



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION SERVICES

The Department of Rehabilitation Services
Testimony regarding HB 6367

An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget
Recommendations for Human Services Programs

February 2013

Good morning Chairwoman Slossberg, Chairwoman Abercrombie, Senator Markley, Representative Wood and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Amy Porter and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Rehabilitation Services, also known as DORS. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of House Bill 6367, An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations for Human Services Programs. I will speak to the first two sections of the bill, which directly relate to DORS.

Section 1 provides a mechanism to **incentivize the use of agency teachers for visually impaired students**. Because blindness is a low incidence disability, the State has looked at multiple ways to deliver accessible education to students who are blind or have visual impairments. Currently, school districts can either obtain teachers for students with visual impairments at no cost through the Department, or they can hire their own teachers and seek reimbursement for the salary of their teachers. The budget removes funding to reimburse towns for this activity. Towns may choose to continue to hire and pay their own teachers of the blind, but they will not receive any reimbursement from the state for those costs. Since reimbursement dollars will no longer be available, some additional towns may decide to obtain DORS teachers to serve their students. This will centralize teacher services for blind children and allow for easy adjustments in teacher caseload assignments as blind children move from town to town.

It should be noted that DORS' Children's Services unit provides certain direct services, at no cost, to every town in the state where a student with a visual impairment resides. These services are made available regardless of whether that town is served by teachers of the visual impaired from our agency or by teachers that the town has hired itself. These important services and equipment will continue at no cost to all students and towns that need them. Examples of equipment we provide include text books in Braille and large print, low vision aids such as magnifiers, closed circuit televisions (CCTVs) that expand text and images to a readable size, talking calculators and text-to-speech software. DORS also provides or pays for services such as eye exams and vision evaluations, Braille training to school paraprofessionals, in-service training to classroom teachers, pre-school services to children with visual impairments in every Connecticut school district, deafblind services throughout the state and summer programs for all interested children. Again, these services and assistance are available to every student and every town and that will continue with the adoption of this budget.

Section 2 provides a mechanism to restructure the Assistive Technology Revolving Fund. The **Assistive Technology Revolving Fund** was established in 1992 and **Section 2 (a)** reflects changes in federal guidelines since that time, for example, allowing senior citizens and the family members of people with disabilities to borrow from the Fund. In addition, since some loans from the Fund are for projects with longer life spans, such as modified vehicles, the agency believes it makes sense to lengthen the possible term of the loans from five to ten years. This will also make those loans more affordable. The bill also permits the agency to charge a rate of up to six percent allowing the agency to grow the Fund modestly over time to keep pace with inflation and demand. The agency will not increase the loan rates for any existing loans.

In addition, new subsection (c) allows the agency to charge fees for certain assistive technology services that are not funded under the federal Assistive Technology Act of 1998. These services meet pressing needs for many of Connecticut's citizens with disabilities. The agency's overall intent is to charge institutional users and providers such as corporations, non-profit organizations, schools, universities and governmental agencies. These fees will allow the agency to maintain important services for people with disabilities that are not otherwise funded and may not be available anywhere else in such an area of specialization. Such fees are supported by federal policy in this area and have been implemented by Alaska, Indiana, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Washington and Wisconsin.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.