**Carlos R. Serván, J.D**

**President, National Council of State Agencies for the Blind**

**4600 Valley Road**

**Ste. 100**

**Lincoln NE 68510**

**(402) 471-8104**



**Carlos R. Serván, President ▪ Dr. Cassondra Williams-Stokes, President-Elect ▪ Tracy Brigham, Treasurer ▪ Shirley Robinson, Secretary**

July 6, 2023

Senator Tammy Baldwin, Chairman

Senate Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations

Room S-128, The Capitol

Washington, DC 20510

Senator Shelley Moore Capito, Ranking Member

Senate Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations

Room S-128, The Capitol

Washington, DC 2051

Dear Chairman Baldwin and Ranking Member Capito,

I am writing on behalf of the National Council of State Agencies for The Blind (NCSAB) to request your support of the Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) program, and to bring to your attention the critical dearth of resources to help seniors experiencing vision loss maintain their independence. The President’s FY 2024 budget proposes to increase the OIB Program from $33.3 million to $38.3 million; if approved, this would represent the first funding increase in a decade. While this increase would greatly help, it is still not sufficient to meet the need. As the number of older blind individuals increases, this cost-effective program helps seniors remain in their homes, and reduces the need for family or institutional caregiving and its associated costs.

NCSAB represents state vocational rehabilitation agencies that provide services to the blind and visually impaired. The OIB Program is administered through the Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration.

As you are aware, the number of older individuals with severe vision loss is increasing rapidly due to population aging and the corresponding increase of seniors with conditions such as age-related macular Degeneration, glaucoma, and diabetic retinopathy. With support, many seniors who have experienced recent vision loss can gain the skills and confidence needed to age in place, avoiding or delaying entry into assisted living facilities or nursing homes. Through the Older Individuals who are Blind program, seniors can receive training and devices that enable them to move about their homes safely, navigate public transportation, manage medications, shop for groceries, do laundry, and carry out other activities of daily living with minimal or no assistance.

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 flat funding and increasing operational costs, the number of individuals served was declining by about 1,000 per year. 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 increasing substantially. An increase in funding would reverse this trend, and enable the OIB to serve more individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

For many states, the OIB Program is the only source of funding for independent living services to individuals who are 55 and older and who are blind or have severe vision loss. Vocational rehabilitation grants, for example, are restricted to serve only individuals who can obtain competitive integrated employment, an option that many seniors with vision loss do not wish to pursue.

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. The training facilitated by the OIB Program helps to avoid costs in multiple other areas of the federal and state budgets. In-home assessments mitigate fall hazards. Assisted living and nursing home costs are avoided or delayed. Spouses or children who might otherwise have to become full-time caregivers are able to continue their own employment. With independence training, seniors served by the OIB Program are even 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.

We know the OIB Program makes a profound difference in the lives of participants and their loved ones, and it is especially inspirational for us to receive the comments made by graduates of our Older Blind training programs, such as the below:

Since my diagnosis of macular degeneration over seven years ago, I have sought out information and resources. I never received what I needed until now! When the classes were first proposed to me, I was thinking how was I going to do four hours of instruction twice a week. After the first class, I couldn’t wait for the next one. I am reminded of the phrase, " Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day, show him how to catch a fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Thank you for teaching me how to fish! I know my journey will not be easy, but I have hope now and I will continue to learn in order to live independently. - Judy

My experience with cooking class was extraordinary. I’m losing my sight to glaucoma. I felt like it was the end of the world. (Taking the class) has been an eye opener for me. While taking the class, I learned that I can still enjoy some of the things that I thought would be taken away from me. I learned new ways of doing things, while staying safe. Before I signed up, I was really just down and thought there was no hope, but there is hope. - Myra

Oh, I thought I was remaining as independent as possible. But after class. I realized I wasn’t scratching the surface. Now I look forward to doing many more things than I thought were possible. - WM

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

Respectfully,



Carlos R. Servan, JD

President