

National Federation of the Blind Newsline Re-Funding
House Commerce and Economic Development Committee Bill

March 9, 2016

First of all, I would like to thank Chairman Botzow and the Committee for the opportunity to testify on restoring funding for an important independent living tool for people who are blind, visually-impaired or who otherwise cannot access print media. I was asked to coordinate the advocacy and thus I will attempt to give a succinct overview of the issue surrounding the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) Newsline; I will defer to those who have used Newsline for more directed testimony.

Currently, 45 states plus the District of Columbia fund this national service, all but one with state funding. Approximately 10 utilize their Universal Service Fund (USF) as a sustainable means of funding, including our friends in New Hampshire. Vermont previously funded the Newsline by a combination of a grant through the State Special Library Services with supplemental funding by the Division of Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI). The grant ended and supplemental funding was insufficient to pay the cost of maintaining the service. The service was discontinued in Vermont the end of March 2015.

Upon advocacy by many dedicated users of the Newsline, the Vermont Department of Disability, Aging and IL (DAIL) decided to prioritize renewal of funding for the Newsline. It was thought best to find both an appropriate and sustainable source of funding – one that would not be subject to budgetary oscillations. Thus it was proposed to utilize the Universal Service Fund for that purpose.

DAIL has worked with the Vermont Public Service Department (PSD) and proposed language for legislation to restore funding via the USF. The cost is estimated to be \$24,000 annually. It is thought that such a cost would not necessitate a fee rise for the USF nor have a negative effect upon any other program the USF funds.

The Newsline is comprised of a landline phone service, a mobile phone app, a Web page portal and an e-mail component. Having multiple channels, the Newsline accesses timely local/regional news and sports; local/regional weather; numerous state, national and international newspapers and magazines; job listings and other classified listings; and much more. In addition, upon activation in a state, a state-specific channel is made available for use, for example, by State agencies to relay important and timely information to citizens.

The Newsline is made available free to those who can benefit from the service.

I respectfully urge the Committee to consider that the Newsline, as an important media tool for IL, better equips many Vermont citizens to live independently, productively and self-sufficiently. For example, it facilitates individual employment objectives.

It is estimated that more than 13,800 Vermont citizens have vision-related or other types of impairments that preclude reading newsprint or other hard copy. In addition, Vermont's population is aging. In turn, aging often entails visual impairment. It is thus thought access to Newsline will benefit Vermont's elders.

As opposed to the need to search various Websites with the use of unreliable and often incompatible screen readers, all info is available with Newsline services in one place: one phone line, one mobile app, one Website. It is user-friendly and cost-effective!

We think it is time for Vermont to re-join the 45 other states and DC that fund the Newsline, making this tool available to those who would utilize it to improve their lives.

I again thank the Committee for its time and consideration.

Submitted by: Sam Liss

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