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**Fact Sheet:**

**THE NJ COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED**

**MUST REMAIN AS A SEPARATE AGENCY**

*With the Commission’s* ***single point of entry*** *&* ***comprehensive system of blindness-specific services***

*all under one roof, the blind of New Jersey experience* ***seamless, easy-to-access, expert services***

To **best serve the needs of the blind** of New Jersey, the **NJ Commission for the Blind** and Visually Impaired **must be preserved** as **a separate, blindness-specific agency** serving the **unique needs of the blind.** It **must not be dismantled** and parceled out or folded in to other agencies, as the Governor’s Human and Children Services Transition Advisory Committee report seems to recommend.

The NJ Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI or the Commission) was created by state statute in 1910. It provides **a single point of entry** for blind and visually impaired (BVI) New Jerseyans from birth through old age, no matter how old they are when they enter the system.

At this blindness-specific agency, **blindness expertise** is contained all under one roof. **Specially trained professionals** provide consumers, regardless of age, with **seamless services**, whether the need is for early intervention, school and transition services, college services, preparation for the workforce, independence in personal life, or a combination of these.

With this **single point of entry** and **comprehensive system of blindness-specific services** all under one roof, the blind of New Jersey experience **seamless, easy-to-find, easy-to-access, expert service** and certainly **not fragmentation** as suggested in the Report of the Human and Children Services Transition Advisory Committee to the Governor.

Skills such as **Braille** and **tactile graphics**, use of **adaptive technologies,** independent **travel with the long white cane**, and **skills of independent living** are taught by Commission **professionals trained in these special techniques. No other agency** in state government **offers similar services. There is no duplication of services** as suggested in the Transition Advisory Committee report.

The **skills that BVI people must master** in order to achieve independence and secure competitive employment **are** **dramatically different** from what is needed by those with **other** disabilities. These skills tend to be unfamiliar to employees of general agencies. Again, t**here is no duplication of services**.

Research **comparing outcomes and costs** of vocational rehabilitation services received by blind and visually impaired people from separate vs. general agencies shows that the unique needs of **BVI people are best served by a separate, dedicated agency** (ongoing research from Mississippi State).

**Blind and visually impaired people** represent **the smallest percentage** of the general disability population. Their needs tend to get lost in general/combined agencies.

**Significantly more clients gain competitive employment** without supports in **integrated settings** or in self employment **when served by** **separate** **agencies** vs. general agencies (83% vs. 57%). **Separate agencies** are able to achieve these results for **substantially the same cost**. Clients served by **separate agencies** also gain **higher paying jobs** and fewer remain on public assistance. Separate agencies close a far smaller percentage of clients as homemakers vs. general agencies (16% vs. 41%) (MS State).

Separate agencies achieve these **better results while serving a more vulnerable population**, including those more severely blind, those with additional disabilities, and those who are poor (MS State).

While the Transition Advisory Committee had the worthy goal of eliminating fragmentation and duplication, the reality is that the implementation of their recommendations would **actually RESULT IN fragmentation for blind people seeking services.**

Another **unintended consequence** of the Committee’s recommendations would be the potential **reduction in employment and earnings of blind adults**. Unemployment rates are already too high for individuals with disabilities. **Policy makers must reject any recommendations or changes which could result in reduced services and reduced employment** for the 10,000 BVI people the Commission serves each year.

To our knowledge**, not one blind or visually impaired person** **or parent of a blind child** was included **on the Transition Advisory Committee**, yet the results of their recommendation would be **drastic negative changes for those actually affected—the blind and visually impaired of New Jersey**.

**FACTORS SPECIFIC TO NEW JERSEY:**

The New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired was **created by the State** **Legislature** in 1910, upon compelling testimony from Helen Keller and other national thought leaders.

Unlike most other vocational rehabilitation agencies in the U.S., NJ’s Commission **has a state-mandated obligation to provide comprehensive blindness education to BVI students**, to ensure that the general education curriculum is accessible and facilitate inclusion in the regular school.

CBVI is also **responsible for administering a unique program of comprehensive access technology training** and **equipment distribution**.

In addition, CBVI has been tasked with administering **a comprehensive eye-health services** program, in which its **specially-trained staff** provides **eye screening and other services** to approximately 35,000 residents of the State.

With its **single point of entry, comprehensive system of blindness-specific services** all under one roof, **better vocational rehabilitation results**, and **seamless, easy-to-access, expert services,** the **NJ Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired must be preserved as a separate agency.**