

**From:** [Sunset Advisory Commission](#)  
**To:** [Cecelia Hartley](#)  
**Subject:** FW: PUBLIC COMMENT FROM ACB OF TEXAS  
**Date:** Tuesday, June 03, 2014 1:44:15 PM

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**From:** Larry Johnson  
**Sent:** Tuesday, June 03, 2014 10:53 AM  
**To:** Sunset Advisory Commission  
**Cc:**  
**Subject:** PUBLIC COMMENT FROM ACB OF TEXAS



**American Council of the Blind of Texas (ACBT)**

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Attention: Mr. Ken Levine, Director

Sunset Advisory Commission

Austin Texas

Dear sir:

The American Council of the Blind of Texas, the largest consumer organization of blind and visually impaired individuals in Texas, appreciates the opportunity to comment on the recommendations offered by the Sunset Advisory Commission staff with respect to the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services.

While we agree that closer interagency cooperation and collaboration are both possible and desirable, we strongly disagree with the staff report's recommendation to consolidate the Division for Blind Services with the Division for Rehabilitation Services. We also believe that seniors who experience loss of independence due to vision loss are best served when they receive the specialized intervention and support from professional staff specifically trained in the blindness field.

**ISSUE 1: The Separation Between DARS' Divisions for Blind Services and Rehabilitation Services Causes Unnecessary Duplication and Impedes Access to Services.**

**RESPONSE:**

The categorical nature of rehabilitation to legally blinded people is best accomplished by a free-standing and competent agency of government, like the DARS Division for Blind Services, dedicated to rehabilitative assistance to legally blind persons. Economic circumstances in some states have been used to consolidate agencies and agency missions to the detriment of blind residents. These consolidations are ill advised because they allow for improperly trained personnel to work with blind people when whatever training they have had is oriented toward the different needs of different groups. The results are blind people living highly diminished lives from what they could have otherwise had, and at worst, they put blind people at risk of injury, impoverishment, or even death from the inability to properly cope with their living circumstances. Acknowledging the reality that specialized training is necessary for the rehabilitation of the blindness population, and that the cost of such rehabilitation system needs to be managed properly, the American Council of the Blind of Texas offers the following ideas to the Sunset Advisory Commission to assist in addressing the issues it has raised and in resolving the fiscal challenges being faced by the Legislature.

**Dedicated revenue streams.**

The cost burden to the state of Texas of having to operate a separate service system to people who are blind or low vision could be greatly lessened or eliminated by the state passing legislation which would dedicate a particular revenue stream to the Division for Blind Services for a particular product or products bought. An example of this would be a percentage or an exact amount of money charged for services to the blind from each pair of eyeglasses purchased in the state. This is not unusual. A similar charge is done on telephone bills to support access for deaf users of the phone system, and in some states a certain charge associated with motorcycle usage is collected to benefit their head injury programs.

Alternative methods of administration.

This is a sensitive topic since the opportunity for harming services to people who are blind is clearly present if not done properly. In this model, the state would arrange for services to the blind to occur by competent staff while having the administrative functions carried out by DARS. DARS could take care of many administrative functions while the Division for Blind Services would still be responsible for recruiting, training, and deploying service professionals with the required expertise in blindness to properly assist blind consumers.

### ***ISSUE 3: DARS Offers Many Independent Living Services Consumers Could Easily Access Through Local Centers for Independent Living.***

#### **RESPONSE:**

This is not the time to cut staff or reduce funding for DARS DBS independent living services programs for seniors who are blind. According to The Texas State Data Center over 393,000 Texas seniors in 2013 were considered legally blind and thus suffer from a major loss of independence.

People who experience vision loss late in life need the intervention and assistance of professionally trained staff, special orientation and travel training, and independent living adaptive aids and technology in order to live independently and stay out of nursing homes. Current staff at the 27 Centers for Independent Living are not trained to provide the specialized services needed by newly blind seniors.

The average monthly cost for nursing facility care according to North Texas Aging and Disability Resource Center and Genworth Financial Inc., a long-term care insurance provider, is \$47,500 for a semiprivate room. It is much less expensive to provide legally blind seniors appropriate independent living services which will allow them to remain in their homes.

Due to the extremely limited funding of its Older Blind Independent Living Program DARS Division for Blind Services was able to serve just 3,314, less than 1% of older blind Texans, during fiscal year 2013. Clearly what is needed is not less but more funding and more staff to address the expanding population of seniors who are experiencing vision loss and are in dire need of independent living services.

Respectfully submitted

ACB of Texas Advocacy and Legislative Committee

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