

**Proposal: Request for a Legislative Study
on Blindness Services in Wisconsin – March 2011**

The Statutory Council on Blindness is asking the members of the Wisconsin Legislature to conduct a study to help determine the feasibility of establishing a comprehensive residential rehabilitation program for blind and visually impaired adults in Wisconsin.

There are approximately 200,000 blind and visually impaired individuals in the state of Wisconsin. At this time, our state has no residential program that is designed to provide structured, incremental and daily comprehensive rehabilitation training to blind and visually impaired adults.

The proposed study should examine the need, the cost of an in-state program, and the number of people it could serve. It should also examine the cost and effectiveness of assisting private agencies such as the Badger Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Milwaukee and the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired in Madison to expand their residential programs if they desire to fill this need. Finally, it should examine the efficacy of sending those who wish a comprehensive residential program to facilities in other states. The study committee should include representatives of the consumer groups of blind individuals in our state, representation from rehabilitation professionals, along with others of the legislature's choosing.

Comprehensive residential rehabilitation programs currently operate in many states and are essential. Some of the states providing comprehensive programs are Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Oregon, and Texas. A residential setting allows for the maximum use of instructors and the maximum benefit to the participants. The intensive training provides structured time required for teaching and learning specialized skills as well as the time for incidental learning that cannot occur in an entirely itinerant program. Newly blind and/or visually impaired adults learn with the support of other participants who are experiencing the same or similar challenges.

Most of the residential programs in the country are scheduled to last for a period of six to nine months. While this may seem a long time to those unfamiliar with blindness, it is a reasonable amount of time once one learns what must be studied to live independently. In order to become a fully independent blind person, one needs to learn how to travel safely using a cane, along with environmental cues; how to work safely in the kitchen using senses other than sight; how to manage printed materials with technology, a human reader, or both; how to manage a home without vision; how to locate the additional assistance and resources one needs, and most importantly, how to deal with one's own and others' attitudes and misperceptions about blindness and

visual impairment. As the participant gains confidence in his or her ability to learn new skills, he or she also demonstrates to family, friends, and others that living independently is both a possibility and a preferred choice.

All of these learning components are essential for successful adaptation to blindness. Without the ability to travel independently, one is limited to the availability and schedule of friends and family and dependent upon them for the most basic things, e.g. finding a restroom, buying groceries, or just going out for coffee. Without the ability to use a kitchen independently, one is limited to the use of a microwave at best, and sometimes not even that without assistance since most appliances have gone to a touch screen interface. Mail arrives every day and must be dealt with periodically. And the attitude toward blindness, what one can and cannot do with a visual impairment, affects every aspect of life.

Wisconsin's current delivery system provides piecemeal rehabilitation services for blind and visually impaired adults, and because of its structure, does what can only be judged as an inadequate job. In an era when we are concerned with the unemployment rate in our state approaching nine percent, blind men and women have lived for years with a rate of seventy percent unemployment. For us, eight percent would be an improvement of several orders of magnitude. Blind and visually impaired adults want to work, pay taxes, contribute to their communities and make things better for all Wisconsin citizens.

Wisconsin's current rehabilitation delivery system for adults who are blind or visually impaired consists of three state agency programs and training offered by two centers. The State of Wisconsin offers an introductory one-week per year residential program through the Department of Public Instruction/Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired (WCBVI) in Janesville, with the assistance of the Department of Health Services/Office for the Blind and Visually Impaired (OBVI). This program can accept up to forty participants per session. The OBVI offers, as a part of its regular service, home visits by blindness professionals throughout the year. The Department of Workforce Development/Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) offers some service by orientation and mobility professionals who teach participants how to use a white cane, as well as other skills. In addition, DVR has contracted with the Badger Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Milwaukee and the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired in Madison to provide services to individuals.

Over the last fifteen years, Wisconsin has lost its residential rehabilitation options for adults. The program at the Wisconsin Center used to be six weeks long, not long enough, but a good start. It now lasts only one week. That is just long enough to give hope to the participants who want to learn new essential skills; then, the hope is taken away due to insufficient time for teaching and learning these essential skills. Up until

2009, there was a residential program through North Central Technical College in Wausau. That program is now gone. The only people from Wisconsin who have been able to take advantage of the full residential rehabilitation experience needed to travel out of state. Most states have a comprehensive residential program but sending adults out of state for training takes both the dollars and jobs out of Wisconsin.

As the Wisconsin aging population grows, so will the number of adults with vision loss. We ask that the legislature perform a feasibility study to assess the rehabilitation services in Wisconsin so that adults may become contributors rather than possible burdens on society. We would ask for a report before the start of the 2013 legislative session

Respectfully,

Wisconsin Statutory Council on Blindness