

AUSTIN LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND

Travis Association for the Blind | Established 1934

July 2, 2026

Dear Members of the Sunset Advisory Commission:

Since 1934, Travis Association for the Blind—doing business as Austin Lighthouse for the Blind—has demonstrated that individuals with disabilities are not only capable but essential members of our workforce. We currently employ more than 400 people across Central Texas, including over 200 who are blind or visually impaired.

In addition to our partnerships with Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program, workforce services, and the Purchasing from People with Disabilities (PPD) program, Austin Lighthouse team has over 50 years' experience administering contract services with TWC/VR, serve on community advisory and advocacy panels and committees including the PPD Advisory Committee where I, proudly, serve as Chair alongside one of our blind team members. We were pleased to see the Sunset staff report:

- Validate VR as an essential pathway to employment, careers, and independence for people with vision loss and other disabilities and recommend continuing TWC's core functions.
- Identify VR integration with Workforce Services as inconsistent and largely dependent on local staff initiative rather than standardized policy—reflected in co-enrollment rates that range from 23% to 0% across offices, against a statewide average of just 6% (Issue 3).
- Recommend realigning VR management units with the 28 Local Workforce Development Board regions to streamline coordination and reduce confusion (Recommendation 3.4).
- Affirm TWC as the appropriate agency to continue overseeing the PPD program and recommend removing its separate Sunset date, strengthening its long-term stability (p. 105,107).

We agree with the report's diagnosis. As a frontline provider, we see daily how the absence of standardized integration and aligned geographic boundaries translates into duplicated effort, missed referrals, and slower paths to employment for our clients. We believe true continuity and impact for people with disabilities will come only through this kind of systems integration — producing a virtuous cycle of economic benefit at the local, regional, state, and national level.

Over FY 2026, Austin Lighthouse served 531 individuals across our TWC contracts, for a total of 1928 hours of intervention. While we maintain a positive, collaborative relationship with TWC and our workforce partners, a persistent gap remains between delivering service interventions and training, and securing long-term, purposeful career employment for our clients.

Where the System Creates Unnecessary Burden

We share the Commission's goal of improving systems integration. The report itself documents an outdated regional administrative structure, VR counselor turnover of 20–35% annually, and caseloads that have grown 34% in four years. From our vantage point as a service provider, four related issues consistently drive up cost and slow down service delivery without improving outcomes:

- **Delayed intake.** Referrals and Service-Authorizations often arrive separately (both required before services can begin or contact with the client) resulting in additional coordination with counselors followed by repeated attempts to schedule, further delaying services.
- **Travel time that outweighs service time.** Given our service area and Texas road conditions, a single 1–2 hour, face-to-face appointment typically requires four hours of staff time once travel is included—time that is largely unreimbursed.

- **Outdated paper-based requirements.** A single case typically generates over 30 printed pages requiring handwritten signatures, copies of all e-mail communications with TWC, and travel beyond 50 miles require, for each visit, documented pre-approval and paper mapping; all physically stored onsite.
- **Fragmented communication and regional misalignment.** Multiple, inconsistent channels of communication and geographic mismatches between providers and the systems they serve add further administrative drag.

Together, these factors place an undue, time-consuming, and largely unreimbursed burden on agencies like ours, directly limiting how many individuals we can serve within targeted timeframes.

The Opportunity: Align Service Regions, as the Report Recommends

These operational challenges point directly to the report's own recommendation: aligning VR management units with Local Workforce Development Board regions. We urge the Commission to extend that same logic to the full continuum of services—from identification in the school setting, through VR services, to career employment. When providers, counselors, schools, and employers consistently work within the same service region, they build the local relationships, familiarity, and trust that allow referrals to move seamlessly through the system, directly addressing the low and inconsistent co-enrollment rates the report identifies.

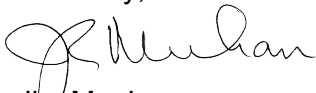
Reduced travel and greater regional consistency would let staff spend more time on direct service and less on logistics. The result is a more coordinated pathway for individuals from initial engagement to successful employment, and a more efficient, effective system for agencies and providers alike.

We appreciate the responsibility the Commission carries in charting the most effective, accessible, and impactful path forward—one that ensures every Texan with vision loss or a disability has the support needed on their journey to employment, career, and independence.

Austin Lighthouse for the Blind submits this written comment ahead of the July 2, 2026 deadline, and stand ready to provide testimony at the August 12 public hearing, attend community meetings, and offer examples from our experience as both a TWC provider and a PPD employer.

Please feel free to contact me at jim.meehan@austinlighthouse.org or 210.380.4906 with any questions.

Sincerely,



Jim Meehan
President & CEO
Austin Lighthouse for the Blind