

November 13, 2014

Sunset Committee

Austin, Texas

Dear Committee,

I thank you for the opportunity to share my input on this matter.

First, let me introduce myself for background. I understand what I am addressing due to my own experience. I had 20/20 vision until a 1993 auto accident left me totally blind at age 31. I had never known a blind person in my life and suddenly found myself thrust into the care of receiving services from the Texas Commission for the Blind to help me take my life back as I adjusted to the onset career and lifestyle changes. I received two months of blind rehabilitation training at the Criss Cole Center where I received Orientation & Mobility training, independent living skills, learned to read and write Grade I Braille, and was exposed to assistive technology that I had never known even existed before my arrival. Since that time, I've gone on to earn my Associates, Bachelors, and Masters Degrees, and I received ongoing support throughout those pursuits from capable professionals with our agency serving the blind. I have since worked as a college counselor and contract assistive technology trainer I'm now an able and capable husband, father, and homeowner thanks to the early empowerment I received. Five years ago, I established Visually Impaired People of South East Texas, a support group for people who are visually impaired and their family members. I've also joined with other support group leaders from across Houston to form the Houston Area Visually Impaired Network, so that we can bring unity to our visually impaired community. I regularly engage with other blind Texans, sharing information and resources, helping those with adjustment to onset vision loss, or other, more specific adaptive questions, utilizing the skills I gleaned from my earliest exposure to the Texas VR system and the formal education that it empowered. I understand first-hand the continued need for the type of services we have been receiving.

There are many items proposed in the current review, but I am here to specifically discuss Staff Recommendation 1.1. This recommendation would combine all five of the current departments in one single entity, putting the Department for Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) and its Division for Blind Services (DBS) into a "supergroup" alongside the Health and Human Services Commission, Department of Aging and Disability Services, Department of Family and Protective Services, and Department of State Health Services.

While on the surface, this recommendation may make fiscal sense as it results in some elimination of superfluous and repetitive management positions. More importantly, however, what this recommendation will do is to put the specialized vocational rehabilitation services that DARS and DBS provide to Texans with disabilities, as well as the unique Independent Living programs of the DBS, and intermingle these services with the assorted, non-associated concerns of the various other departments. Granted, these other departments do good and valuable work, but I fear combining all of these as recommended will fragment the attention and specialized focus necessary to operate the unique programs of DARS and the DBS.

I am opposed to this recommendation, and it is also where I am asking you to take action.

My opposition is based on the concern that the needs of Texans with disabilities will be diluted and not treated with the specific concern and knowledge that are required to properly provide these unique services. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is specifically designed to teach people with disabilities how to adapt to the limitations brought on with their specific disability, targeting employment. The end result of this process is getting these clients back on the rolls as employed tax payers, instead of only drawing from the agency resources without giving any return. This aspect is what sets DARS and the DBS apart from these other state agencies.

Additionally, there are unique programs provided by the DBS to teach independent living skills to blind Texans, and these are also in peril of being watered down under this recommendation. The specialized training required to administer these various applications -- Orientation & Mobility specialists, certified teachers for the visually impaired, and certified assistive technology trainers -- all come together to teach blind Texans how to become confident and competent tax-paying citizens of our great state. Trusting the administration of these programs in the hands of a program manager who has no background in the professional field of VR is a scary thought.

This current recommendation is proposing to take specialized services and make them part of a mainstream process. The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors in both DARS and the DBS are specially degreed and certified professionals in this unique service field, and the expertise they provide cannot be duplicated by those who are not experienced in their field of service. Additionally, the other specialized services unique to teaching blind Texans the adaptive skills they need to be successful adults are not layman skills, either. A person with a specific and significant illness, such as a heart condition or cancer, would not seek the services of a general practitioner; they would seek the services of a specialist. Texans with disabilities are equally in need of specialized services, and I urge you not to weaken the administration of the services as they are currently being provided.

Instead of outright opposition of this recommendation, Veronda L. Durden, the current Commissioner of DARS, is proposing a modification to Staff Recommendation 1.1, which would create “a division within the reconstituted organization to house all programs that serve people with disabilities and children with developmental delays.”

And, I believe this is a suggestion worth pursuing. I urge each of you to please consider Commissioner Durden’s proposal, as I wholeheartedly feel it would work to meet the needs and goals of the Texas Sunset Commission, while also working to keep valuable service to disabled Texans in place.

Thank you again for your time and attention to this important matter. I sincerely appreciate the work you are doing.

Ron Graham, President  
Visually Impaired People of South East Texas