
**Children & Family Services
Committee**

HB 1838

Brief Description: Providing access to a telephonic reading service for blind or visually handicapped persons in the state of Washington.

Sponsors: Representatives Dickerson, Romero, Kenney, Kagi, Moeller, Chase and Santos.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Department of Services for the Blind to provide access to a telephonic reading service for blind and disabled persons.

Hearing Date: 2/24/03

Staff: Sonja Hallum (786-7092).

Background:

The Department of Services for the Blind (DSB) is a state agency which reports directly to the Governor. The DSB provides a variety of programs to blind and visually impaired persons of all ages. People whose vision is not correctable by ordinary eye care are likely candidates for services. The purpose of the DSB is to help people who are blind or visually impaired to become employed, or retain employment, and to live independently in their communities.

The primary programs of the DSB are for vocational rehabilitation and the aging population. The funding for the DSB is largely provided by federal funding. The DSB does not currently operate a telephonic reading service. There is no other government entity in this state operating a telephonic reading service.

There is a telephonic reading service which is offered nationally through the National Federation for the Blind. This service is an electronic system to receive digital transmissions from newspapers on the morning of publication, reformat the data for conversion to synthetic speech, and transfer the data to the National Federation of the Blind telephonic system. By dialing a toll-free number, dozens of newspapers are available to eligible persons over any touch-tone telephone using synthetic speech.

This service was funded by a federal grant which is due to expire in 2003. Currently, Washington blind and disabled residents can sign up for this system through the National Federation for the Blind. However, after all funding expires Washington residents will not be able to access the information.

Summary of Bill:

The Director of the Department of Services for the Blind (DSB) is required to provide access to a telephonic reading service for blind and disabled persons. The Director may contract for the service and establish criteria for the eligibility of the program. The Director must also inform persons who may be eligible for the service of the availability of the service.

The Director is given authority to expand the type and scope of materials available on the service to meet the varying needs of blind and disabled persons in the state and to accommodate the development of new technology for the delivery of the service.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on February 12, 2003.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.