

## **Testimony SB2012 Older Individuals Who Are Blind (OIB) Program Appropriation.**

To: Representative Jon Nelson, Chair, and Members of the ND House Appropriations Committee, Human Resources Division, 68<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

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

Greetings Chairman Jon Nelson, Vice Chair Stemen, and Representatives, Bert Anderson, Kreidt, Mitskog, O'Brien, Schobinger, Strinden, members of the House Appropriations Committee, Human Resources Division.

We are testifying on our own behalf, as well as, to represent the advocacy goals of the North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB). This testimony is given in **support of the Appropriation** for the Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program within the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation for its operation in the next biennium of 2023-2025.

Included with this testimony is a resolution we adopted at our 2022 Convention which supports the appropriation request of the OIB Program in North Dakota.

The OIB 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 based on population size. Because North Dakota's population base is small in comparison to other more populated states, it receives what is termed a minimal distribution. 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. Second, our state has a higher proportion of people in the older age categories, 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 many significant advances in eye care are being made, sight problems such as macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, & cataracts continue to be primary sources of sight loss , particularly, for persons who are 55 and older, and this is the segment of the population which is **disproportionately** increasing in size.

The professional staff which are trained to provide the services for the Older Blind Program are classified as vision rehabilitation specialists. In North Dakota currently there are 7 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. The services of this program have helped thousands of our older citizens, who after having lost some or all of their eyesight, have been able to enjoy more independence and a productive and fulfilled life.

The skills and aids that the vision rehabilitation specialists provide to older citizens with sight loss helps 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 ND and limitations on access to public transportation, can mean those who experience severe sight loss are isolated and very dependent on others.

The number of clients served by the OIB specialists has increased significantly in the current biennium. Demographics indicate that the average age is increasing and that the need for this program will steadily increase in the next biennium and beyond.

In 2021 the population of North Dakota was estimated to be 774,948. Credible studies have demonstrated that, conservatively, **3.3%** among the general population will have medical conditions that mildly, moderately, or severely compromise their eyesight – which would mean that more than 20,000 individuals in North Dakota could be affected by some degree of uncorrectable sight loss and that a quarter of whom, about 5,000, may have significant sight loss and/or are “legally blind”. Undoubtedly, many so affected would benefit greatly from the services of the OIB program.

**A majority of the members of North Dakota Association of the Blind are blind or have a significant visual impairment. Many of us are among the segment of the population who are 55 years old and older.**