

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1838

As Reported by House Committee On:
Children & Family Services

Title: An act relating to providing access to a telephonic reading service for blind or visually handicapped persons in the state of Washington.

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 History:

Committee Activity:

Children & Family Services: 2/24/03, 2/27/03 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

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

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Kagi, Chair; Darneille, Vice Chair; Boldt, Ranking Minority Member; Roach, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Bailey, Dickerson, Miloscia, Pettigrew and Shabro.

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 Substitute Bill:

The Director of the 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.

The Director is authorized to expend funds from the business enterprise program account, as well as donations and grant money, for the purpose of supporting the telephonic reading service.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The original bill was silent on the funding of the service. The substitute bill authorizes the Director to expend funds from the Business Enterprise Program Account or money which has been donated or obtained by grant sources.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: (In support, Original bill) Some of us take for granted the ability to pick up and read a newspaper. In our democracy it is imperative for people to be informed. Newsline allows people to participate. This is providing a service to people. It provides access to every paper in the country. So many blind individuals utilize this source. It is a great aid to the blind and disabled. They can read want-ads to help them become employed. People who are beginning to lose sight say that one of the things they miss most is not being able to read the paper. At the moment the service is costing \$40,000-\$50,000 and there is a \$5,000 cost for each additional paper which is added. The service allows a person to listen to the newspaper cover to cover, to check the calendar section for events for the family, or check the want-ads. Newsline is a great service to use any time of the day or night. You hear the whole story, not just bits and pieces. It helps as a student trying to research newspapers. You don't have to rely on another person to read to you. You can use the paper like any other person. Newsline can benefit anyone who can't read the paper, not just the blind, such as a person who cannot turn pages or the aged.

(Neutral, Original bill) The fiscal impact may be less than the DSB originally thought. The estimate of \$172,000 for the biennium may be high. If this is given to the DSB there should be some appropriation. If enacted, the DSB might look to the Talking Book & Braille Library to contract for the service.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: (In support) Representative Dickerson, prime sponsor; David Delaittre, citizen; and Michael Freeman, Kris Lawrence, Jacob Struiksma, and Josie Armontrout, National Federation of Blind of Washington.

(Neutral) Bill Palmer, Department of Services for the Blind.