

I wish to comment on the Sunset Commission's staff report on the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS). I oppose the first recommendation in this report.

Recommendation One

Currently DARS has two designated units: the Division for Rehabilitation Services (DRS) vocational rehabilitation, and the Division for Blind Services (DBS).

Recommendation one is to administratively merge these divisions.

The reasons why I disapprove of this recommendation are:

1. As an Assistive Technology Professional who lived and worked in another state that fell under an umbrella agency I witnessed firsthand the lack of quality training, lack of resources and the lack of knowledge by counselors and other professionals in the rehabilitation field that were available for the blind and visually impaired clients. During the time I was providing assistive technology training in the state that was operating under the umbrella agency, I saw many blind and low-vision clients who could not get basic technology training, equipment or even evaluations for equipment to enter post-secondary education and the work force. Often the cause was that the rehabilitation professionals had little knowledge if any about what assistive technology was available to the blind. On several occasions, counselors would request my services and state that they did not think a blind person would be able to perform gainful employment because they could not use a computer. When I explained to the rehabilitation professionals that there was software that could read the computer screen these professionals were surprised. The rehabilitation professionals told me that they had very little knowledge about what technology was available for the blind because their primary caseloads were for clients that were hearing impaired or had other disabilities. Because blindness is a low incidence disability, there is a need

for extensive and ongoing specific training to provide specific rehabilitation services that will match this population's needs. This is particularly true in the area of assistive technology.

2. The focus of rehabilitation is to help people enter the work force. Technology is a necessary skill for today's work force. In order for blind and visually impaired people to be competitive in the work force, it is no different. This means blind and visually impaired people need quality technology training specific to their needs. This requires specialized software for the blind or low-vision and assistive technology trainers who are

knowledgeable in these applications. Even the off the shelf devices with built-in accessibility features requires a trainer that understands how to use the specific accessibility features on the devices, knows how to evaluate which features will be most effective for particular types of vision loss and train people who are blind or visually impaired to effectively use those features.

An assistive technology professional for the blind is a blindness rehabilitation professional that not only specializes in rehabilitation but also specializes in technology as it pertains to the blind. Assistive technology trainers of the blind and visually impaired have a very special skill set. It takes a considerable amount of time and training to become an assistive technology professional of the blind and visually impaired.

3. Rehabilitation training for those without vision loss is often less costly; there will be an incentive to get faster results to meet rehabilitation goals by serving those without longer term specialized training such as instruction in assistive technology. Blind consumers might be overlooked in favor of less intensive non-blindness related cases if their services are merged into a more generic vocational rehabilitation system.

4. The purchasing department at the large agency will have no concept

of the nuances related to purchasing services for blind consumers. This is especially true in the area of assistive technology. When an employer makes a job offer to a person who is blind, they need to get the equipment and/or software necessary to go to work as soon as possible. The DARS purchasers understand how important timely purchasing of assistive technology is for employment.

5. There is current data to support separate structures (Cavanaugh,

2010): The primary conclusions of Mississippi State University 2010 research on the outcomes of separate blindness-specific versus combined agencies is

highlighted below: Consumer Outcomes - "...Separate agencies, compared with General/Combined agencies, close a higher percentage of consumers in employment

in integrated settings and in self-employment." Competitive Employment - "...Separate agencies, compared with General/Combined agencies, close a higher

percentage of consumers in competitive

employment..."

6. DRS has never had a children's program; the Blind Children's Program

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would lose the leadership and oversight of knowledgeable supervisors who can meaningfully direct these critical support functions for families and young children and for transition services.

Summary

Based on my direct experience from working as an assistive technology professional in a state operating under an umbrella rehabilitation structure combined with the research that has been conducted; I am convinced that if recommendation one of the report is followed, the funds that are now earmarked for blindness related services will be dispersed within the larger general community and services will suffer. This will mean that blind and visually impaired Texans will have a difficult time competing in school at all levels and entering the increasingly technology savvy workforce.

Reference

Cavanaugh, B. S. (2010). An update on services and outcomes of blind consumers served in separate and general/combined VR agencies. Prepared for the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, Mississippi State University. Mississippi State, MS: RRTC-MSU.

([http://www.blind.msstate.edu/research/nrtc-publications/download/questionaire.php?id=187&f=An Update on Services and Outcomes of Blind and Visually Impaired Consumers Served in Separate and General/Combined VR Agencies&itk=bc7e6022c141e1b6096ab05d618d5f5b](http://www.blind.msstate.edu/research/nrtc-publications/download/questionaire.php?id=187&f=An%20Update%20on%20Services%20and%20Outcomes%20of%20Blind%20and%20Visually%20Impaired%20Consumers%20Served%20in%20Separate%20and%20General/Combined%20VR%20Agencies&itk=bc7e6022c141e1b6096ab05d618d5f5b)).

I recommend that the Division of Blind Services is maintained under the current organizational structure of DARS or separated out into its own agency with a separate operating budget. This would allow for services to be more timely and more focused. This will allow for more successful outcomes in school and employment for the blind and visually impaired of Texas.

Submitted by

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