Dear representatives and senators:

I serve as president of the National Federation of the Blind of Iowa, the transformative membership and advocacy organization of blind Iowans. I am writing to express our strong opposition to Division XIII OF HSB 126 and SSB 1123. These identical provisions would remove the authority of the three members of the Iowa Commission for the blind to appoint the director of the Iowa Department for the Blind (IDB). The governor would appoint IDB’s director instead. The effect of this proposal would be to severely curtail the ability of the Iowa Commission for the Blind to ensure that a qualified IDB director — one with knowledge of the needs of blind Iowans, the expertise to see that those needs are met, and a commitment to working directly with us to achieve excellence — is appointed to that position. It would further eliminate the ability of the Commissioners to hold the IDB director accountable for job performance. In short, the blind of Iowa, through the commissioners, would no longer have any voice in determining who oversees the agency that is supposed to serve us. We therefore strongly urge that this division be stricken from both bills in its entirety.

The Iowa department for the blind has a long history of providing excellent service to blind citizens. It is no accident that many of its achievements occurred under the leadership of blind people working collaboratively with both blind and sighted experts in the field of blindness and with the organized blind movement in our state to provide the specialized skills training and rehabilitation services that we need to obtain education, employment, and independence. From 1958 to 1978, Under the leadership of dr. Kenneth Jernigan, who was blind, the agency became regarded as the best in the country, with recognition spreading to the nation’s capital. The training techniques and practices pioneered during this era are still a model for rehabilitation agencies across our country and beyond. But without participation in its governance and direction by blind Iowans and our allies, as well as the ability to hold the agency director and their staff accountable, this proud legacy will be undermined or lost completely, and your blind constituents will find themselves receiving inferior service. This in turn will lead to the loss of educational and employment opportunities for blind Iowans, leaving many entirely dependent upon state and federal assistance instead of living fulfilling lives learning, working, and participating in their communities.

Nothing less than the future of blind Iowans to live the lives we want depends on your swift action to remove this harmful provision. Please support the immediate striking of Division XIII from HSB 126 and SSB 1123. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your public service and your consideration of this critically important matter.

Sincerely,



Scott Van Gorp, President

National Federation of the Blind of Iowa