind is at a disadvantage when hiring counselors because of the lower salaries offered. Counselors at the Commission for the Blind are working in a specialized area with individuals considered to be significantly disabled. The disparity between the counselors' salaries for SCCB and SCVRD was reviewed by agency officials, taking into account the minimum training, education, duties, and responsibilities for these positions. In its FY 19-20 budget request, SCCB requested \$210,000 in general funds to align vocational rehabilitation counselors and counselor assistant salaries with comparable position salaries within the state of South Carolina. According to the budget request, this increase will allow the commission to attract and retain qualified counselors and assistants with the necessary skills to serve clients and will assist in promoting retention and improving turnover in these positions. The House Ways and Means Committee granted SCCB \$210,000 in general funds for the salary alignment in H.4000, the FY 19-20 appropriation bill.

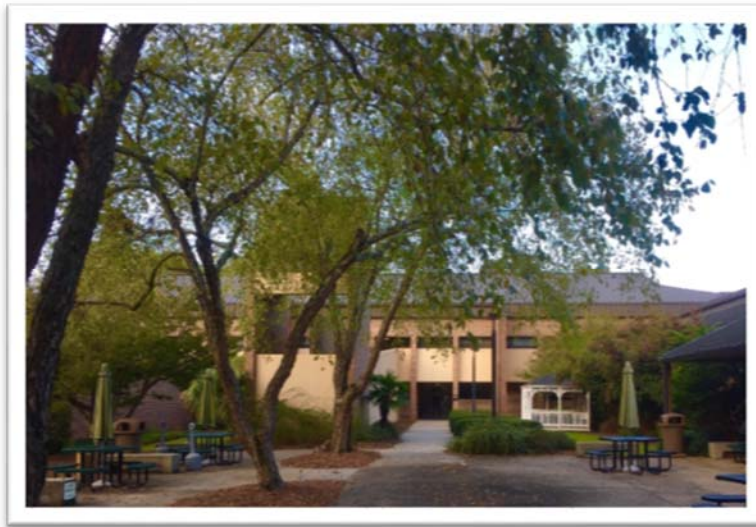
- **Legislative Recommendation: The General Assembly should consider increasing counselor and counselor assistant salaries at the South Carolina Commission for the Blind at a cost of \$210,000 in general funds. This increase would provide that the thirty counselor positions at SCCB would align with similar counselor positions within the state of South Carolina.**

Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center (EBMRC)

The EBMRC is a residential training facility located at the commission's offices in Columbia. Consumers are provided transportation to and from the facility and stay at the facility Monday through Friday where staff is available 24-hours a day. The programs offered include:

- Orientation and Mobility
- Braille Literacy
- Training on JAWS and ZOOM (magnification device and screen reader)
- Home and Personal Management
- Manual Arts
- Interpersonal Communications

The EBMRC has dormitory accommodations for up to 36 trainees and recreational areas including a gym, weight room, and a bowling alley. The picture below shows the center's courtyard area.



The table below shows the amounts spent on the operation of the center, the number of consumers served by the center, and the average funds spent per consumer for the last three fiscal years.

Fiscal Year	Total State Funds	Total Federal Funds	Total Funds Spent	# of Consumers Assisted	Average Funds Spent per Consumer
FY 14-15	\$170,148	\$941,986	\$1,112,134	82	\$13,563
FY 15-16	\$202,404	\$915,941	\$1,118,345	91	\$12,290
FY 16-17	\$249,032	\$946,904	\$1,195,936	144	\$8,305

A sub-section on the EBMRC in the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) included several unfavorable conclusions. It reported that for 2014, 82% of the closed cases did not have an employment outcome. Further, the CSNA stated that based on “SCCB’s most recently reported data for FY 2011-2015 [only] 37% of EBMRC cases were closed successfully.” The following recommendations were received from SCCB staff and other key informants for the CSNA regarding the center:

- Strengthen assessment in order to better individualize services and measure quality.
 - Focus more on employment related training.
 - There is a significant amount of unused physical space. Explore options for maximizing the space (e.g. for training programs).
 - Management needs to be more supportive of the program; more qualified staff need to be hired and better staff development needs to be offered.
- **Agency Recommendation: The South Carolina Commission for the Blind should evaluate the programs offered by the Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center, the unused space at the center, and the findings included in the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) in order to develop a strategic plan to improve the operations of the center.**

Training & Employment Division

The commission’s Training & Employment Division assists consumers in training and places individuals who are blind or visually impaired in jobs that suit their individual skills and needs. A consumer typically has

received the necessary adjustment to blindness training through the EBMRC, and is considered “job ready.” The following services are provided by the Training & Employment Division:

- Career assessment
- Career training and technical assistance
- Customized training
- Employment services
- Job-readiness and training
- Internships
- On-the-job training

The table below shows the number of consumers served, the number of job placements, and the amounts spent by this division for the last three fiscal years.

Fiscal Year	Total State Funds	Total Federal Funds	Total Funds Spent	Number of Consumers Assisted	Number of Job Placements
FY 14-15	\$122,611	\$836,749	\$959,360	388	41
FY 15-16	\$120,129	\$712,689	\$832,818	422	33
FY 16-17	\$212,231	\$798,028	\$1,010,259	502	24

In this division, employment consultants work with consumers and vocational rehabilitation counselors to aid consumers in their job search and placement. The employment consultants offer services such as career and job explorations, resume building and interviewing skills. These consultants also recruit employers and assist them in understanding the needs of the visually impaired. Training and Employment Division staff participate in job fairs, community events, and Workforce Development meetings in order to provide information to potential employers concerning accommodations for visually impaired employees.

A technology training unit is housed within this division to help consumers acquire and use assistive technology. The assistive technology professionals work with both consumers and employers to install necessary software and hardware to make it possible for a visually impaired person to perform the same work as a person without a visual impairment. For example, JAWS (Job Access With Speech) is a screen reader which provides speech and Braille output for most computer applications.

Business Enterprise Program

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides employment opportunities to blind consumers by training and licensing them to operate their own businesses in rest stop vending operations, snack bars, and cafeterias throughout the state. The Randolph-Sheppard Act was established in 1936 and provides qualified blind individuals the opportunity to operate businesses on federal property by granting them priority on such property. In turn, the majority of states have established similar laws that included state, county, and municipal property. In South Carolina, there are currently over 100 vending facilities that range from small vending machine routes to a large facility contract at Fort Jackson. SCCB currently supports 92 blind vendors, and is working to expand the program with new military and state contracts. Blind vendors operate facilities along the state’s highways in rest areas, in several state correctional facilities, and in several locations at the Savannah River Site. South Carolina currently oversees the third largest BEP in the United States.

Eligibility, Training and Placement

Becoming a blind, licensed vendor allows consumers to become the owner of a vending business with support from the SCCB. In order to qualify, participants must be legally blind, at least 18 years of age or older, and a legal resident of the United States and South Carolina. In addition, a consumer must pass a background check and possess a high school diploma or GED. Participants must have good mathematical, organizational, and public relations skills and be able to perform the required day-to-day tasks, including getting to work independently and safely.

Training consists of 8 weeks of classroom training in courses covering state laws and policies, customer service, and food safety regulations. After the classroom training is completed, the consumers participate in 8 weeks of on-the-job training at various BEP locations. During training, consumers reside at the Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center. Once the training course is completed, a participant will receive a Level 1 license and be eligible to take the ServSafe exam. ServSafe is a program for safe food handling used by the foodservice industry. A licensee can continue with training to earn various levels of licensure, including a Level IV which would qualify him or her to bid on any of the available vending facilities throughout the state. However, becoming licensed does not guarantee a vendor a facility, as all facilities are assigned according to a bid process.

Upon completion of the initial training and licensure, a consumer may bid for an available vending location. Selections are based on skills, performance, and experience and income potential varies with the location and size of the vending operation. The vendor and SCCB enter into an operating agreement when a location is assigned which outlines the responsibilities of each party. Blind vendors pay no rent or other assessments to the locations where the vending businesses are established. In addition, they receive assistance with startup costs. Once a vendor is assigned to an area, the agency provides them with sufficient cash and merchandise to begin business operations. The amount provided is dependent upon the type and size of the facility. This amount is also paid back to the agency within the first year of operation. Merchandise inventory records are kept and submitted to SCCB every January 15th by the vendors. Under state law, SCCB provides vending machines and other equipment necessary to operate the business, and is responsible for the repair and maintenance of the machines. The machines remain the property of the agency, and not the vendor. The number of participants in the BEP has decreased over the past three fiscal years, going from 88 participants in FY 14-15 to 81 in FY 16-17.

The table below shows the amounts spent for the BEP for the last three fiscal years and the numbers of BEP participants.

Amounts Spent and Number of BEP Participants			
	FY 14-15	FY 15-16	FY 16-17
	\$	\$	\$
State Funds	138,684	281,117	278,633
Federal Funds	<u>1,125,782</u>	<u>881,159</u>	<u>1,204,326</u>
Total	1,264,466	1,162,276	1,482,959
Number of BEP Participants	88	82	81

Vendors operate the facility as their own business, and receive income from the net profits. They are responsible for filing their own tax returns, obtaining business licenses, and for any other requirements of a business owner. According to an official with SCCB, the average annual amount of income received by a vendor is \$41,000. This is based on vending operations excluding the operations at Fort Jackson, which distort the results, if included. The cafeteria and food related services at Fort Jackson in Columbia are part of the BEP

operated by the SCCB. The Fort Jackson operations made up over 82% of the gross sales of the BEP for federal fiscal year 2015 and had gross sales totaling over \$30 million, according to a report of South Carolina operations available on the website of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) of the U.S. Department of Education.

Unassigned Vending Machine Income

SCCB receives commissions related to the BEP referred to as “unassigned vending machine income.” These commissions are paid into the BEP when certain vending operations or areas of vending operations which are eligible to be operated by a blind vendor are not. For example, certain state prisons are not operated by blind vendors because of safety concerns. Therefore, the vendors operating those vending machines pay the BEP a commission for this opportunity.

SCCB reported having \$29,645 in federal funds and \$403,423 in state funds relating to unassigned vending machine income in May 2017, which had accumulated over approximately six years. Plans were to distribute some of these funds to the BEP vendors as a “vendor benefit” to be used towards retirement or pension expenses, sick leave, and vacation leave. A proposal to distribute these funds was voted on by all BEP vendors in May 2017, as required by RSA since federal monies were involved. The proposal to distribute these funds was:

- Distribute all funds currently in the federal account among the eligible blind vendors.
- 100% of unassigned vending income from federal properties will be divided equally and disbursed annually to all eligible licensed blind vendors.
- Expend the current balance in the non-federal vending machine account with 25% being divided among eligible blind vendors, 50% being used for programmatic purposes, and 25% going into a reserve fund.
- In the future, distribute funds from vending machines on non-federal property with 30% being distributed to eligible blind vendors, 50% for programmatic purposes, and 20% going into the reserve fund.

Distribution of the funds on hand in May 2017 resulted in state funds of \$99,669 and federal funds of \$29,295 being distributed among 84 vendors who received \$1,186.54 each in state funds and \$348.75 each in federal funds. According to federal policy, programmatic purposes could include remodeling or refurbishing facilities, providing new or updated equipment, salary and fringe expenses, training expenses or anything directly related to the operation of the program. According to SCCB, the yearly amounts received from unassigned vending machine income have varied. Based on the past three years, the yearly average for federal funds has been \$17,200 and \$68,119 for state funds.

Older Blind Program, Children’s Services and Prevention

Older Blind Program

The Older Blind Program provides services for individuals 55 and older to assist with appropriate adjustment-to-blindness training. Services may include:

- Counseling and guidance
- Helpful methods for managing personal care and daily tasks
- Adjustment-to-blindness skills training
- Labeling and organizing items around the home
- Safe cooking techniques
- Referrals to community services

- Orientation and mobility instruction
- Low vision evaluation and aids

Training is conducted primarily in the individual’s home and is designed so that consumers may live more independently within their home. Requests for services are routinely addressed on a “first-inquiry, first-served” basis. Through this program, progressive or total loss of vision may be prevented, and the need for individuals to require vision rehabilitation services is reduced, resulting in cost savings for the state. Activities to increase the social interactions and reduce isolation for many older adults who remain in their homes with limited transportation options are made available. These activities include senior camp, computer training, and mobility training. Staff for SCCB noted that the Older Blind Program exceeded program goals for FY 16-17. The table below shows the number of consumers served and the amounts spent for this program.

Fiscal Year	Total Spent Including State & Federal Funds	# of Consumers Assisted
FY 14-15	\$569,598	724
FY 15-16	\$624,723	763
FY 16-17	\$702,628	747

Children’s Services

It is the goal of the department of children’s services to afford blind or visually impaired children the opportunity to develop their maximum personal growth, achieve educational goals, and reach their full potential. Children ages 3 through 14 are assisted. Beginning at age 14 children are referred to the commission’s vocational rehabilitation transition program, which provides educational and career guidance services. The number of children assisted and the amounts spent for the last three fiscal years are shown in the table below. These services are provided with 100% state funding.

Fiscal Year	Total State Funds Spent	# of Children Assisted
FY 14-15	\$98,246	87
FY 15-16	\$171,880	93
FY 16-17	\$218,141	86

After eligibility is determined, a plan of service is developed for a child within 45 days of application, and will document the treatment process, any referrals needed, and goals to be met.

The services provided to children are often used to supplement what these consumers are unable to obtain from other resources. For example, since schools do not permit the children to take assistive equipment out of the classroom, the commission provides essential technical equipment for use at home to complete school assignments. According to an official with the commission, all of the schools with which the commission is associated have maintained that adaptive equipment must remain at school. Some schools may offer to establish a contract with the parents or guardians to allow students to take equipment home. However, most families do not opt to do so, since the equipment is too large and costly to transport back and forth.

The costs for assistive equipment can be significant since many children remain on the caseload for up to ten years and the equipment needs frequently change each year. The table below lists the types of equipment provided by the commission and the approximate prices.

Equipment	Approximate Price
CCTV	\$2,200
iPad	\$900
Various Software	\$700 to \$800
Vision Devices	\$500 to \$600
Braillers	\$800 to \$900
Source: FY 18-19 Budget Request	

Low vision exams are offered as well as equipment to help with low vision such as digital and lighted magnifiers, sun filters, CCTVs, and monoculars. Training in orientation and mobility and replacement of canes are also offered as needed. This department also provides advocacy services to ensure all accommodations are being made in the school setting and the goals of the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are being met. Counselors meet with schools, guidance counselors, and teachers regarding a child’s special vision needs.

Prevention Services

Prevention Services provides outreach across the state with services that include vision screenings, eye exams, financial assistance for cataract and detached retina surgeries and eyeglasses, and educational services. These preventive measures can often prevent blindness. The table below outlines the number of consumers served and the amount spent on prevention services for the last two fiscal years.

Fiscal Year	Total State Funds Spent	# of Consumers Assisted
FY 15-16	\$70,886	32
FY 16-17	\$144,860	89

Beginning in 2008, state funding for the program was reduced due to the recession. Eventually, no funding was appropriated for the program for three years during FY 12-13 through FY 14-15. The program was re-established in FY 15-16 with an appropriation of \$150,000, and the commission once again began providing prevention services. The program currently is operating with an appropriation of \$150,426 for FY 17-18. The commission is making efforts to restore the program to pre-recession funding levels, according to its FY 18-19 budget request. The commission recently hired a Prevention of Blindness Program counselor and plans are in place to develop additional marketing efforts.

In order to qualify for services, a consumer must be a U.S. citizen and a resident of South Carolina, must meet federal poverty guidelines, and must not be covered by Medicare, Medicaid, or health insurance. When an individual is determined eligible and a surgical procedure is approved, a counselor is responsible for contacting the office of the examining ophthalmologist and coordinating the scheduling of the surgical procedure. The doctors performing surgery under this program agree to accept the Medicaid rate for the surgery. Average prices for surgeries and services under the prevention program are shown in the table below as well as the number of services performed in each category for FY 16-17.

Service	Average Price	# of Services Provided in FY 16-17
Cataract surgery	\$1,500	25
Retinal detachment surgery	\$1,625	7
Comprehensive eye exam	\$94	51
Eye glasses with standard frames	\$300 (but may pay up to \$500 if specialized lenses are required)	29