

# Board of Directors

Name:	Position:	City:
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Claude Louishomme	Vice Chairperson	Kearney
Joni Thomas	Treasurer	Lincoln
Lisa Casullo	Secretary	Lincoln
Aimée Folker		Omaha
Seamus Kelly		Omaha
Paulissa Kipp		Omaha
Danielle Schutz		Lincoln

# Our Staff

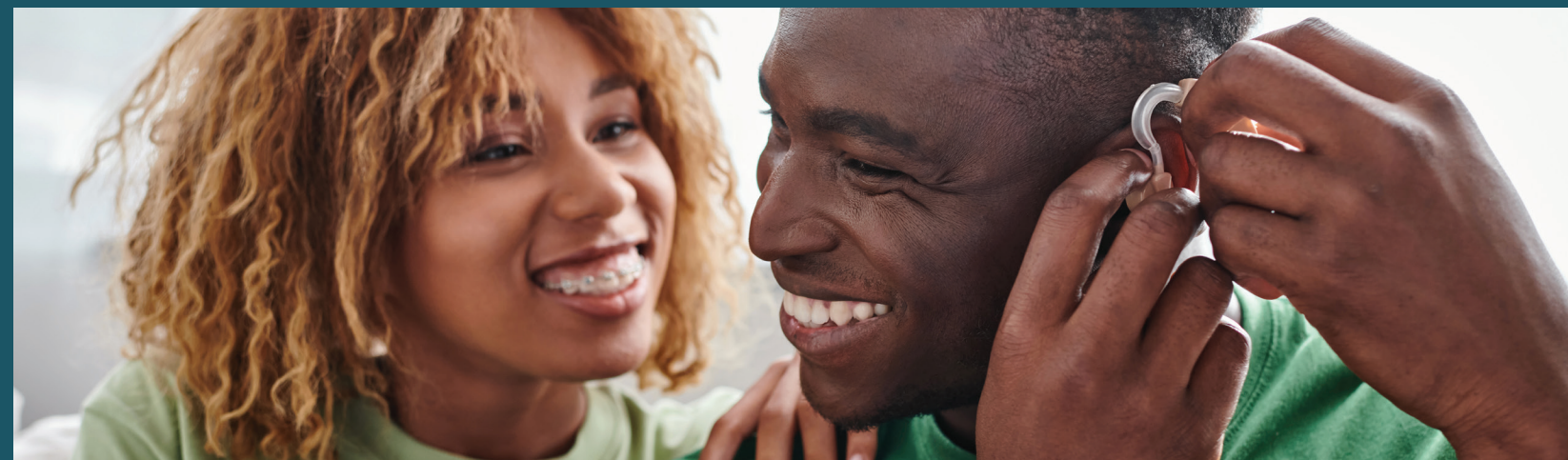
Tania Diaz	Chief Executive Officer
Judy Sinner	Fiscal and Human Resources Director
Dianne DeLair	Legal Services Director
Amy A. Miller	Monitoring Attorney
Madison Wurtele	Attorney
Katie Barmettler	Values-Based Program Director
Patricia Cottingham	Inclusive Education Lay Advocacy Coordinator
Bradley A. Meurrens	Public Policy Director
Molly Klocksinn	Advocacy Specialist
Mindy Larson	Community Outreach Disability Advocate
Yorlenny Diaz-Sullivan	Intake Specialist
Karen Masterson	Representative Payee Program Manager
Patricia Nichelson	Legal Assistant
Sharon Ohmberger	Community Engagement Director
Jillian Ward	Business Operations and IT Coordinator
Adalia Henderson	Administrative Secretary
Liza Howell	Program and Administrative Assistant
Sarah Gospodarek	Law Clerk
Danielle Thompson	Law Clerk

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# Annual Report

Protection and Advocacy for People with Disabilities.



2024



Disability Rights Nebraska is a proud member of Give Nebraska. Learn more at [GiveNebraska.org](http://GiveNebraska.org)

Visit us online for more information at [disabilityrightsnebraska.org](http://disabilityrightsnebraska.org)





# Nebraska Supported Employment Summit Action Plan

1. Promote and expect employment as a natural part of high school transition and adulthood.
2. Ensure Supported Employment professionals are equipped with the key skills and competencies necessary for success.
3. Ensure connecting people with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) happens quickly and successfully.
4. Ensure a seamless transition of funding from VR to Division of Behavioral Health (DBH) or Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) so the individual and employer do not even notice.
5. Ensure the funding administered by VR, DBH, and DDD is used to support and incentivize best practices in Supported Employment service provision.
6. Ensure the general public and employers see people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) and behavioral health needs as capable of being valued members of the State's workforce.
7. Ensure the data that best measures our success is available, accurate and shared with all stakeholders.

The Supported Employment Action Plan and Dr. Mills were featured at our annual Tri-Board meeting on June 28, 2024. A Tri-Board meeting each year takes place between Disability Rights Nebraska, Nebraska Council on Developmental Disabilities and MMI UCEDD. Disability Rights Nebraska contracted with Dr. Mills for her participation at the Tri-Board meeting and we also contracted with an expert on employment, Becki Koehler, to ensure that state agencies are continuing to work together on employment. Our organization, along with members of the Board of Directors, attended this event. Participant feedback was very positive about the event with many people commenting that the panel involving people with developmental disabilities that are competitively employed talking about their work experience was a great addition to the day.

## Supported Employment

### Fiscal Year 2024

The Nebraska Council on Developmental Disabilities, Disability Rights Nebraska and the Munroe-Meyer Institute University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (MMI UCEDD) collaborated with state agencies, including the Nebraska DHHS DD Division, Behavioral Health Division, Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation, Nebraska Association for Service Providers, and the Governor's office to host a one-day invitation only summit on September 20, 2024 of leaders, self-advocates, agency providers, job coaches, legislative staff, and others to identify strategies to improve systems of support in Nebraska for competitive integrated employment.

In 2024, an outside consultant (Dr. Lisa Mills) was contracted through Nebraska Council on Developmental Disabilities and Disability Rights Nebraska to then work with leaders and stakeholders throughout NE, including the NE DD Network Partners, to develop an action plan for Nebraska to improve competitive integrated employment based on summit findings and subsequent work by the respective agencies and organizations.

With input from summit participants and Dr. Mills guidance and drafting, an action plan was created.



# Service Requests by Problem Area

Abuse & Neglect	106
Access to Administrative/Judicial Processes	1
Access to Records	1
Advance Directives	1
Architectural Accessibility	16
Assistive Technology	9
Benefits Planning	1
Custody / Parental Rights	4
Education	27
Employment	31
Financial Entitlement	3
Government Benefits / Services	84
Guardianship / Conservatorship	8
Healthcare	18
Housing	69
Immigration	1
Insurance	2
Juvenile Justice	1
Non-Government Services	37
Post-Secondary Education (PABSS)	12
Privacy Rights	4
Program Access	6
Public Accommodation	1
Quality Assurance	2
Rehabilitation Services	1
Rights Violations	231
Services	96
Transportation	4
Voting	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>782</b>

# Service Request Numbers

## US Department of Health and Human Services

**PADD** Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities

**PAIMI** Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness

**PAAT** Protection and Advocacy for Assistive Technology

**PAVA** Protection and Advocacy for Voting Access

**PATBI** Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Traumatic Brain Injury

## US Department of Education

**PAIR** Protection and Advocacy for Individual Rights

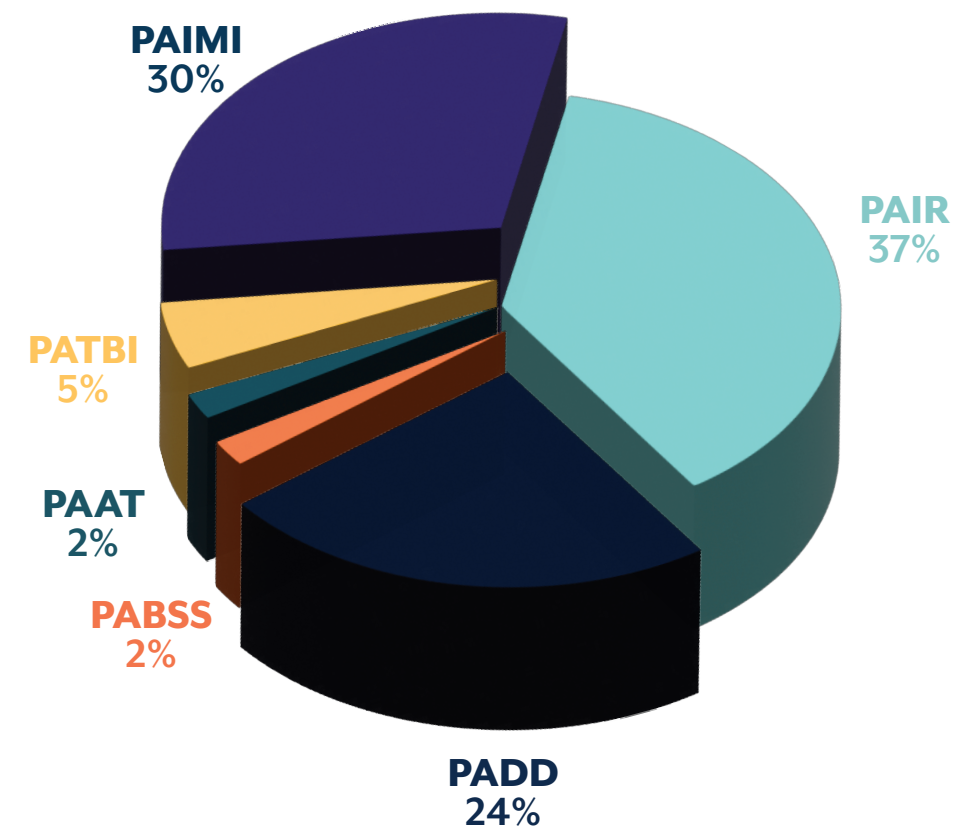
## Social Security Administration

**PABSS** Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security

**PABRP** Representative Payees of Social Security

## Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services

**HHS** Department of Health and Human Services



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# Support and Revenue

FY October 1, 2023 through September 30, 2024

US Dept of Health & Human Services .....	\$1,101,694
US Dept of Education .....	\$179,628
US Social Security Administration .....	\$376,906
NE Dept of Health & Human Services .....	\$555,039
Developmental Disabilities Council .....	\$32,211
University of Nebraska Medical Center .....	\$7,500
Donations, Interest & Other Income .....	\$22,126
<b>Total Revenue.....</b>	<b>\$2,275,104</b>

## EXPENSES

Salaries & Benefits .....	\$1,162,338
Operating Expenses.....	\$208,212
Travel Expenses.....	\$18,672
Educational Expenses.....	\$55,268
Contractual Services .....	\$108,351
Citizen Advocacy Support .....	\$372,046
<b>Total Program Services Expenses.....</b>	<b>\$1,924,887</b>
Fundraising.....	\$28,453
Management & Administration.....	\$328,437
<b>Total Support Services Expenses .....</b>	<b>\$356,890</b>
Total Support and Revenue .....	\$2,275,104
Less Total Expenses.....	\$2,281,777
Change in Net Assets .....	(\$6,673)
Net Assets, beginning of year .....	\$31,249
Net Assets, end of year.....	\$2,151

## Our Mission





Disability Rights Nebraska uses a combination of strategies to promote, protect, and advocate for the legal and human rights of all people with disabilities. We support people to gain full inclusion in home, community, education, and employment beginning with those who learn, live, or work in isolated segregated or congregated settings.

## Our Vision

Disability Rights Nebraska envisions a world where human rights are protected, differences are celebrated and all people have value, visibility, and voice.

## Social Media Followers



-  **YouTube: 50**
-  **Instagram: 291**
-  **Facebook: 2,512**
-  **x: 635**

Press releases issued: **5**

Times a Protection and Advocacy representative was interviewed or featured on TV or radio: **7**

Articles about the Protection and Advocacy System or its work in external mass media such as newspapers, radio, podcasts, blogs, or television: **13**

Social media followers: **3,488**

Absolute unique visitors to blogs/web pages where information about the Protection and Advocacy System is mentioned: **21,349**

Circulation of the Protection and Advocacy System's newsletter and/or listserv updates: **13**

Articles by the Protection and Advocacy System about disability rights issues published in newspapers, books, journals, or magazines: **9**

Links to other disability rights related information sources published on the Protection and Advocacy System website: **120**

Times a Protection and Advocacy System representative exhibited at conferences, community fairs, etc.: **11**

Presentations made to community groups: **46**

# Guarding from the Guardians Report Released

After two years of extensive research, we released a comprehensive exposé describing how guardianship is overused with insufficient oversight to prevent abuse. The report, “Guarding from the Guardians,” combined the details we learned from the lived experiences of Nebraskans we met and interviewed, with the evidence revealed during our thorough review of court records. We uncovered extremely concerning facts. For example, one for-profit guardian had been appointed to three times the recommended number of protected people as clients. The vulnerable Nebraskans under their guardianship power stretched all across the state and lived in some of the worst, most dilapidated assisted living facilities. Using this example, we analyzed how predatory guardians could be paid monthly even though they never visited or called their clients who had no clear path forward to independence. In addition to the identified problems, we provided tried and true solutions that have reformed guardianship practices in other states. The solutions include increased scrutiny of annual financial reports, caseload limits, and additional education for county court judges who oversee guardianship cases. The report was released on the anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act and already has resulted in positive news reports. Disability Rights Nebraska sent a copy of the report to every state senator, every county court judge, and partner advocacy organizations. Our Legal Services Director has long served on the Nebraska Supreme Court Commission on Guardianships and Conservatorships. As such, we have begun a conversation within the judicial branch, and we are considering the possibility of legislative reform in the next calendar year.

# Lincoln Public Schools to End Discriminatory Treatment of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

We fought to protect the rights of a Lincoln Public Schools (LPS) student who was denied attendance at her neighborhood school because she was deaf and had requested the use of her preferred method of communication, American Sign Language (ASL) interpreting. Instead, she was forced to travel over 30 minutes to attend the designated school for students who use ASL to communicate. Under LPS’ cluster school policy, deaf and hard of hearing students who were believed to need ASL interpretation were required to attend cluster schools serving deaf and hard of hearing students. We filed a complaint with the United States Department of Justice alleging the policy violated Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) investigated and found that LPS was in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The DOJ announced that in applying this policy, LPS did not consider the individualized needs of deaf and hard of hearing students and denied them an equal opportunity to participate in their neighborhood schools. “Denying students with disabilities access to their neighborhood schools based on a blanket policy denies such students the opportunity to experience school with their siblings, friends, and neighbors and is discriminatory,” said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division. “The Justice Department is pleased that LPS has changed its practices and will work to ensure that deaf and hard of hearing students have equal educational opportunities.” As a result of our advocacy, our client has returned to her home school with the use of ASL interpreters.

# Community Engagement: Making Connections

Community Engagement is a program area dedicated to building and maintaining in-person relationships, expanding awareness of our work and services, and sharing information internally and externally. The Community Engagement Team is purposeful about connecting people with resources and opportunities, building awareness of our work, and scouting out additional resources and opportunities for collaboration. The Team includes members of the Leadership, Legal Advocacy, Public Policy, Monitoring, and Values-Based Programs Teams.

## In FY 2024, Community Engagement looked like:

- Using our contact networks to find good matches for open positions on the Board of Directors and Mental Illness Advisory Council.
- Recording informational radio interviews about Disability Rights Nebraska with Radio Talking Book Services and KIOS Public Radio.
- Supporting a group of Masters’ degree Counseling students from UNO in developing a report about consumer involvement in policy making.
- Collaborating to get the word out about a highly successful series of Department of Justice statewide town halls focused on the mental health system in Nebraska.
- Providing supporting information for an instructor in Emergency Services to help train first responders how to work with people who use service animals.
- Developing a focused Outreach Plan to help direct our efforts in the next three years.
- Attending and contributing at regular meetings of the four-county south central Nebraska Community Impact Network headquartered in Hastings, Nebraska.

As we get to know individual communities better, we can find ways to serve them better.



# Public Policy

Protecting and advocating for the rights of Nebraskans with disabilities involves a variety of methods. In addition to working through the courts, Disability Rights Nebraska is deeply engaged in the state public policy process. Disability Rights Nebraska works with state senators and other state policymakers to educate them about disability issues. We also are here to help them craft laws and public policies that are more inclusive of, and beneficial to, Nebraskans with disabilities. A highlight of our work from the 2024 session is Legislative Bill 850.

➔ We supported Legislative Bill 850 (LB 850) which increases the efficiency of drawing down federal funds for Nebraska. These funds are to be used to rehabilitate and reuse vacant or abandoned property in small rural communities to build affordable housing. We told senators that Nebraskans with disabilities often struggle to find housing. The struggle becomes even more difficult in smaller rural areas. Nebraskans with disabilities deserve, as anyone else does, housing opportunities that are not just affordable, but also safe and accessible. Affordability means nothing if people with disabilities cannot enter the affordable housing units. LB 850 was amended into LB 1417, which was passed by the legislature and signed into law.

In addition to the time spent working with state policymakers, Disability Rights Nebraska provides numerous presentations and other educational activities to raise awareness of disability issues. Examples include:

- ➔ **Supported Decision Making:** Disability Rights Nebraska hosted a summit meeting to educate individuals with disabilities, families, advocates, and the public about using Supported Decision Making to increase the self-determination of people with disabilities. We brought in a nationally renowned expert to consult on the project and to facilitate the summit meeting. We also leaned on the lived experience of our project's "Family Ambassadors" to demonstrate that Supported Decision Making can be done and concerns can be overcome. The Family Ambassadors gave both a breakout session presentation and a panel discussion. The Family Ambassadors discussed the benefits of Supported Decision for their families and gave participants tips on how to use Supported Decision Making. More than 50 people participated in the event either in-person or via Zoom.
- ➔ **Proclamation for Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome Awareness Month:** May is Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome Awareness Month. Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) is a group of connective tissue disorders that affect the skin, tendons, ligaments, blood vessels, internal organs, or bones. We worked with two students from Omaha Westside High School, to develop language for a proclamation announcing May as EDS Awareness month. We reached out to the Nebraska EDS Support Group to review and edit the language; once approved they agreed to submit the proclamation to Governor Pillen's office for review, formatting, and approval. The proclamation was accepted and Governor Pillen signed the proclamation at the signing ceremony in May.

# Values-Based Program Highlights Annual Report for Media Team

## FY 2024

Disability Rights Nebraska supports five Citizen Advocacy programs in Nebraska as they promote, protect, and defend the well-being, interest, and justice of those impacted by disabilities. The Values-Based Program Director provides consultation on program development, training for staff and board members, and manages operational contracts and evaluations for each office. A new Values-Based Program Director was hired in July 2024.

During FY 24, Disability Rights Nebraska staff members attended forty-two (42) Citizen Advocacy Board meetings and provided orientation related to the Citizen Advocacy Principles and Practices at thirty-five (35) meetings. Support to individual coordinators took place over twenty-eight (28) workdays and twenty-three (23) new coordinator orientation days, in addition to weekly contact, quarterly meetings, and individual assistance with workplan updates. A new coordinator was hired for the Grand Island office in July 2024. Time spent with coordinators was focused on the key office activities of recruiting vulnerable people and advocates, making long-term matches, and providing ongoing support to those who have been matched. An Annual Relationship Review at the end of the fiscal year revealed that the Nebraska Citizen Advocacy offices were supporting 110 active relationships.

The Annual Citizen Advocacy Retreat was held in November 2023 and hosted by the Georgia Citizen Advocacy offices. Coordinators and board members from each Nebraska office attended by Zoom. Offices in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York, Canada, and Australia were also represented. John O'Brien and Derona King presented on the principles of Positive Imagery and Clarity of Staff Function. The Safeguards Committee met four times between December 2023 and February 2024 and were assigned to meet with the Senators of the Appropriations Committee. During a special gathering in July, members of the committee presented Senator Wishart with a plaque to thank her for her support throughout the duration of her term. Funding was protected, and contracts for FY 24-25 were negotiated with all five Citizen Advocacy programs. The Nebraska Values-Based Education Coalition met throughout the year to plan a workshop series to be held in FY 2024-25. Darcy Elks was consulted for "Developing Valued Social Roles," which would be offered as a hybrid - version. Host sites were planned to be set up in Lincoln, Norfolk, Scottsbluff, and York.

The Inclusive Education Lay Advocacy training began with its 10<sup>th</sup> cohort in September 2024. Six (6) participants completed the series. During the FY 23-24, thirteen (13) families were referred to the Inclusive Education Lay Advocacy. Nine (9) families were assigned advocates. Two families were assisted in filing a state complaint regarding the failure of the school to provide appropriate educational services. All families were provided information on strategies to advocate for their child.