

# FINAL BILL REPORT

## SB 5705

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Synopsis as Enacted

**Brief Description:** Conforming the department of services for the blind provisions with federal law.

**Sponsors:** Senators Winsley, Thibaudeau, Carlson, Fraser and Shin; by request of Department of Services for the Blind.

**Senate Committee on Government Operations & Elections**  
**House Committee on Children & Family Services**

**Background:** The Department of Services for the Blind 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 department is to help such people become employed or retain employment so that they can live independently wherever they choose to live. When a client of the department's services is dissatisfied with the department, he or she can appeal the department's decision. Before a hearing occurs, the department conducts a process of reviewing the complaint.

Funding for the department mostly comes from federal sources. The Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 allocates the federal funding. To receive the federal dollars, the state must fund at least 21.3 percent of the department's costs. Any agency that receives the federal money must comply with the federal act. Currently, provisions in the Washington statutes are not in compliance with amendments to the act.

The department does not currently operate a telephonic reading service. A telephonic reading service is an electronic system that receives digital transmissions from newspapers on the morning of publication and reformats the data for conversion to synthetic speech. By dialing a toll-free number, newspapers are available to eligible persons over any touch-tone telephone. There is a telephonic reading service offered nationally through the National Federation for the Blind. The national service is funded by a federal grant set to expire this year.

The department operates the business enterprise program, which entails a vending service staffed by blind and disabled persons at vending sites in public buildings. The revenues from the program go into the business enterprise program account.

**Summary:** Technical changes are made in language relating to the department. The changes make language more consistent with language in the Federal Rehabilitation Act. For example, terms relating to blindness are modernized and some definitions are clarified.

Substantive changes address the appeals process within the department. The administrative review that occurs before the hearing is removed, allowing the appellant to go straight to the hearing stage.

Substantive changes also give the department the authority to conduct background checks of applicants for jobs within the department. When doing background checks, the department must protect the confidentiality of applicants' personal information.

Additionally, sections are repealed that are repetitive or not used. The section relating to vocational rehabilitation training centers is repealed because another statute addresses such centers. The statute relating to medical eye care services is repealed because this is within the purview of the Department of Social and Health Services rather than the department.

Finally, the department is required to provide access to a telephonic reading service for blind and disabled persons. The department may contract for the service. The department must establish eligibility criteria for persons seeking to use the service. The department is authorized to use funds from the business enterprise program account, as well as donations and grant money, to support the service.

**Votes on Final Passage:**

Senate	48	0	
House	98	0	(House amended)
Senate	46	0	(Senate concurred)

**Effective:** July 27, 2003