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To: Senator Ronald Sorvaag, Chair, and Members of the ND Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Education and the Environment, 68th Legislative Session.

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Re: Testimony offered for SB2013, specifically for the appropriation provided to North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind for the biennium of 2023 – 2025.

Greetings Chairman Senator Sorvaag, Vice Chair Krebsbach, and Senators Meyer, Rust, and Schaible, members of the North Dakota Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Education and the Environment.

I am testifying on my own behalf as well as for that of the **North Dakota Association of the Blind**, we are testifying in support of the budget request that has been submitted for North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind for its operation and capital expenditures for the next biennium of 2023 - 2025.

A resolution that supports the appropriation request of NDVS/SB, adopted by North Dakota Association of the Blind, is also included with this testimony.

To be clear, we are testifying not only to maintain but to strengthen the appropriation for NDVS/SB. We do support the budget for NDVS/SB as was proposed in Governor Doug Burgum's budget as has been submitted to the 68th North Dakota Legislative session. We are well aware, that there are significant unmet needs and a great need for more resources that, if available, would help serve more people with sight loss in ND.

It cannot be over emphasized, just how important it is that persons who lose some or all of their sight, be afforded the opportunity to receive appropriate quality blindness rehabilitation skills training to deal with this most serious life altering change. This training is really what makes all the difference in having a much better quality of life.

About North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB): You could say that North Dakota Association of the Blind is an organization of and for people who are blind or visually impaired. We are a statewide membership organization that was founded 87 years ago in 1936. A majority of our members are blind or sight impaired. We provide educational, mentorship, networking, social and recreational opportunities for members and nonmembers. As an organization, we strongly advocate for blindness specific rehabilitation skills training, employment opportunities, and adaptations that will enhance and improve the lives of people who are blind and visually impaired. We have no paid staff, and our services are provided through the work of unpaid volunteers.

As a person who lost his eyesight as an adult, I can testify to the importance and efficacy of the training that can be offered by NDVS-SB. The skills that I learned through what is known as “orientation and mobility” using a white cane, is an adaptation I use each and every day and is of immeasurable importance to my independence. The skill set of orientation and mobility is taught by a mobility instructor who has been certified to provide this training. Clients learn and perfect the skills of mobility and orientation over a period of several weeks and even months of training.

Besides the “orientation and mobility” skills that I’ve learned, I rely heavily on the use of a computer that has been equipped with a speech (audio) output program, which allows me to work productively as a person that has no functional eyesight.

The instruction that I’ve received from the NDVS-SB technology experts on using audio output from my computer has been absolutely vital in developing my skills to access this mode of communication. Many others in the population of people who are blind can provide similar testimonials on the absolute vital need for the services of the skilled technology instructors employed by NDVS/SB. Because the digital revolution is so critically vital to independence in today’s society, we desperately need the specific training to allow us to be proficient in utilizing today’s latest electronic technology.

I have also gained very valuable skills on using an iPhone from instructors at NDVS/SB and am very thankful that this training can be offered virtually via a phone call.

Another vital skill I’ve learned and used extensively with the aid of instruction from teachers at NDVS-SB is to read and write in Braille. I have found this skill to be particularly useful in writing notes and marking items; Braille is an adaptation comparable to the use of paper and pencil.

Whether they are children or are adults, learning the skills to deal with blindness are best done at a teaching facility that is equipped and has the professional staff needed to instruct their students, so they are better able to deal with the challenges that this disability imposes on a person. And North Dakota Vision services / School for the Blind is the only teaching institution in North Dakota that offers a comprehensive program of instruction to deal with sight loss adjustment and It is absolutely imperative that this service be maintained and strengthened so that it is better able to continue to serve those of us who must deal with significant sight loss.

One of the benefits the pandemic yielded, was that we learned how to communicate virtually using electronic platforms like Zoom. Instructors at the School coordinated with our organization to offer a variety of virtual weekly meetings that have included among others - valuable information on accessible technology, coping skills, daily living skills like cooking, and much, much more that continue to be offered presently.