

Dear members of the Appropriations Committee,

The Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI) has served Vermonters since 1926. We are the only non-profit in the State to offer rehabilitation services to the blind and visually impaired. Our mission is to enable Vermonters with vision problems to achieve and maintain their independence. Towards that end, we have provided independent living skills training, orientation and mobility, adaptive equipment and materials, volunteer drivers, low vision evaluations, and produced written materials in braille, audiotape and large print format. Enclosed is our latest fact sheet, and other information that tells you more about VABVI and the services we provide.

Unfortunately we need additional funding to increase our support services, and to hire additional staff. Since the last time we received additional funding (11 years ago), we have seen an increase of about 60% in the number of clients that we serve. We could be serving even more as the need is there; but our existing staff cannot handle more clients. There are an estimated 10,500 Vermonters who are currently blind or visually impaired. As the “Baby Boomer” generation ages however; this number is expected to increase to 18,000 or higher by 2030. As a result, our neighbors, parents, family and friends are among those who may be coping with a vision loss.

If you spoke to our clients, they would tell you how important our services are to them. Approximately 20% of our clients, (one in six) express concerns when they first contact us that they fear that they might have to move into a nursing home. If anything, that percentage is low as many do not want to admit to that fear. For the number of elderly adults that we currently serve, 20% is about 170 people. For those clients whom VABVI has completed providing services, about 98% of those who had expressed that concern are now confident that they could live independently in their current living situation and continue to lead fulfilling lives regardless of their vision loss.

For the fiscal year just ended, we served over 1,150 adults. VABVI provides these supports to the visually impaired for less than \$1000 per client annually. Compared to the cost of a nursing home, (which is 15 times more likely when a senior citizen becomes visually impaired) this program is very cost effective, and we are actually saving the State money. If we are unable to increase the number of our rehabilitation teachers, we won't be able to provide the services to these people in a timely manner, and many could end up in a nursing home. Early diagnosis and adaptive training can make all the difference in allowing those affected to continue to live an active and independent lifestyle in their community.

On behalf of our clients, both current and future, I ask that you increase our funding by an additional \$200,000 to meet the existing needs. What this would mean to the State is about \$43,000 while the balance would be paid by matching Federal Global Commitment Funds. While vision loss could be seen in a negative light, the stories of success and accomplishment from VABVI's clients highlight the "can-do" attitude and joy of life that is present regardless of their vision levels. From skiing to artwork, a walk in their neighborhood or cooking a meal at home, our clients demonstrate that the only limiting factor to what can be done is their imagination.

Please join us in keeping our clients independent and contributing members of our society. I appreciate your consideration in this critical area of need.

Sincerely,

Steven P. Pouliot
Executive Director