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August 17, 2022

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro

United States House of Representatives

Chair, Committee on Appropriations

2413 Rayburn House Office Building

Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger

United States House of Representatives

Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations

1026 Longworth House Office Building

Washington, DC 20515

Subject: The Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) Program

Dear Chair DeLauro and Ranking Member Granger:

On behalf of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB), I am writing to thank you for your support of the Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) Program. The President’s FFY 23 budget proposes to continue to fund the OIB Program in the amount of $33,317,000, an amount that has not increased since 2014. However, during that time the number of individuals who are older blind has increased significantly due to the aging of the population.

The mission of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) is to promote through advocacy, coordination, and education the delivery of specialized services that enable individuals who are blind and visually impaired to achieve personal and vocational independence. NCSAB represents state vocational rehabilitation agencies that provide services to people who are blind and visually impaired. The OIB Program is administered through the vocational rehabilitation program in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration.

The number of older individuals with severe vision loss is increasing rapidly due to the aging of the population and the corresponding increase of seniors with conditions such as age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, and diabetic retinopathy. According to the 2019 American Community Survey, 6% of Americans who are 65 and older have serious vision loss (3.2 million Americans). For individuals who are 75 and older, the percentage is even greater, with 8.8% having serious vision loss (1.9 million Americans). These numbers will continue to increase as the population ages. Studies are also showing that COVID can cause diabetes, with one recent study finding persons with even mild COVID having a 28% increase in the risk of diabetes (European Association for the Study of Diabetes). Another recent study out of the United Kingdom found an 81% increased risk of diabetes in the first four weeks after infection, and 27% in the first 12 months after infection (PLOS Medicine). This increase in diabetes will also result in an increase in the number of individuals who become blind or visually impaired due to diabetic retinopathy.

The OIB Program provided independent living services to 53,785 individuals in 2019, the last full year of data prior to the pandemic. Because of the flat funding of the OIB Program and increasing operational costs, the number of individuals served in 2019 was about 1,000 less than served in 2018, which was about 1,000 less than the number served in 2017. This decrease in the number of persons served is despite the fact that the number of older individuals who are blind or visually impaired is actually increasing. An increase in funding would reverse this trend, and enable the OIB to serve more individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

The OIB Program provides independent living services to individuals who are 55 and older and who are blind or have severe vision loss. The independent living services that are provided enable seniors who are blind or visually impaired to continue to live in their own homes and communities and avoid or delay transitioning into assisted living facilities or nursing homes. Without appropriate independent living services, seniors who are blind or visually impaired can also become dependent and isolated.

Many of the persons served by the OIB Program are also able to provide care to disabled spouses or provide childcare to grandchildren, helping to support the family. This support can enable a family member to remain employed, attend college, or avoid the need to enter a nursing home. One out of every four Americans is a caregiver for an older individual. In 2015, the typical working caregiver lost $200 per day in wages and benefits (Stucki and Mulvey). According to the RAND Corporation, the contribution of America’s caregivers to our health care system is valued at $522 billion annually. Costs associated with age-related vision loss are substantial. For example, the Alliance on Aging Research reports that visual impairments are one of the top four reasons why seniors lose their independence, contributing to medical and long-term care costs in excess of $100.3 billion annually.

It is common for older individuals with blindness or vision loss to lack proficiency in the basic skills of cooking, traveling and digital communications. These individuals are also often unable to successfully use a computer, and lack the skills to complete online tasks which are increasingly essential for everyday life, such as using the internet to shop or pay bills.

The Rehabilitation Services Administration currently distributes the OIB funds, which require a 10% state match. The state vocational rehabilitation agencies that receive the OIB funds already have the infrastructure in place to provide training to older individuals who are blind. If the OIB funding is significantly increased, each state will be able to substantially increase the independent living services to individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Such an investment will have the benefit of reducing Medicaid and Medicare costs as fewer individuals who are older blind will need the services of nursing home or skilled nursing facilities.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any concerns or questions, or require additional information.

Respectfully,

Dr. Bernice Davis

President, NCSAB

cc: NCSAB Executive Committee