

ANNUAL EVALUATION REPORT

Nebraska Traumatic Brain Injury State
Partnership Program Grant

AUGUST 2023 – JULY 2024



Dear Reader:

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a serious public health problem in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports there are approximately 2.9 million TBI-related emergency department visits each year in the United States. The number of reported TBIs in Nebraska average 12,563 per year. 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 TBIs are unreported and untreated. In a recent survey, the CDC found that 64 million adults recounted experiencing one or more TBIs in their lifetime.

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 2023-2024. 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

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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 third year of the grant cycle, **August 2023 through July 2024**.

Nebraska VR

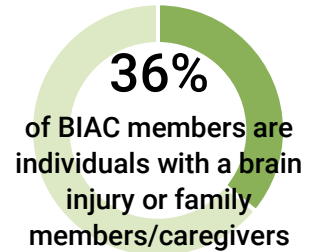
Brain Injury Advisory Council

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 July 31, 2024, there were 25 members representing a variety of agencies and geographic areas of the state. Among those, slightly more than one-third reflected individuals with brain injury (n=6) or family members/caregivers of individuals with a brain injury (n=3).



State Plan

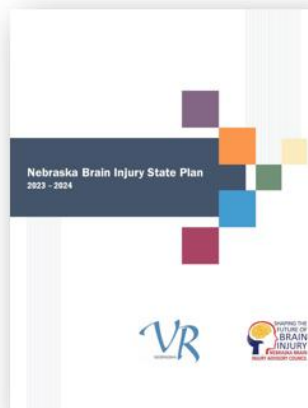
Nebraska's Brain Injury State Plan is based on the five priority areas. During the previous grant year, a workgroup comprised of four BIAC members began working with Nebraska VR and Partners for Insightful Evaluation to revise the State Plan. The goal was to review all activities and update the language as needed to ensure they were actionable, understandable, and clear. This included adding in the timeline or anticipated completion date, the agency responsible for each activity, and benchmarks for measuring progress.

There were three final products:



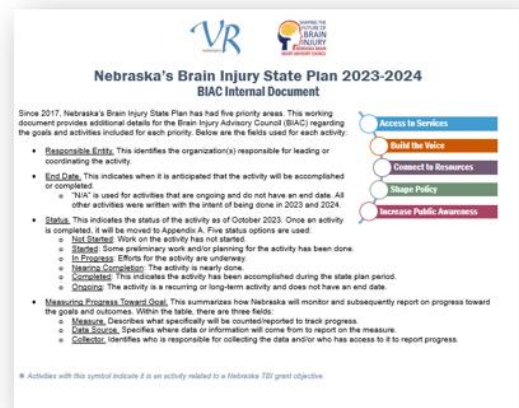
Executive Summary

One page overview of the five priorities included in the plan



Public Facing Document

High-level version; outlines vision and activities for priorities



Working/Internal Document

Additional details for BIAC members; appendix with completed activities and accomplishments/context

Through the revision process, the total number of activities included in the state plan was reduced from 62 to 46 – in part because seven of the activities had been completed. Among the 46 activities included in the plan, about one-fourth (28%) were considered ongoing activities. The public facing document was approved by the BIAC in December 2023.

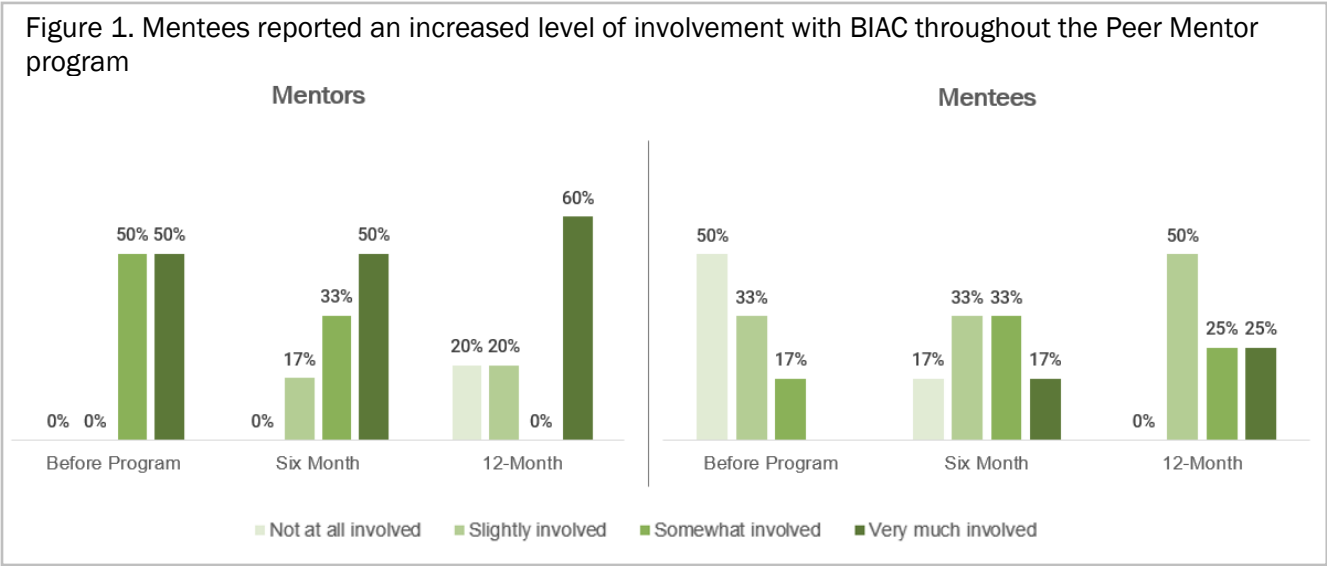
Mentor Program

The BIAC Mentor Program is a formalized way to connect new council members with more experienced ones. After participating in an orientation session, mentors are encouraged to connect with their mentees on a regular basis to offer additional support and information. A new member toolkit is available to complement the mentor program, with content geared toward helping new members gain background knowledge on 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 3 of the grant, 12-month surveys were conducted with two mentors and one mentee.

An aggregate report was developed in November 2024 to get a more comprehensive understanding of how the program has been going. The Mentor Program has been implemented across three separate cohorts. There were four pairs of mentors and mentees in Cohort 1, two pairs in Cohort 2, and two pairs in Cohort 3. A total of 12 people completed the six-month survey while 10 people completed the 12-month survey.

Aggregate results that show that at least among the mentees, there does seem to be an increase in how involved they feel with the BIAC (Figure 1). Although only four of the six completed the 12-month survey, all but one also indicated their involvement had at least slightly increased during the previous year.



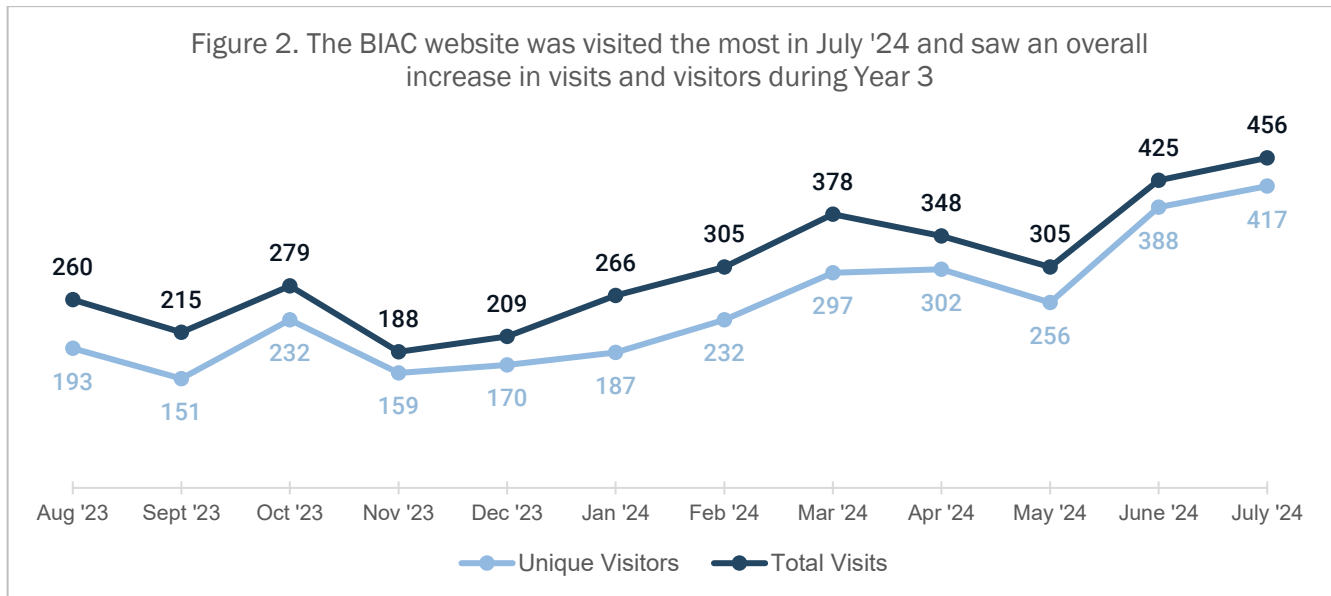
In terms of suggestions to enhance or strengthen the Mentor Program, two of the three program participants commented on the Year 3 survey that the BIAC could host or facilitate at least two more in-person meeting opportunities per year.

Website

Nebraska’s BIAC website exists to educate the 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 2023 through July

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

2024 showed an average of 249 unique visitors each month. There was an overall increase in the number of website visits and visitors from the beginning of Year 3 to the end of Year 3 (Figure 2).



Data also indicates that most visitors (67%) access the BIAC website by directly seeking out the website. About one-third of the visitors came across the website through a search engine.

Statewide Needs Assessment

The 2024 statewide brain injury needs assessment provides an opportunity to 1) inform the Brain Injury State Plan and 2) understand what services, supports and assistance are available to those who have experienced a brain injury, particularly to identify any unmet needs. The last needs assessment was conducted in 2020.

A variety of data was utilized for the 2024 needs assessment. Three surveys were conducted to collect primary data from across the state:

- Survey for individuals with brain injury, which could be completed online, by paper, or over the phone/zoom. There were 83 responses.
- Survey for family members/caregivers of those with a brain injury who live in Nebraska, which could also be completed online, by paper, or over the phone/zoom. There were 50 responses to that survey.
- Online survey for service providers who may serve individuals with brain injury. There were 112 responses to that survey.

Each survey was developed by Partners for Insightful Evaluation (PIE) in conjunction with Nebraska VR, the Brain Injury Advisory Council, and the Brain Injury Data Workgroup. They were all disseminated and available at the same time (March 12, 2024 through May 3, 2024) to streamline data collection efforts. The public release of the surveys aligned with the Nebraska Brain Injury Conference in 2024, coordinated by the Brain Injury Association of Nebraska. PIE, Nebraska VR and members of the BIAC reached out to 232 organizations to help promote the surveys

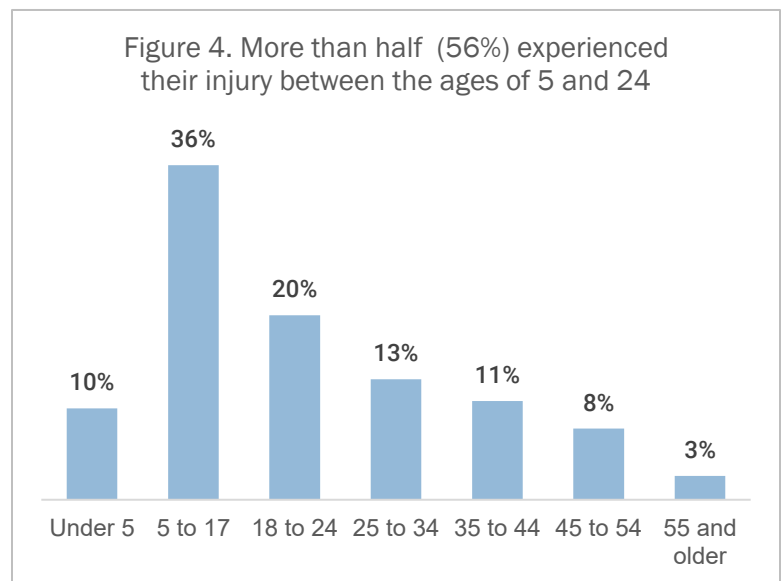
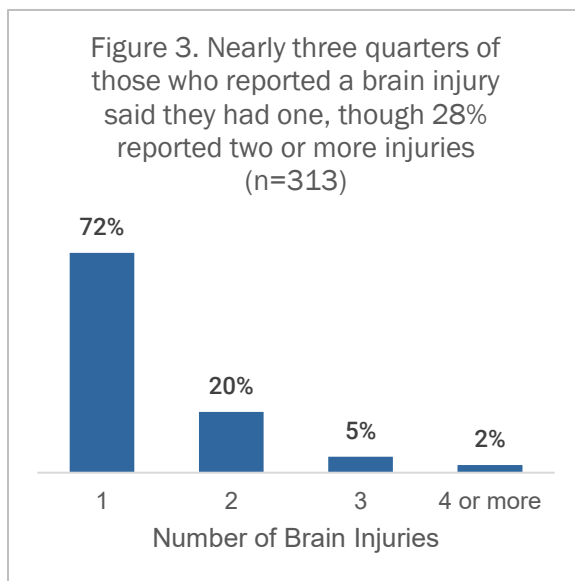
The three surveys were complemented by secondary data, which included TBI Registry data, Resource Facilitation data from the Brain Injury Association of Nebraska, and the Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Interview Form data from Nebraska VR. All data was compiled, analyzed, and reported by PIE. More information can be found in the Statewide Needs Assessment Report, which will be available sometime in 2025.

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 434 interviews were conducted from August 1, 2023 through July 31, 2024. This reflects a slight increase over the number of interviews (n=413) that were completed during the previous year.

Among the 434 that were interviewed, 365 (84%) reported experiencing at least one external (traumatic) injury. Most of those applicants noted one brain injury, though about 28% experienced two or more injuries (Figure 3). Applicants experienced their injury or injuries at varying ages, though the median age was 21.7 years (Figure 4).



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

Keri Bennett, Program Director for ABI held monthly, virtual 'drop-in' training sessions for Nebraska VR and Assistive Technology Partnership staff. Each session was an hour long, and attendance averaged 5 to 10 staff during each session. Positive feedback was offered by many who attended.

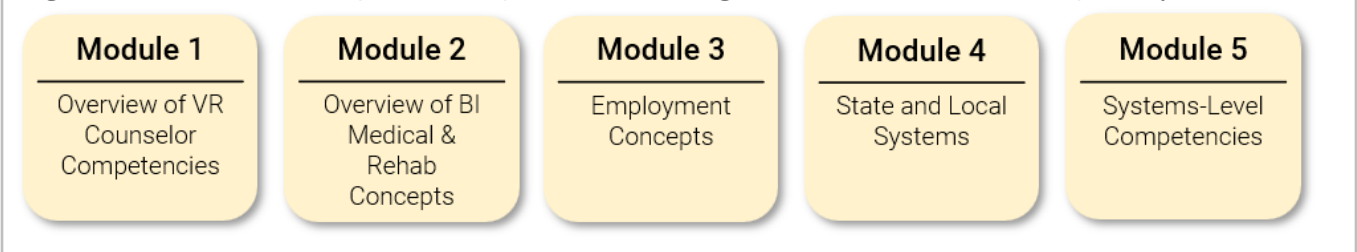
Training topics during this grant year included: Nebraska VR ABI Interview protocol, employment and training strategies for individuals with TBI, identification and screening, neurobehavioral aspects of TBI, behavioral health and ABI, community-based services and support resources. The Program did not offer any public training events during Year 3.

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.

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



During Year 3, the slides for all five modules were completed. The materials were under review before making them available as part of a curriculum to Nebraska VR staff.

Brain Injury Prevalence (Grant Objective 6)

Brain Injury Data Workgroup

The Brain Injury Data Workgroup was formed in March 2022 to examine opportunities to better capture the prevalence of brain injury in Nebraska. By the end of Year 3, there were 16 consistent members, which includes representatives from NDHHS, Nebraska VR, brain injury service providers, and individuals with brain injury.

Their role during Year 3 of the TBI Grant expanded slightly to help with the implementation of the statewide needs assessment. In the fall of 2023, the workgroup reviewed some of the results from the 2019 and 2020 needs assessment to determine what questions should be included in the surveys. The review and survey development process undertaken by the data workgroup was outlined in a presentation to the ACL Using Data to Connect People to Services grantee workgroup in June 2024.

Beyond exploring prevalence, the BI Data Workgroup assists with implementing data-related activities included in the Brain Injury State Plan. There are at least five activities. By the end of the grant year, the workgroup identified next steps for each of those activities, including key organizations to connect with to identify data.

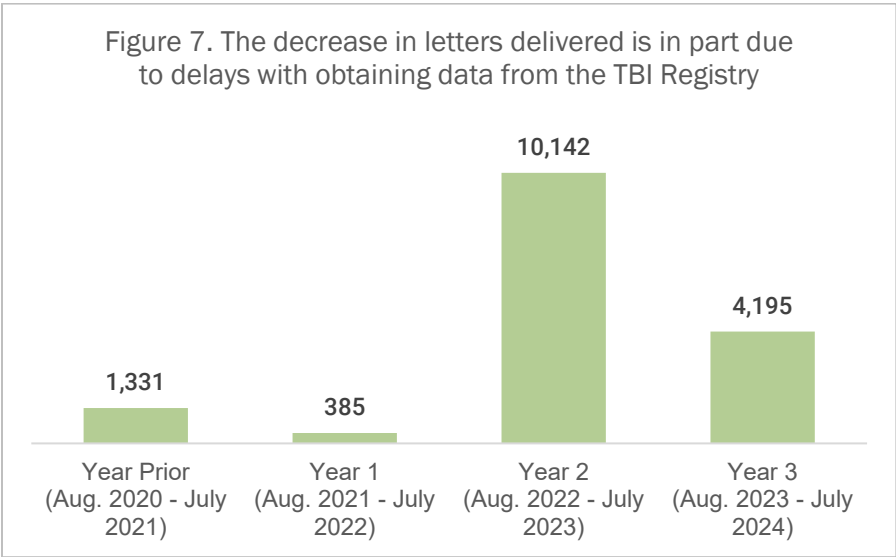
Nebraska TBI Registry & Mailings (Grant Objective 1)

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 in Year 1 and in the year prior to the grant. The increase in the number of mailings in Year 2 and Year 3 represents the result of efforts to work through the Registry backlog and make up for the delay from Year 1 (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 BIA-NE, University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), 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 Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received through UNL. This means that a board reviewed the data collection protocols and consent forms anticipated for the project to ensure the safety and privacy of participants. The project will run through September 2024. As of August 2024, seventeen individuals were referred to the BIA for potential participation, with five participating in the project. The program is limited to individuals between ages 19 and 65 who had a diagnosed acquired brain injury and lived in Douglas, Sarpy, or Cass county, among other criteria. A formal evaluation report for the project will be available in 2025.

Peer to Peer Support (Grant Objective 3)

During Year 2 of the grant, Nebraska VR and the BIAC hosted a virtual Peer Support Summit, facilitated by the National Association of State Head Injury Administrators (NASHIA). Nebraska VR utilized the Summit results to identify next steps to increase the availability of peer support for individuals with brain injury across the state. This will be a key focus of the work in Year 4 and Year 5 of the grant.