

Testimony for the Older Individuals Who Are Blind (OIB) Program Appropriation within HB1012.

To: Chair John Nelson, and Members of the House Appropriations Human Services subcommittee, North Dakota 67th Legislative Assembly.

From: Allan Peterson, Legislative Committee, North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB).

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Re: Testimony in support of the state Appropriation for the Older Individuals Who Are Blind (OIB) Program within the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, North Dakota Department of Human Services

Greetings Chairman Nelson, and members of the House Appropriations Human Services Subcommittee,

We are testifying on our own behalf, as well as to help represent the advocacy goals of the North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB). Our testimony is directed in support of the Appropriation for the Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program within the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation for its operation during the next biennium of 2021 - 2023.

In North Dakota, the Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program is administrated by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation within the Department of Human Services. Funding for the program is generated through a 90% grant from the federal government which requires a minimum state appropriation of 10%. Federal funding for the program is authorized under the U.S. Rehabilitation Act.

Federal funding for the Older Individuals Who Are Blind program is allocated to the states on the basis of population size. Because North Dakota's population base is small in comparison to other more populated states, it receives what is termed a minimal allocation. Minimal federal funding is a problem for the program here in North Dakota because our state is geographically large in relation to its population size, which necessitates a lot of travel to meet with clients in their homes. Also, our state has a higher proportion of people in the older age ranges, which experience a much higher incidence of sight loss. The Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program is specifically directed to serve individuals who are 55 years of age and older.

Although there have been many significant advances in eye care, sight problems such as macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, and cataracts continue to be primary sources of vision impairments and blindness, particularly, for persons who are 55 and older.

The professional staff which are trained to provide the services for the Older Blind Program are classified as vision rehabilitation specialists. In North Dakota there are 6 vision rehabilitation specialists assigned to work in each of the state's 8 defined Human Service regions. Vision specialists, employed in the older blind program, travel to a client's home to do an assessment of needs and provide the services and counseling that is needed in that person's home environment and is individualized to meet client needs. The services of this program have helped thousands of our older citizens who have experienced severe sight impairments to become more independent and enjoy a more productive and fulfilled life in spite of having lost some or all of their eyesight.

The skills and aids that the vision rehabilitation specialists provide to older citizens with sight loss, is often quite an (pardon the pun) "an eye opener" which does much to help them stay in their own homes and postpone or avoid institutionalized nursing home care. The cost savings that are gained by postponing or avoiding institutionalized care and the increased sense of wellbeing and dignity that are realized by being more independent are compelling reasons for the state to provide the appropriation needed for this program in North Dakota. In most instances, the clients served are elderly and live on very fixed incomes so for them to purchase a vision aid that would help them is difficult or impossible.

The rural character of our state and limitations on access to public transportation can mean those who experience severe sight loss are isolated and very dependent on others.

You might ask, among us in ND, **how many today have a loss of eyesight?** The U.S. Senses Bureau estimates that presently there are approximately 762,062 residents in North Dakota. Many credible studies have demonstrated that, conservatively, that **3.3%** among the general population, will have conditions that mildly, moderately, or severely medically compromise their eyesight – this means that more than 20,000 individuals in North Dakota are affected by uncorrectable sight loss - a quarter of whom (5,000) have significant sight loss and/or are "legally blind".

About North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB): You could say that NDAB is an organization of and for people who are blind or sight impaired. We are a statewide membership organization founded 85 years ago in 1936, a majority of our members are blind or sight impaired.