

ANNUAL EVALUATION REPORT

Nebraska Traumatic Brain Injury State
Partnership Program Grant

AUGUST 2022 – JULY 2023



Dear Reader:

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a serious public health problem in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported approximately 214,110 TBI-related hospitalizations in 2020 and 6,9473 TBI-related deaths across the nation in 2021. The number of reported TBIs in Nebraska rose from 11,396 in 2017 to 14,819 in 2022, marking a 30% increase. A TBI is caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the normal function of the brain. Most TBIs are mild and their effects diminish over time, but even a mild TBI can result in permanent cognitive, physical, and behavioral changes. Individuals experiencing moderate to severe injuries may require life-long supports for housing, work, and community living.

Many Nebraskans impacted by TBI still struggle to access appropriate services to meet their needs. Nebraska VR (Vocational Rehabilitation) and the Brain Injury Advisory Council remain committed to building a comprehensive, multidisciplinary, easily accessible system of care for individuals experiencing TBI and to ensuring awareness and training for partners in the system.

Nebraska VR serves as lead agency for a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living TBI State Partnership Program Grant which provides funding for states to build infrastructure and create systems change to better serve their citizens with TBI. The Brain Injury Advisory Council advises Nebraska VR and the Department of Education in implementation of grant goals and objectives.

This report summarizes grant-funded project activities and outcomes for FY 2022-2023. Nebraska VR and the Brain Injury Advisory Council are grateful for our partners and stakeholders who serve to build better futures for Nebraskans with TBI and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Keri Bennett".

Keri Bennett, M.S.Ed, CBIS
Nebraska VR Program Director for ABI
TBI Grant Project Director

This project is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$1,000,890.00 with 100 percent funding by ACL/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

Table of Contents

Project Background	4
Grant Objectives	4
Nebraska VR	5
Brain Injury Advisory Council	5
State Plan	5
Mentor Program	5
Website	6
Brain Injury Screenings	7
Trainings	8
Enhancing Nebraska VR Staff Competency (Objective 4 & 5)	8
Brain Injury Prevalence (Grant Objective 6)	9
Brain Injury Data Workgroup	9
Nebraska TBI Registry & Mailings (Grant Objective 1)	9
Registry Letters	9
Resource Facilitation (Grant Objective 2)	10
Peer to Peer Support (Grant Objective 3)	10



Project Background

Nebraska VR (Vocational Rehabilitation) receives the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) State Partnership Program funding through the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The five-year grant cycle began in August 2021 and will end in July 2026. The funding helps ensure states can strengthen their system of services and supports to maximize the independence, well-being, and health of people with TBI across the lifespan. Along with their individual grant objectives, all funded states must agree to provide a 2:1 state match and at least one full-time employee, support a TBI Advisory Board or Council, create and support a TBI State Plan and establish or enhance Resource Facilitation services.



A Note on Terminology: Although the grant is geared toward TBI, those who have experienced a non-traumatic brain injury are not excluded from TBI grant activities in any way. To more clearly demonstrate this, we have typically used the more inclusive term “brain injury” for the remainder of this report.

Grant Objectives

Currently, TBI grant funding is being used to meet six key objectives:

OBJECTIVE 1

Increase the capacity of the **TBI Registry** to provide more individuals with recent TBIs with information on resources and services via the TBI Registry follow-up mailings.

OBJECTIVE 2

Enhance the **Resource Facilitation** program’s capacity to serve individuals with persistent symptoms from TBI with the integration of a high-quality, surveillance-based, long-term care service delivery model.

OBJECTIVE 3

Increase the availability of evidence-based **Peer to Peer Supports** for individuals with TBI and their families.

OBJECTIVE 4

Improve **competency levels among Nebraska VR staff** to effectively serve and support individuals with TBI aged 16 and over who are seeking employment.

OBJECTIVE 5

Increase the availability of **high-quality Supported Employment services** for individuals with TBI who are seeking employment.

OBJECTIVE 6

Augment NE’s **data collection and surveillance strategies** to accurately determine the prevalence of TBI, and to ensure equitable participation in needs assessments that inform continuous TBI service system improvement.

This report is structured around the grant objectives, though it also includes other information related to Nebraska VR’s efforts to address grantee requirements. It primarily summarizes data and information for the second year of the grant cycle, **August 2022 through July 2023**.

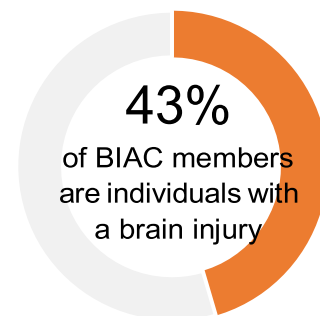
Nebraska VR

Brain Injury Advisory Council

Nebraska VR's key partner in carrying out this work is the Nebraska Brain Injury Advisory Council (BIAC). The BIAC is a voluntary council that serves in an advisory role to ensure that brain injury stakeholders are engaged, integrated, and inspired to help achieve the vision for brain injury in Nebraska. Currently the vision includes five core priorities:

1. Access to Services
2. Build the Voice
3. Connect to Resources
4. Shape Policy
5. Increase Public Awareness

A key goal for each state's Advisory Board or Council is for at least 50% of the members to be individuals with brain injury. The BIAC's Operating Procedures allow some members to fill dual roles, as professionals and also as individuals with TBI if they have that lived experience. As of August 2023, there were 23 members representing a variety of agencies and geographic areas of the state. Among those, slightly less than half reflected individuals with brain injury.



State Plan

Nebraska's Brain Injury State Plan is based on the five priority areas. In April 2023, a workgroup comprised of four BIAC members began working with Nebraska VR and Partners for Insightful Evaluation to revise the State Plan. The goal was to review all activities and update the language as needed to ensure they were actionable, understandable, and clear. Preliminary changes were discussed during the June 2023 quarterly BIAC meeting, at which point it was determined that three documents would be used:

1. A **public-facing document** would be available on the website for BIAC members and any stakeholder or member of the public to access.
2. A **working document** would include additional details (like anticipated completion date and responsible entity) for each activity. This would be a more detailed plan for Nebraska VR and the BIAC to use in carrying out activities.
3. An **executive summary** would offer a one-page synopsis of the state plan.

The project is on track to be completed by the end of 2023.

Mentor Program

The BIAC Mentor Program is a formalized way to connect new council members with more experienced one. After participating in an orientation session, the mentors are encouraged to connect with their mentees on a regular basis to offer additional support and information. A new member toolkit was also developed to complement the mentor program, with the content focused on helping new members gain a basic knowledge of Nebraska's programs and system of services for people with brain injury.

To date, there have been eight mentees and seven mentors. Surveys to solicit feedback and assess progress for both the mentors and mentees are sent out six months after the pairs meet for the first time and again at 12 months. During Year 2 of the grant, surveys were conducted with two mentors and two mentees. The three respondents noted that the orientation session was helpful and they did not have suggestions for change.

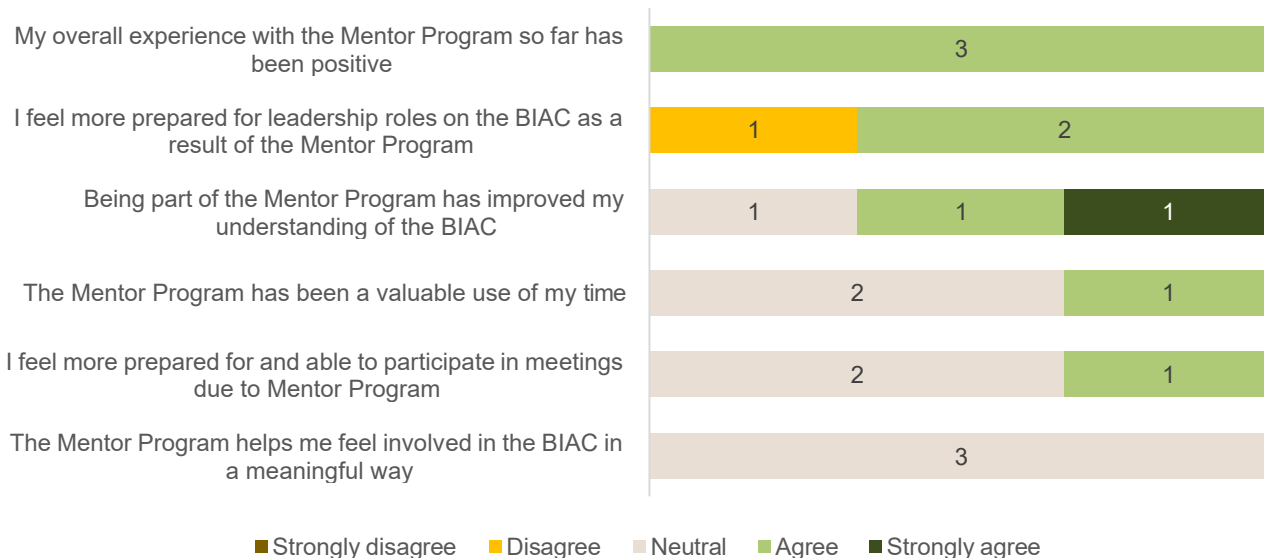
Other suggestions to enhance the Mentor Program were submitted via the surveys:

- Finding opportunities to ensure the mentor can be more proactive with reaching out. Suggestions included adding calendar reminders for outreach or allowing time before or after BIAC meetings for mentors to connect with their mentees.

"We get busy with work life and [mentees] tend to put off reaching out ourselves sometimes."

- Specifying what the time commitment for the program is so mentors and mentees can ensure they have adequate time to be involved.

Figure 1. All respondents indicated their experience with the Mentor Program has been positive (n=3)

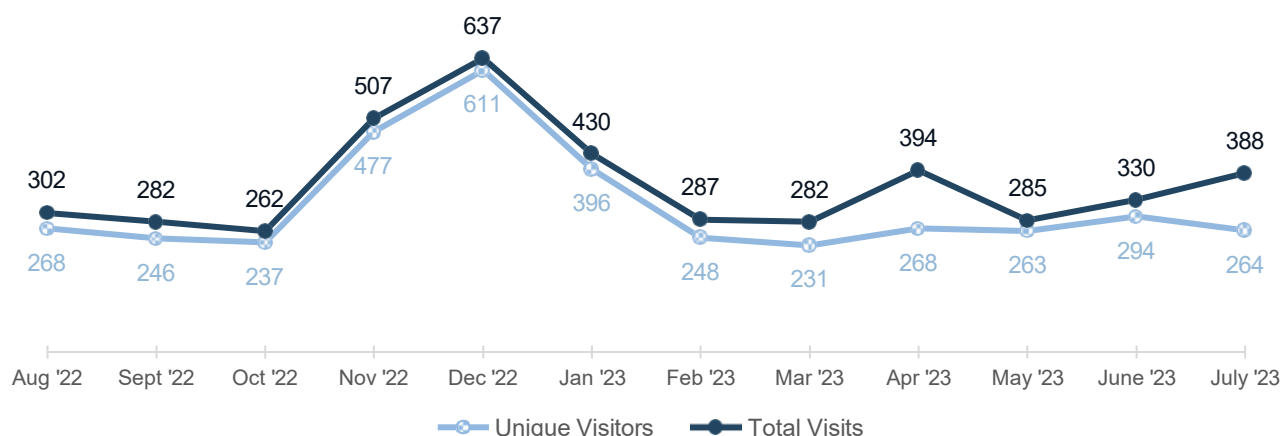


In the fall of 2023, surveys will be sent to four mentees (two will receive the six-month survey while the remaining will receive the twelve-month survey) and five mentors.

Website

Nebraska's BIAC website exists to educate the general public on the impact of TBI and also serves as a repository for TBI grant-generated reports and other data.¹ Website data collected from August 2022 through July 2023 showed an average of 316 unique visitors each month. There was a relatively large increase in website utilization in December (Figure 4).

Figure 2. The BIAC website was visited the most in December 2022, with an average of 316 unique visitors each month



¹ Nebraska Brain Injury Advisory Council. (n.dat). <https://braininjury.nebraska.gov/>

Most visitors access the BIAC website by directly seeking out the website (Figure 5). About one-fourth of visitors accessed the website through a search engine, with 89% of those being through google (rather than Yahoo or Bing). There did not appear to be a trend among referring sites. However, some included Gmail, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) website, and Brainline.org.

Brain Injury Screenings

The Nebraska VR Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Interview is completed with applicants for employment program services. A pre-screening question on the Nebraska VR application alerts staff to individuals with a possible lifetime history of TBI. Staff conduct a full screening with applicants answering 'yes' or 'not sure' to the pre-screening question. The ABI interview includes questions regarding traumatic injuries and non-traumatic illnesses that may have resulted in long-term symptoms and challenges. Applicants are asked to provide information regarding the following injury categories: 1) any external injuries to their head, face, or neck; 2) repeated impacts to their head; and 3) any illness or event(s) that affected their brain. Some individuals reported in multiple categories.

A total of 413 interviews were conducted from August 1, 2022 through July 31, 2023. This reflects nearly twice the number of interviews (n=224) that were completed during the previous year.

Among the 413 that were interviewed, 313 (76%) reported experiencing at least one external (traumatic) injury. Most of those applicants noted one brain injury, though 43% experienced two or more injuries (Figure 4). Applicants experienced their injury or injuries at varying ages, though the median age was 18 years (Figure 5).

Figure 3. Most people visit the BIAC website through a direct link

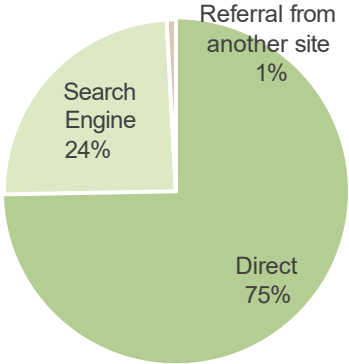


Figure 4. More than half (56%) of those who reported a brain injury through the interview said they had one, though 43% reported two or more injuries (n=313)

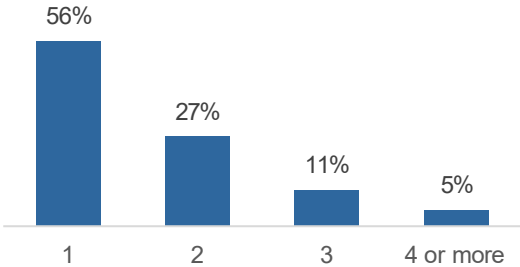
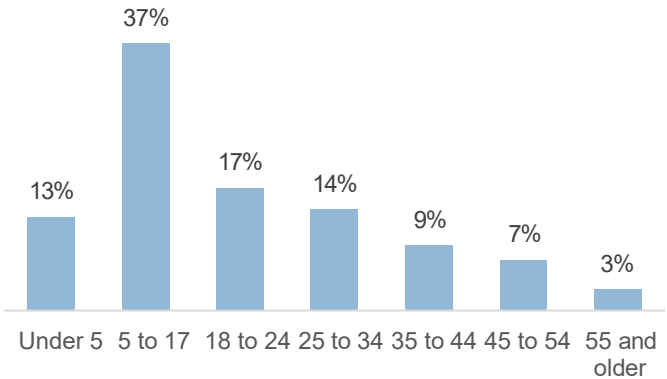


Figure 5. More than half (54%) experienced their injury between the ages of 5 and 24



Data on the number of applicants reporting repeated impacts and illnesses is not included here, though that information is available in a more comprehensive report from Nebraska VR. It is anticipated that many of the applicants who participated in the ABI Interview do not have a brain injury diagnosis – they are likely applying for VR services based on another diagnosis or injury. This may provide an opportunity to identify individuals who have experienced a brain injury to provide more awareness about their condition. Nebraska VR staff are trained to use ABI Interview results in the career planning process to help identify an applicant's functional challenges and barriers to employment that may stem from their history of ABI.

Trainings

In October 2022, an ABI Interview Refresher Training was held with 55 Nebraska VR staff. That training was complemented by monthly ABI Interview discussion sessions. The sessions provide an informal, virtual opportunity for all Nebraska VR and Assistive Technology Partnership staff to ask questions, learn about the ABI Interview process, or to consult on challenging cases involving ABI. On average, four to five staff participate each month.

As an educational opportunity as well as a way to solicit feedback, the BIAC and the NDHHS Division of Developmental Disabilities hosted a TBI Waiver Stakeholder Meeting in August 2022. There were 45 people in attendance. A variety of polls were used throughout the meeting to collect feedback on the impacts of the proposed TBI Waiver modifications. A handful of those who completed the post-meeting evaluation form noted that having additional input sessions like this would be helpful in the future.

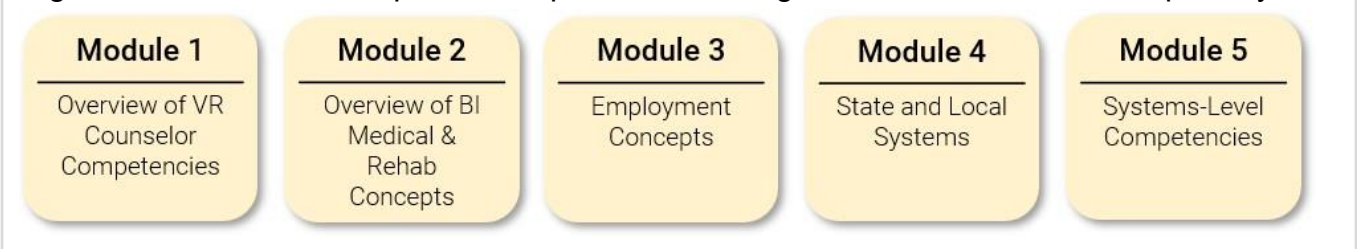
Additional training opportunities associated with other initiatives are highlighted in other sections of this report.

Enhancing Nebraska VR Staff Competency (Objectives 4 & 5)

Two grant objectives are focused on increasing staff skills and competency in supporting individuals with brain injury who are seeking employment and increasing the number of skilled Supported Employment providers across the state. Nebraska VR continued contracting with Dr. Christina Dillahunt-Aspillaga at the University of South Florida to provide guidance in the development of a multi-tiered, person-centered, culturally competent TBI training curriculum and materials for the staff of Nebraska VR and its Supported Employment providers.

The training curriculum will consist of five modules that address core VR Counselor (VRC) competencies in serving clients with ABI. Members of the VRC Core Competency Planning Committee offer input on content as modules are developed, then provide feedback on draft modules. Supplemental, 'deeper dive' modules on special topics are also planned.

Figure 6. Five modules are planned as part of the training curriculum to increase competency

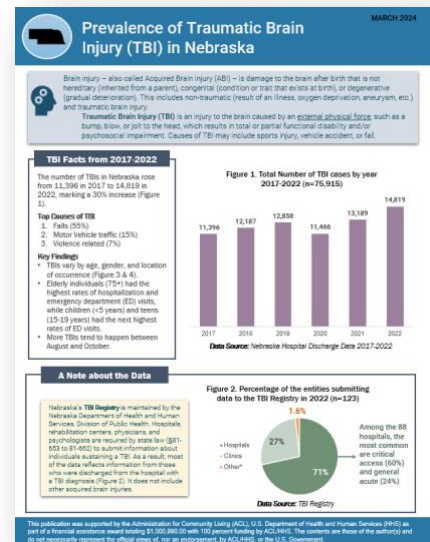


Brain Injury Prevalence (Grant Objective 6)

Brain Injury Data Workgroup

The Brain Injury Data Workgroup was formed in March 2022 to examine various sources of statewide data on TBI. The Workgroup met every other month and grew to 20 members by July 2023. Members included representatives from NDHHS, Nebraska VR, brain injury service providers and individuals with brain injury. Three BIAAC members joined the Workgroup to help with planning a brain injury needs assessment survey.

Nebraska's TBI Registry provides key data on the statewide incidence of TBI as well as demographic data on individuals who are diagnosed with TBI. During the second year, unweighted data from the Behavioral Risk (BRFSS) and Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) were obtained to share with the workgroup. Handouts were drafted on the incidence and prevalence of TBI in Nebraska and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on TBI in the state. The finalized handouts will be available to the public upon approval from NDHHS and Nebraska VR.

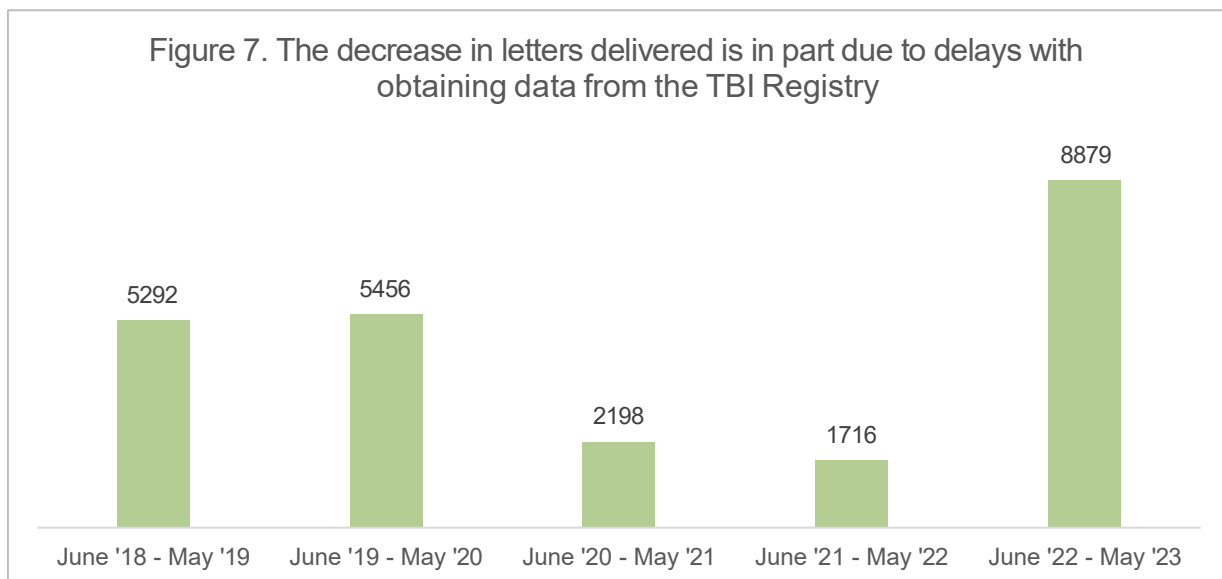


Nebraska TBI Registry & Mailings (Grant Objective 1)

The Nebraska Hospital Association (NHA) provides hospital discharge data to NDHHS for the TBI Registry. Nebraska VR maintains an agreement with NDHHS to mail a letter and informational brochure listing local service and support contacts to each individual placed on the TBI Registry, per the TBI Registry follow-up requirement stated in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 81-662.

Registry Letters

Upon receipt of the mailing list from NDHHS, Nebraska VR mails to each individual a TBI Registry letter and customized brochure based on the recipient's age and region of the state in which they live. The NHA



changed vendors for obtaining their data, which delayed the delivery of data to NDHHS and subsequently to Nebraska VR. Although there was a decline in the number of mailings from June 2020 through May 2022 due to the delays in obtaining the mailing lists, that has since increased (Figure 7).

As part of the Brain Injury State Plan and efforts from the Brain Injury Data Workgroup, there will be a focus during the next grant year for enhancing the mailings. It is also a goal to increase the number of providers who submit data to the TBI Registry, allowing Nebraska to reach more individuals who may need information and services for TBI.

Resource Facilitation (Grant Objective 2)

With supplemental case service funding from Nebraska VR, a pilot is underway in collaboration with the Brain Injury Alliance of Nebraska (BIA-NE), the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), the University of Nebraska Lincoln (UNL), and Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital. The provision of Resource Facilitation services coupled with brain injury symptom surveillance via the MyBrain 2.0 mobile app is expected to help VR clients with brain injury achieve better employment outcomes.

The project, called *My Brain, My Self*, formally launched in late summer 2023 once IRB approval was received through UNL. The first participant clinical team meeting was held August 20, 2023. **By the end of August 2023, two participants had been enrolled in the project and six individuals were under consideration for the project.**

In preparation for implementing the project, **four trainings were held for the team coordinating the project.** This included two clinical surveillance team meetings focused on understanding the MyBrain 2.0 app and supplemental resources such as the Flourish and Employment Pathfinder apps. A larger training event was held in September to bring all collaborating partners together to understand the process. A program evaluation and fidelity monitoring training also took place in April 2023.

“Although it’s taken longer than anticipated, I think the pilot planning process has helped to strengthen support for the pilot and will make it a better experience for participants.”

Peer to Peer Support (Grant Objective 3)

In February, Nebraska VR and the BIA-NE hosted a virtual Peer Support Summit, facilitated by the National Association of State Head Injury Administrators (NASHIA). The Summit included presentations on Nebraska’s pilot results, the history of peer support, and brain injury peer support service delivery models in use in other states. Following the presentations, attendees discussed their priorities for peer support, and the models that might work well in Nebraska. Nebraska VR will use the Summit results to identify next steps to increase the availability of peer support for individuals with brain injury across the state. Based on satisfaction survey results, a majority of attendees were satisfied with the event. (Figure 8).

