

1999 SENATE EDUCATION

SCR 4044

1999 SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE MINUTES

BILL/RESOLUTION NO. SCR4044

Senate Education Committee

Conference Committee

Hearing Date February 24, 1999

Tape Number	Side A	Side B	Meter #
1		x	2192-4819
Committee Clerk Signature <i>Jindia Christman</i>			

Minutes:

SENATOR FREBORG opened the hearing on SCR4044. SENATOR REDLIN was absent.

Testimony introducing SCR4044: SENATOR ST. AUBYN, District 43. No written testimony.

Resolution is asking for a review of services provided for children and adults who are blind or visually impaired. Currently the School for the Blind which is in Grand Forks, services a lot of the blind services throughout the state as an outreach program. Geared more toward children but they still deal and interact with a lot of services for adults. What I would like to see on this study resolution is the ability for Council to study feasibility and desirability of looking at all the vision services within the state and see if there are some recommendations or suggestions about maybe merging them. Several sessions ago the School for the Blind ceased to exist as a school but really provides more outreach services throughout the state. They have done an excellent job in terms of outreach services. However, they continually get requests from adult themselves

for visual services and those typically are handled by the vocational rehabilitation. I think that it makes sense to merge these under one umbrella.

Testimony in Favor: SENATOR STENEHJEM, District 42. No written testimony. I want to tell you how important I think this study would be. The role for the School for the Blind has changed considerably over the last few years from a residential facility to really a resource type facility.

Testimony in Favor: Carmen Grove Suminski, Superintendent of the North Dakota School for the Blind. Written testimony attached.

Testimony in Favor: Allan Peterson, Fargo. Legally blind. Written testimony attached.

SENATOR O'CONNELL : You talked about caning as a service. Can you give me some other services that are available and what skills are taught.

Allan: Computer training, daily living skills, communication skills-Braille, and also leisure time activities.

Close hearing on SCR4044.

SENATOR WANZEK : I move a DO PASS on SCR4044.

SENATOR KELSH : 2nd

Vote: 5 Yes 0 No 2 Absent

CARRIER: SENATOR WANZEK

Date: 2/24/99
Roll Call Vote #: _____

1999 SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ROLL CALL VOTES
BILL/RESOLUTION NO. SCR 4044

Senate EDUCATION Committee

Subcommittee on _____
or
 Conference Committee

Legislative Council Amendment Number _____

Action Taken Move for a Do Pass SCR 4044

Motion Made By Wanzek Seconded By Kelsh

Senators	Yes	No	Senators	Yes	No
Senator Freborg, Chairman	✓				
Senator Cook, Vice Chairman	✓				
Senator Flakoll					
Senator Wanzek	✓				
Senator Kelsh	✓				
Senator O'Connell	✓				
Senator Redlin					

Total (Yes) 5 No 0

Absent _____

Floor Assignment Wanzek

If the vote is on an amendment, briefly indicate intent:

REPORT OF STANDING COMMITTEE (410)
February 24, 1999 3:19 p.m.

Module No: SR-33-3495
Carrier: Wanzek
Insert LC: . Title: .

REPORT OF STANDING COMMITTEE

SCR 4044: Education Committee (Sen. Freborg, Chairman) recommends DO PASS
(5 YEAS, 0 NAYS, 2 ABSENT AND NOT VOTING). SCR 4044 was placed on the
Eleventh order on the calendar.

1999 HOUSE HUMAN SERVICES

SCR 4044

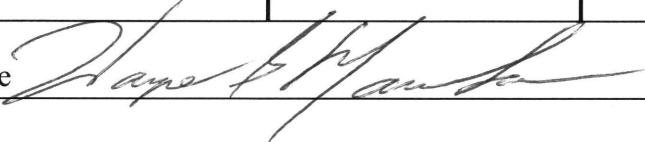
1999 HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE MINUTES

BILL/RESOLUTION NO. SCR4044

House Human Services Committee

Conference Committee

Hearing Date March 16, 1999

Tape Number	Side A	Side B	Meter #
1	x		6.9-24.9
1	x		51.2-58.5
Committee Clerk Signature 			

Minutes:

Opened hearing on SCR4044.

Senator ROD ST.AUBYN, District 43, testified that the School for the Blind used to house students. The housing was closed down several years ago with the intent of spreading out vision services throughout the state. However, one of the concerns is that vision services are being provided through vocational rehabilitation. This study would determine if all vision services should be housed under a single umbrella. He requested the committee's support.

Senator WAYNE STENEHJEM, District 42, appeared to support the concurrent resolution and the reason it was introduced.

Ms. CARMEN GROVE SUMINISKI, Superintendent of the North Dakota School for the Blind, testified in support of SCR4044. (Testimony attached.) In addition, Ms. SUMINISKI presented written testimony from GARY BORNSSEN.

Page 2

House Human Services Committee

Bill/Resolution Number 4044

Hearing Date March 16, 1999

Mr. ALLAN PETERSON, from rural Fargo, testified. (Testimony attached.)

There was no OPPOSITION to SCR4044.

Hearing closed on SCR4044.

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

Rep. BRUCE ECKRE moved DO PASS, seconded by Rep. ROXANNE JENSEN.

Motion PASSED on a roll call vote: 14 YES, 0 NO, 1 ABSENT.

CARRIER: Rep. BRUCE ECKRE.

Date: 3/16/99
 Roll Call Vote #: 3

1999 HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ROLL CALL VOTES
 BILL/RESOLUTION NO. SCR 4044

House Human Services Committee

Subcommittee on _____
 or
 Conference Committee

Legislative Council Amendment Number _____

Action Taken Do Pass to be forwarded to Consent Calendar

Motion Made By E Seconded By J

Representatives	Yes	No	Representatives	Yes	No
Clara Sue Price - Chairwoman	✓		Bruce A. Eckre	✓	
Robin Weisz - Vice Chairman	✓		Ralph Metcalf	✓	
William R. Devlin	✓		Carol A. Niemeier	✓	
Pat Galvin	✓		Wanda Rose	✓	
Dale L. Henegar	✓		Sally M. Sandvig	✓	
Roxanne Jensen	✓				
Amy N. Kliniske					
Chet Pollert	✓				
Todd Porter	✓				
Blair Thoreson	✓				

Total Yes 14 No 0
 Absent 1

Floor Assignment Rep Eckre

If the vote is on an amendment, briefly indicate intent:

REPORT OF STANDING COMMITTEE (410)
March 18, 1999 10:49 a.m.

Module No: HR-49-5064
Carrier: Eckre
Insert LC: . Title: .

REPORT OF STANDING COMMITTEE

SCR 4044: Human Services Committee (Rep. Price, Chairman) recommends DO PASS and BE PLACED ON THE CONSENT CALENDAR (14 YEAS, 0 NAYS, 1 ABSENT AND NOT VOTING). SCR 4044 was placed on the Tenth order on the calendar.

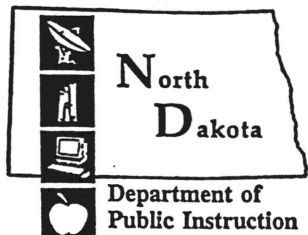
1999 TESTIMONY

SCR 4044

Testimony to the SENATE Education Committee February 24, 1999

BRaille ALPHABET

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**TESTIMONY ON SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 4044
SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

February 24, 1999

**by Carmen Grove Suminski, Superintendent
North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind
(701) 795-2708**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Carmen Grove Suminski, and I am the Superintendent of the North Dakota School for the Blind. I am here to provide information regarding the School for the Blind in support of Resolution #4044.

Introduction

North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind (NDSB) has significantly improved its outreach services and functions as a statewide, comprehensive resource center. The NDSB works cooperatively with related agencies in providing a full range of services to all persons who are blind or visually impaired, including those with multiple disabilities.

The School for the Blind is not a building located in Grand Forks but rather a service and resource. Our campus is statewide.

We have undergone major transition – in 1993, the Legislature voted to eliminate the residential component. We are the only school for the blind nationally that has undergone this change. We are truly the outreach center; yet have maintained housing for short-term placement for school age and adults. This has enabled the state of North Dakota to offer a full continuum of services ensuring that vision specific skills are provided. These skills include Braille, Braille music, technology, orientation and mobility, daily living skills, vocational/careers, and recreation/leisure.

Services Provided

The map and graphs illustrate the eight regions and contact personnel for each region. The coordinator functions as a lead person in communication with local personnel, students, and families in that specific geographical area. The coordinator also facilitates the services and has other job responsibilities. All staff travel statewide based on their specialization. In the upcoming biennium the NDSB will have full-time staff working out of offices based in Bismarck, Devils Lake, Fargo and Minot. The NDSB also has part-time staff that are based in Dickinson and Williston.

The graphs and charts illustrate services to vocational rehabilitation clients based on vision specific areas for the last two years plus the number of clients served.

Currently the following adult services are provided via the School for the Blind:

Center Based Adaptive Skills Training and Evaluation (fee for service basis)
Talking Book Machine Lending Agency
Toll Free Telephone Line

The Store
Instruction and Consultation in Vision Specific Areas
Braille support Groups in Fargo and Minot

Services are also provided in collaboration with the Infant Development Program, local education agencies, special education units, and the Program for the Developmentally Disabled. What is being proposed via this resolution is to study the feasibility of an extension of the services that are currently in place.

Scenarios

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation is providing vocational counseling and training and would continue to fulfill their mission; however, there are persons who are blind or visually impaired that do not meet the vocational criteria. Yet they are in need of adaptive skills training.

Examples include:

- Adults without vocational goals requiring technology training
- Adults who have adaptive equipment and require instruction in its use and set up
- Adults who may not receive center based training based on the current fee for service requirement

Concept

This resolution is proposing a study that would enhance statewide regional programming for persons who are blind or visually impaired from ages 0 to 99. A draft of what the model could be would be the combination of NDSB's 28 FTE's along with the 7 FTE's of Vision Rehabilitation.

Region #1	2 FTE's
Region #2	2 FTE's
Region #3	2 FTE's
Region #4	21 FTE's (Center Base)
Region #5	2 FTE's
Region #6	2 FTE's
Region #7	2 FTE's
Region #8	2 FTE's

Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 personnel would include one with expertise in ages 0 to 21, and a second with expertise in ages 22 to 99.

Current FTE's at NDSB	28
Current FTE's with VR (Vision)	7

With this model, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation would continue to serve the vocational counseling needs of persons with disabilities including the visually impaired. Personnel from the private sector and local education agencies would continue to provide direct vision services.

Conclusion

This "model" is in compliance with the recommendations of the NDSB Advisory Committee and the National Accreditation Council. A development of continuity of services would involve input from you as legislators, parents and family members, personnel with NDSB and Vocational Rehabilitation, and most importantly the consumers we serve. I believe that the expertise exists in these entities to develop new strategies and create a cost effective and time efficient service delivery system. Services under one agency would be much more geographically efficient enabling us to fully utilize staff both regionally and center based. It would provide continuity within a "seamless" system eliminating the fee the service. Resources, equipment, office space, and expertise could be shared. The result has the potential be a national model for rural America much like the NDSB Outreach program has become.

I urge you to work with us in this "charge" to have a major impact on the quality of statewide programs enabling adult persons who are blind or visually impaired to receive full comprehensive services.

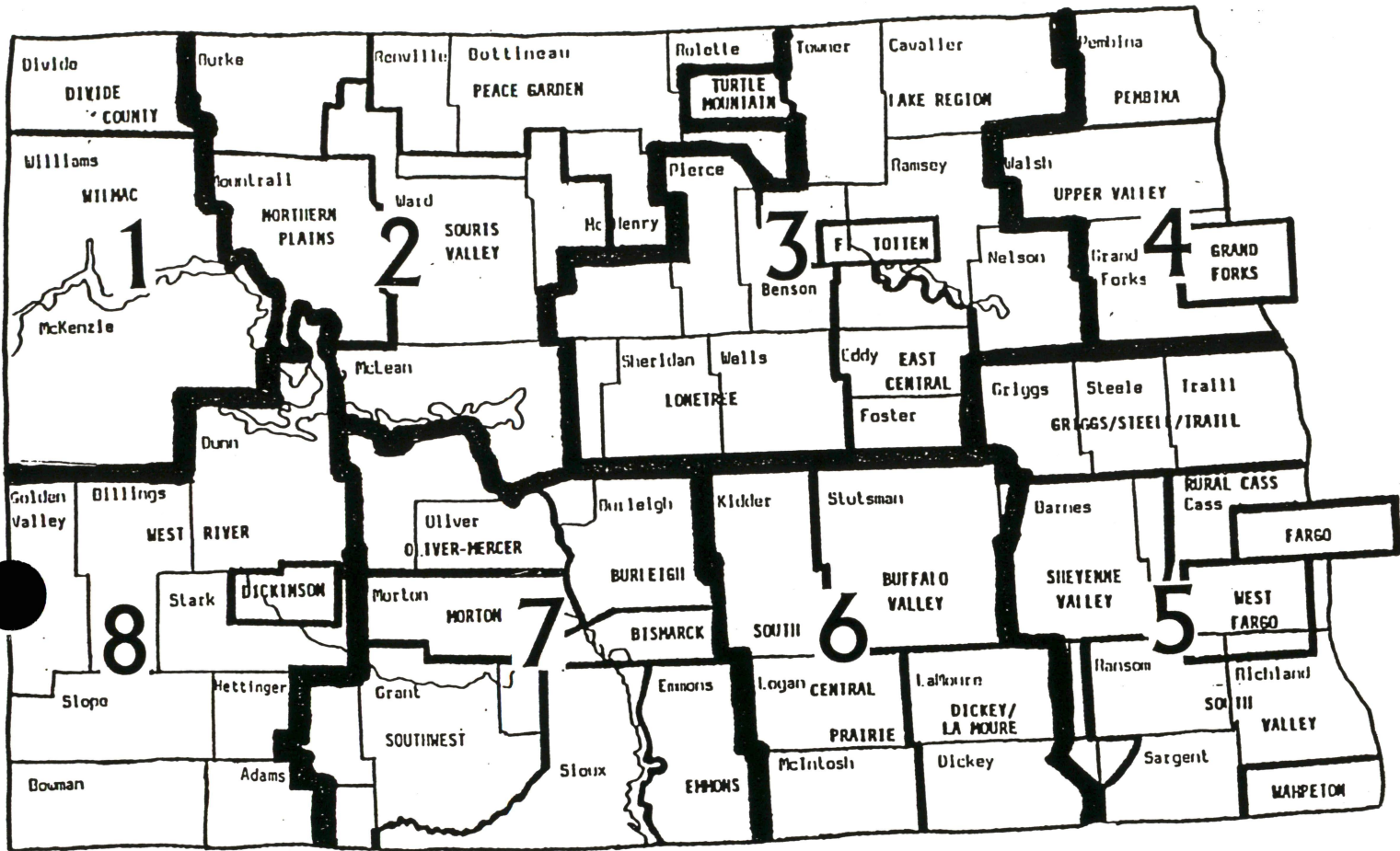


Carmen Grove Suminski, Superintendent
North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind

February 24, 1999

Date

NORTH DAKOTA VISION SERVICES SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND



Outreach Coordinator
Colleen Sanford 795-2721

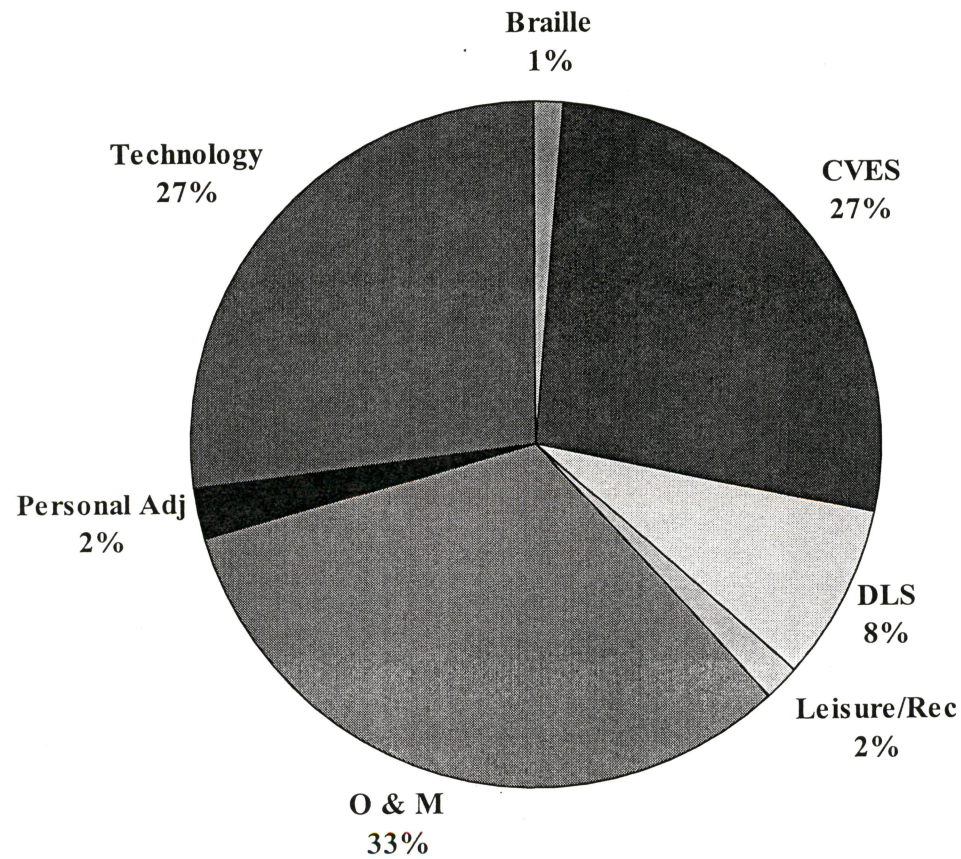
Regional Coordinators

Region 1	Paul Olson	795-2717
Region 2 & 3	Dianne Giessinger	549-2606
Region 4	Diane Mihulka	795-2722
Region 5	Marie Topp	298-4417
Region 6	Pat Hill	795-2718
Region 7 & 8	Katrina Wendel	328-3497

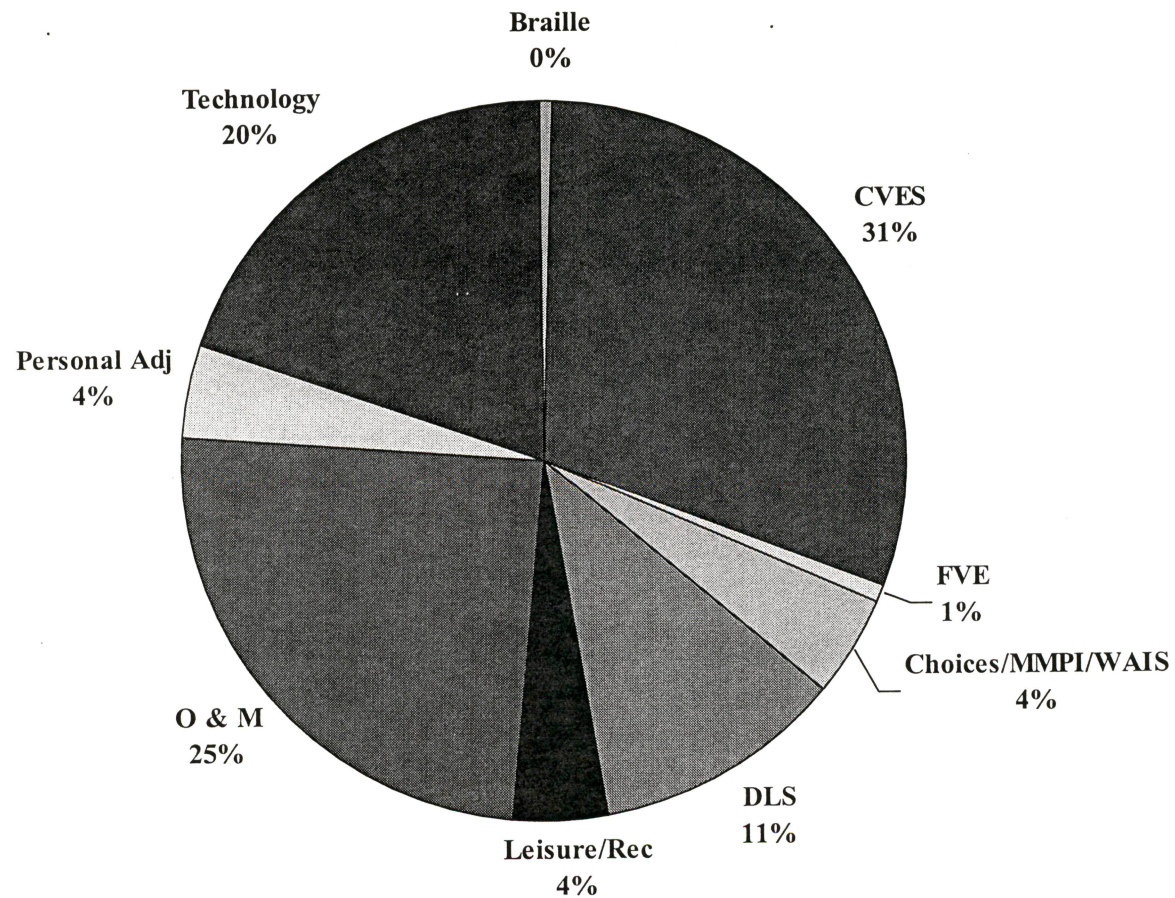
Parent Infant Service Providers

Region 1, 2, 7	Phyllis LeDosquet	572-6757
Region 3, 4, 6	Kari Chiasson	795-2714
Region 5	Marie Topp	298-4417
Region 8	Darlene Henning	225-3172

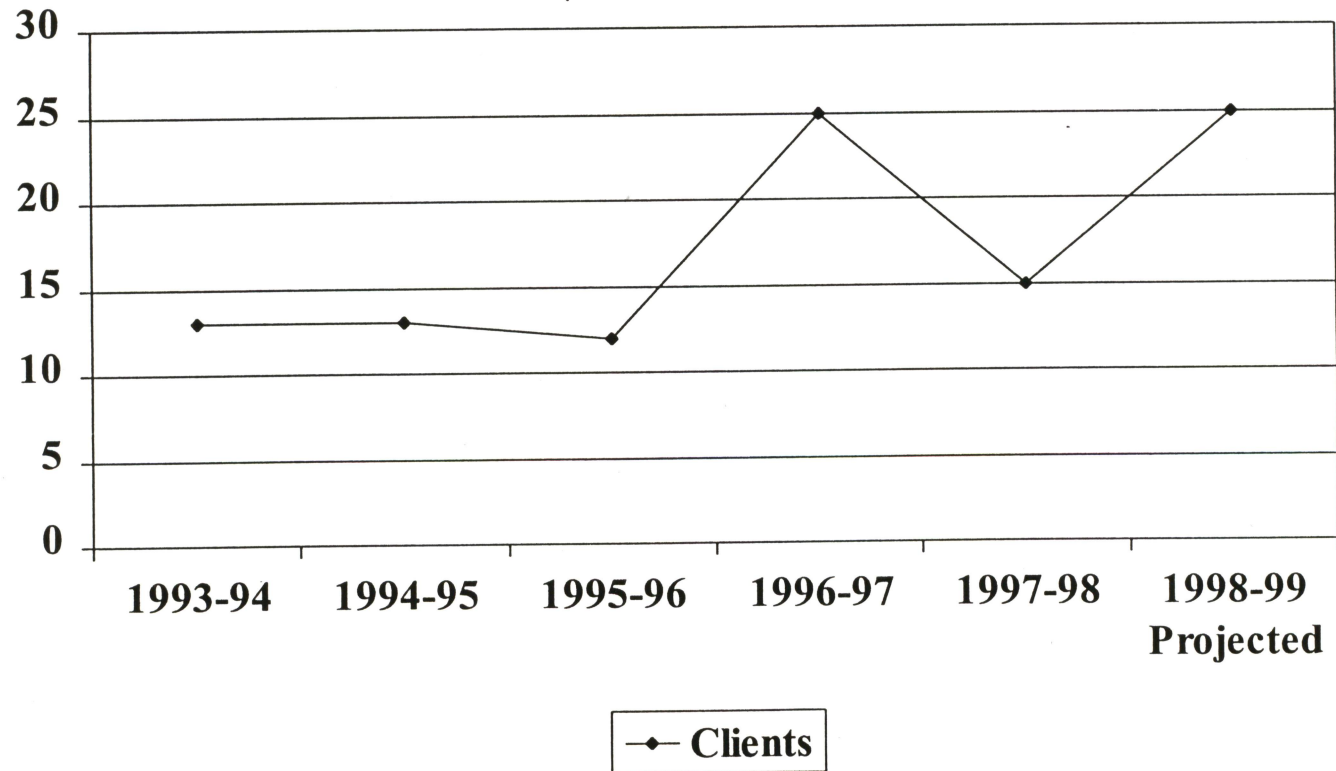
1998-99 Services to Vocational Rehabilitation



1997-98 Services to Vocational Rehabilitation



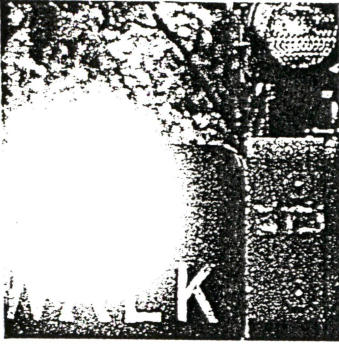
Vocational Rehabilitation Clients Served



Every
seven minutes,
someone in
America will
permanently lose
their eyesight.

Eliminating specialized services—a dangerous and costly idea.

Specialized services are the key to dignity, productivity, and independence for people who are blind or visually impaired. In an age of cost cutting and budget slashing, blind and visually impaired people are increasingly concerned that the services that best serve their needs will be eliminated, and that the only option will be large all-purpose disability and health service organizations—where some blind people have already fallen through the cracks.



Specialized services teach people with macular degeneration the proper techniques that will enable them to cross this busy intersection while safely avoiding that five-ton cement truck that is quickly approaching.

It's very likely that in your lifetime, you or someone you love will become blind or severely visually impaired. *The loss of specialized*

services isn't just someone else's problem—we may all feel the effects at some point

in our lives. Because we're living longer than ever before, more and more Americans are experiencing vision loss, which increases sharply with age. And, because of medical advances, children born prematurely or with multiple disabilities are now surviving, and a high proportion of these children are blind or visually impaired.

There are already ten million Americans who have problems seeing, and this number is growing at an alarming rate—among older people it is expected to more than double by the year 2030. And yet, even with a population this large and skyrocketing, America remains a “seeing” society, with few allowances made for the unique needs of people who cannot see or cannot see well. Myths and stereotypes abound when people think about blindness. Blindness is one of the most feared and misunderstood disabilities, distorting both public opinion and the attitudes of professionals who lack specific knowledge about visual impairment.

Specialized services enable blind people to:

- read and write braille • come and go safely with a long cane or guide dog • use computers with speech synthesizers, or braille or large-print displays • take care of their homes and personal needs using specially designed techniques and devices • secure satisfying and productive employment.


What does it mean to be blind? If you're like most people, you can't imagine how you would function in daily life if you lost your sight. For one thing, you'd learn very quickly that most information is perceived visually. Imagine all the things you're used to doing every day—preparing for work in the morning, reading the newspaper, or riding the train or bus—then imagine doing them without being able to see. Or imagine being a parent of a child who is blind—how would you teach your child the skills he or she would need to grow to be a productive adult?

People who are blind or visually impaired have learned effective solutions to the challenges brought about by vision loss; however, these solutions are not immediately obvious.³ Although it may be possible to think of some ways to compensate for vision loss, this is not the same as knowing about the specific skills that millions of successful blind people use every day, such as using a long white cane correctly to walk down the street and avoid oncoming traffic, or reading and writing braille to communicate. These skills can best be taught by specialists—professionals who can teach people to adapt to the challenges posed by blindness or visual impairment.


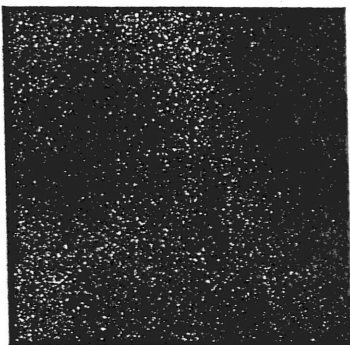


To people who are visually impaired, this is how the "Help Wanted" section appears. With specialized services, they will learn to use magnification devices, like closed-circuit televisions, to see that the job listed here in column three is perfect for them.

Specialized services are a proven and cost-effective solution to the challenges of blindness and visual impairment. If you needed major surgery, would you want it performed by a general practitioner, or by a qualified surgeon specially trained in the procedure? You would choose the expert for your care. Blind people have the same right to receive the services they need from qualified specialists.



Specialized services—which enable blind people to receive an effective education and learn the skills that are needed to participate in family and community life—are the alternative to becoming dependent on family and friends or costly government support. Without specialized services, blind people risk what we all fear most: loss of independence and dignity. Society loses, too—we all lose productive, tax-paying workers or active retirees who contribute to family and community.



When you're blind, this is how your medicine looks. Through specialized services, you would learn how to use braille to label the bottles, which would prevent you from taking the white pill when you should be taking the green one.

Eliminating specialized services will not mean real savings. It will cost society more in the long run. For example, if you lost your sight, you might find that a general rehabilitation agency can offer you a tape recorder and someone to read your mail for you. However, specialized services would teach you the skills you would need to use “talking” computers and read and write braille. Not only would you keep your privacy, but society will not have to keep paying someone to do for you what you can now do for yourself.

For the 200 people who lose their vision every day in the United States, specialized services are the key to regaining independence.

Remember, blindness can affect every one of us. If you were the parent of a blind child, or the child of an older parent who is losing sight through age-related eye disease, you would want your loved one to lead a life of independence, productivity and dignity. Specialized services are an important step toward that life.



Support
Specialized
Services



American
Foundation
for the Blind

1.800.232.5463

Testimony on Senate Resolution 4044

I am Allan Peterson from rural Fargo. My home address is 7009 Horseshoe Bend, Fargo, North Dakota 58104.

I have been legally blind for 16 years and have little remaining vision other than light perception. My vision loss was the result of a progressive degenerative disease of the retina of the eye known as retinitis pigmentosa. Presently, there are no treatments or surgical techniques that have been developed that can restore my sight.

In 1983, after my vision loss had progressed to the point that I had become legally blind I received training on skills to deal with vision loss from Adult Vision Services, now part of the services provided through North Dakota School for the Blind / Vision Services. The mobility training with the white cane that I received from Vision Services has proven to be extremely valuable. I use the cane travel skills that I learned at Vision Services to negotiate my way independently around the campus at North Dakota State University, the West Acres Mall, and various sites around the city of Fargo that I can access through the bus and paratransit system.

I have benefited greatly from training in a number of areas that are provided through the North Dakota School for the Blind. Personnel from the North Dakota School for the Blind and Vision Services have provided training to me so I can use a computer that is modified with speech output. These staff people are an integral part of the resources that many of us who have vision impairments have come to rely on as a vital resource to help us with problems we encounter using computers on a day-to-day basis. Many of the operating systems and application programs have become more and more graphically based. These programs are designed to point and click with a "mouse" on a desired task or function. It is a problem if you cannot see the screen in order to click on a desired feature. Training that is available from the School for the Blind is vital so we who have vision problems can access the use of a computer for our work, to gather information or use E-M mail.

Staff from the School for the Blind are also involved with myself and others from the Fargo area in a study group to learn and improve our braille skills. Braille is the equivalent of reading and writing for those of us who cannot see print. Many of us who use braille use it to label food items, clothing or file documents that we need to keep and have a record of. Braille has proven to be an essential tool for those who are blind in their work-place. The North Dakota School for the Blind has an excellent instructor who has taught braille and music in braille for many years.

Speaking as an advocate for the services provided by the North Dakota School for the Blind, I can attest to the value of the training and resources they can provide to persons who experience vision loss. I speak not only as a person who has benefited from the services they provide, but I have served on an Advisory Board for the School for three years and have witnessed the progress this educational institution has made over that period of time. This institution has a staff that is uniquely qualified in this region to offer training to those who experience severe vision loss.

The funding that I received for the white cane training came through the North Dakota Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. They have also provided counseling, resources and funded educational opportunities that I have benefited from.

I am a firm advocate of the Older Blind Grant Program that is administered through the North Dakota Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. This program is directed toward people over the age of 55. The vision rehabilitation specialists that provide the services to older citizens often meet with those experiencing vision loss in the persons home. They are trained to provide suggestions on modifications the person can make to deal with vision loss and provide them with some resources that enable them with this adjustment.

The skills and aids that the vision rehabilitation specialists are able to provide can mean that older citizens of our state who experience severe vision loss can remain in their own homes and postpone or avoid institutionalized nursing home care, if that is their desire. The cost savings that are realized by either avoiding or postponing institutionalized care and the increased sense of well being that are realized by being more independent are strong and compelling reasons that support this program.

Eye diseases commonly associated with aging are macular degeneration and retinopathy that occurs with either diabetes, glaucoma or hypertension. The medical treatment for these eye conditions is often limited and the affected person must cope with a permanent vision loss. Several studies have demonstrated that well over fifty percent of the people who are identified as blind and severely visually impaired in our population are over 60 years of age. This percentage is expected to increase significantly as our population increases in average age. Adjusting to vision loss is often difficult for older persons because they must also deal with other age related infirmities.

The scope and magnitude of those who experience vision loss among persons aged 55 and older in the population of North Dakota was illustrated in a study conducted by researchers at North Dakota State University in 1997. The study found that there were 2,780 non-institutionalized persons over the age of 55 in the population of North Dakota with severe vision loss. Their visual acuity was measured in the range around 20/200 or less after their vision was medically corrected to its best possible level. The study identified another 6,826 non-institutionalized persons with mild to moderate levels of vision loss among the population of people of our state over the age of 55. These people were concentrated along the two major interstate highways of the state.

Personally I feel that the efficacy of combining the services of the North Dakota School for the Blind / Vision Services together with those provided through the Older Blind program of Vocational Rehabilitation need to answer the questions of (1) whether there would be any loss of federal or state funding for the Older Blind Grant Program with this merger and (2) whether there would be greater efficiencies created in the delivery of services to people of all ages who experience vision loss in our state.

TESTIMONY ON SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 4044

HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

March 16, 1999

By Gary Bornsen Data Processing Coordinator
North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind
(701) 795-2712

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

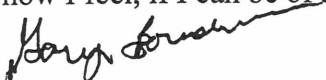
This testimony is in support of resolution 4044. I am a totally blind individual currently employed at the North Dakota School for the Blind.

I became blind in 1985. Since that time I have been exposed to almost any and all things pertaining to visual impairment and blindness. I have been a vocational rehabilitation client, a student at the University of North Dakota and now an employee of NDSB. I could probably write a book about these experiences but I will try to touch on just a couple of what I feel are the most important.

Centralizing vision services for all ages in one state agency makes sense. It is hard for individuals to know where to go for what. As I traveled the college route there was little help in obtaining textbooks, tactual tools or support for a visually impaired student. Technological needs are expanding everyday. Keeping up with technology is a full time job. Working knowledge of expensive equipment is needed to avoid waste. Technology is becoming a lifesaver for older North Dakota citizens. The telephone tag that can be played is enough to drive anyone crazy. This is multiplied when it includes older individuals. Having one stop shopping for anything to do with vision can only be more efficient and user friendly.

The other main point should be of concern to you as legislators. The gathering of statistics is generally considered as a way of judging if appropriations are being used wisely. Statistics of the visually impaired from birth to old age are not now available. Combining statistics from different agencies is next to impossible. With all vision services in one agency, statistics should be able to be gathered and reported in a manner that makes sense. More accurate reports will help any decisions dealing with visual impairments easier.

In conclusion I would like to say I feel NDSB has a lot of the needed criteria already in place. The dedicated expertise staff, the outreach operation and developing databases are going strong. The greatest "black hole" in the system is the fifty-five-year and older age group. I think our staff would enjoy helping any and all visually impaired individual no matter what age. Thank you for your time and since this is an abbreviated version of how I feel, if I can be of any further assistance please contact me.



**TESTIMONY ON SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 4044
HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE**

March 16, 1999

**by Carmen Grove Suminski, Superintendent
North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind
(701) 795-2708**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

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Introduction

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Examples include:

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Concept

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Region #5	2 FTE's
Region #6	2 FTE's
Region #7	2 FTE's
Region #8	2 FTE's

Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 personnel would include one with expertise in ages 0 to 21, and a second with expertise in ages 22 to 99.

Current FTE's at NDSB	28
Current FTE's with VR (Vision)	7

With this model, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation would continue to serve the vocational counseling needs of persons with disabilities including the visually impaired. Personnel from the private sector and local education agencies would continue to provide direct vision services.

Conclusion

This "model" is in compliance with the recommendations of the NDSB Advisory Committee and the National Accreditation Council. A development of continuity of services would involve input from you as legislators, parents and family members, personnel with NDSB and Vocational Rehabilitation, and most importantly the consumers we serve. I believe that the expertise exists in these entities to develop new strategies and create a cost effective and time efficient service delivery system. Services under one agency would be much more geographically efficient enabling us to fully utilize staff both regionally and center based. It would provide continuity within a "seamless" system eliminating the fee the service. Resources, equipment, office space, and expertise could be shared. The result has the potential be a national model for rural America much like the NDSB Outreach program has become.

I urge you to work with us in this "charge" to have a major impact on the quality of statewide programs enabling adult persons who are blind or visually impaired to receive full comprehensive services.



Carmen Grove Suminski, Superintendent
North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind

March 16, 1999

Date

Testimony on Senate Resolution 4044

I am Allan Peterson from rural Fargo. My home address is 7009 Horseshoe Bend, Fargo, North Dakota 58104.

I have been legally blind for 16 years and have little remaining vision other than light perception. My vision loss was the result of a progressive degenerative disease of the retina of the eye known as retinitis pigmentosa. Presently, there are no treatments or surgical techniques that have been developed that can restore my sight.

In 1983, after my vision loss had progressed to the point that I had become legally blind I received training on skills to deal with vision loss from Adult Vision Services, now part of the services provided through North Dakota Vision Services - School for the Blind. The mobility training with the white cane that I received there has proven to be extremely valuable. I use the cane travel skills that I learned at Vision Services to negotiate my way independently around the campus at North Dakota State University, the West Acres Mall, and various sites around the city of Fargo that I can access through the bus and paratransit system.

I have benefited greatly from training in a number of other areas that are provided by the North Dakota Vision Services - School for the Blind. Two of their staff members have provided the training I needed so that I could use a computer that is modified with speech output. These staff people are an integral part of the resources that many of us who have vision impairments have come to rely on as a vital resource to help us with problems we encounter using computers on a day-to-day basis. These staff people field many calls daily from visually impaired people and are very competent in providing the assistance that is needed. Many operating systems and application programs have become more and more graphically based. These programs are designed to point and click with a "mouse" on a desired task or function. It is a problem if you cannot see the screen in order to click on a desired feature. Training that is available from the School for the Blind is vital so that we who have vision problems can learn the techniques that are necessary for us to operate a computer in our work and our homes.

Staff from the School for the Blind are also involved with myself and others from the Fargo area in a study group to learn and improve our braille skills. Braille is the equivalent of reading and writing for those of us who cannot see print. Many of us who use braille use it to label food items, clothing or file documents that we need to keep and have a record of. The North Dakota School for the Blind has an excellent instructor who has taught braille and music in braille for several years. Braille is an essential tool for the blind in a work environment.

Speaking as an advocate for the services provided by the North Dakota School for the Blind, I can attest to the value of the training and resources they can provide to persons who experience vision loss. I speak not only as a person who has benefited from the services they provide, but I have served on an Advisory Board for the School for three years and have witnessed the progress this educational institution has made over that period of time. This institution has a staff that is uniquely qualified in this region to offer training to those who experience severe vision loss.

I am a firm advocate of the Older Blind Grant Program that is administered through the North Dakota Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. This program is directed toward people over the age of 55. The vision rehabilitation specialists that provide the services to older citizens often meet with those experiencing vision loss in the persons home. They are trained to provide suggestions on modifications the person can make to deal with vision loss and provide them with some resources that enable them with this adjustment.

The skills and aids that the vision rehabilitation specialists are able to provide can mean that older citizens of our state who experience severe vision loss can remain in their own homes and postpone or avoid institutionalized nursing home care, if that is their desire. The cost savings that are realized by either avoiding or postponing institutionalized care and the increased sense of well being that are realized by being more independent are strong and compelling reasons that support this program.

Factors and figures offered to support the Older Blind program are:

(1) Many eye diseases have an age relationship. Common age related eye diseases are macular degeneration, retinopathy (that can occur with diabetes, glaucoma or hypertension) and complications that can occur as a result of cataract surgery. The medical treatment for these eye conditions is often limited and the affected person must cope with a permanent vision loss. Several studies have demonstrated that well over fifty percent of the people who are identified as blind and severely visually impaired in our population are over 60 years of age. This percentage is expected to increase significantly as our population increases in average age.

(2) A number of older citizens of North Dakota have some degree of vision loss. The scope and magnitude of those who have experienced some degree of permanent vision loss among persons aged 55 and older in the population of North Dakota was illustrated in a study conducted by researchers at North Dakota State University in 1997. The study found that there were 2,780 non-institutionalized persons over the age of 55 in the population of North Dakota with severe vision loss. Their visual acuity was measured in the range around 20/200 or less after their vision was medically corrected to its best possible level. The study identified another 6,826 non-institutionalized persons with mild to moderate levels of vision loss among people of our state over the age of 55. The people identified with vision loss were found to be living principally in larger urban centers along the two major interstate highways in the state.

I hope that this testimony has demonstrated that both of these services are vital and strong. Personally I feel that a study that determines the efficacy of merging services provided by the North Dakota Vision Services - School for the Blind together with those provided through the Older Blind program of Vocational Rehabilitation need to answer the questions of (1) whether there would be any loss of federal or state funding for the Older Blind Grant Program with this merger and (2) whether there would be greater efficiencies created in the delivery of services to people of all ages who experience vision loss in North Dakota.