**Bill Robinson**

**State Director**

**Bureau of Services for Blind Persons**

**702. W. Kalamazoo**

**PO Box 30652**

**Lansing, MI 48915**

**517-335-4265**



**Bill Robinson, President ▪ Dr. Bernice Davis, President-Elect ▪ Tracy Brigham, Treasurer ▪ Cassondra Williams-Stokes, DM, Secretary**

January 6, 2021

Dear NCSAB Membership:

The mission of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) is to promote through advocacy, coordination, and education the delivery of specialized services that enable individuals who are blind and visually impaired to achieve personal and vocational independence.

In furtherance of NCSAB’s mission, the Executive Committee, led by the efforts of Greg Trapp, J.D., Executive Director, New Mexico Commission for the Blind, drafted a position regarding the priority of vaccination for individuals with disabilities. The position was presented at the business meeting of the 2020 Winter Virtual Conference. Based on feedback to date and the Executive Committee’s approval, I am pleased to share with you the formal position of NCSAB regarding vaccine prioritization adopted December 11, 2020.

**BACKGROUND**

State agencies for the blind provide vocational rehabilitation and independent living services to persons who are blind or visually impaired. This is accomplished through funding provided by the United States Department of Education. Vocational rehabilitation services enable persons who are blind or visually impaired to be competitively employed. Independent living services enable blind or visually impaired persons to live independently in their own homes and communities. The majority of independent living services are provided to seniors who have lost vision due to age-related blindness. The services are provided by rehabilitation teachers and include Orientation & Mobility instruction that enable persons who are blind or visually impaired to safely travel using a white cane. The rehabilitation teaching also includes instruction in Braille, assistive technology, adaptive cooking, and personal management.

**NCSAB Position on Vaccine Prioritization**

It is the position of NCSAB that rehabilitation professionals employed by state agencies for the blind should be given a high vaccine priority, either as other health workers, frontline workers, or essential workers.

**Rationale**

\*The services provided by state agencies for the blind are essential to preserve the health and safety of persons who are blind or visually impaired. State agencies for the blind routinely interact in person with individuals who are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19, including individuals from vulnerable population groups.

\*The CDC has stated that older adults are at greatest risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Agencies for the blind administer the federal Older Blind program and serve seniors with age-related vision loss. Agencies for the blind provide seniors with critical rehabilitation teaching in cane travel and other blindness skills. Without this rehabilitation teaching, blind seniors are at increased risk of injury from falls, misidentification of medication, and cooking accidents.

\*The CDC has identified Type 2 Diabetes as a risk factor for severe illness from COVID-19, and Type 1 Diabetes as a potential risk factor. Diabetes is the leading cause of new cases of blindness in adults aged 20 to 74, and persons with diabetic retinopathy constitute a significant portion of persons served by state agencies for the blind. According to a study recently published in Diabetes Research and Clinical Practice, persons who had severe COVID-19 and diabetic Retinopathy have a five-fold increased risk for intubation. A person with severe COVID-19 who is intubated has a significantly diminished chance of survival.

\*The CDC has identified obesity as a risk factor for severe illness from COVID-19 and being overweight as a potential risk factor. Persons who are blind or visually impaired are 1.5 times more likely to be obese. Obesity also increases the risk for blindness from glaucoma, diabetes, and macular degeneration. Age-related macular degeneration is the most common form of macular degeneration, and the majority of persons served through the Older Blind program have macular degeneration. The combination of age and obesity means that these individuals are at increased risk of severe illness due to COVID-19.

\*Persons who are blind or visually impaired have limited access to transportation resources, including ride sharing services which prohibit persons who have COVID-19 symptoms from using their services. As a result, many persons who are blind or visually impaired are often unable to travel to public testing locations, many of which are drive-through. Persons who are blind also have restricted access to outpatient clinics, including infusion clinics where intravenous doses of Remdesivir or Bamlanivimab are administered.

Approved for distribution by the NCSAB Executive Committee (<http://www.ncsab.org/Home/ExecCommittee>)

January 5, 2021