

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND OF NEW YORK, INC.

AN AFFILIATE OF THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND, WASHINGTON, D.C.
A SELF-HELP ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO
IMPROVING THE LIFESTYLE AND INDEPENDENCE
OF THE BLIND

2017 ACBNY LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

The American Council of the Blind of New York (ACBNY) is a volunteer organization. Any and all questions should be directed to:

Legislative Chair, Mike Godino: 516-612-3368 or mikeg125@optonline.net

ACBNY strongly supports establishing licensing requirements for two categories of vision rehabilitation professionals: licensed orientation and mobility specialists and licensed rehabilitation therapists: A3968 (Lupardo) and S3381 (Griffo).

As New Yorkers age, the number of persons with significant visual impairments is increasing.

There is also an increase in the number of babies surviving prematurity, low birth weight, congenital conditions or diseases. They often experience multiple disabilities including vision loss.

Orientation and Mobility (O&M) specialists provide people of all ages who are blind or visually impaired with instruction in the use of their remaining senses along with a prescribed white and red cane to enable safe navigation and independent travel in their environment. O&M specialists prepare people who are blind or visually impaired to attain mobility skills to qualify for a dog guide.

Vision Rehabilitation Therapists (VRTs) provide training in the reading and writing of braille, safe cooking techniques, child care, medication management, instruction in keyboarding and the use of adaptive and other technologies and skills that enable people who are blind to manage independently at home, work and in the general community.

Licensure increases the number of qualified professionals who are specifically trained to meet the unique needs of people who are totally blind or legally blind. Licensure assures the provision of quality services through regulation and examination of the professionals. Licensure promotes consumer safety and ensures that individuals who are blind have access to trained professionals who have received specialized supervised training in working with people who are blind or visually impaired.

This bill was passed unanimously by the NYS Senate and Assembly in the 2015 legislative session but was vetoed by Governor Cuomo. A new version **A3968 (Lupardo) and S3381 (Griffo)** has been introduced which addresses the concerns outlined by the Executive.

ACBNY strongly supports the posting of “Fully Accessible” Online Sample Ballot for all elections as soon as they become available: A267-A (Rosenthal) and S4113-A (Sanders).

Section 7-118 of NYS Election Law mandates ballot facsimile and sample be printed and distributed in several formats and to numerous venues as requested. These venues are, but not limited to, being displayed at the poll sight, schools, newspapers, including the mailing of said ballot when requested. However, within all the numerous formats and postings, there is no provision that said facsimile or sample be accessible to or usable by those persons who are blind or have an inability to read the print on paper formats. S4113A (Sanders) proposes NYS Election law be amended to include the sentence: “The Board of Elections shall post a fully accessible copy of the sample ballot on its website as soon as it is available.” A267-A (Rosenthal) reads, “The Board of Elections shall post a copy of the sample ballot on its website, including electronically for use with a computer screen reading program, as soon

as it is available.” These amendments would serve to provide equal access to sample ballots for people with print impairments who review their ballots on a computer using screen reader technology. ACBNY is confident the language differences can be worked out in conference prior to passage.

ACBNY is seeking substantial changes to the “Electronic Information Act” which would provide additional funding to Newsline, A2125 (Pretlow) and S3274 (Parker).

While ACBNY strongly supports Newsline as a useful and valuable service to all New Yorkers who are blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired, we cannot accept the proposed funding mechanism through the Targeted Accessibility Fund for this worthwhile service which is unlimited and lacks transparency and accountability to New York taxpayers.

A prior veto memo negated the Targeted Accessibility Fund as an acceptable source of funding for Newsline.

We strongly urge the sponsors of these bills to alter their legislation's language to include a limit to the amount of funding earmarked for the Newsline service directly related to the actual cost of procuring this service from its national provider, the National Federation of the Blind.

In other states, Newsline is being provided with financial support from between \$25,000 to \$80,000 per annum. We furthermore request that the language in this legislation concerning alternate funding streams include a provision that uses any grants, bequests or other funding obtained to support Newsline to offset the funding received through any State established funding source including the New York State Commission for the Blind and other state agencies currently funding Newsline.

We also wish to have clarification in the legislation concerning which commissioner would consult with the provider to determine levels of funding for Newsline from the Targeted Accessibility Fund if that were deemed a funding source.

ACBNY strongly supports A-06515 (Miller) and S-04831, (Lavalle) which provide aid for blind or deaf students in relation to the purchase and use of supports for the education of students who are blind, deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing, learning disabled or print disabled.

These students have historically experienced barriers to reading textbooks, pamphlets, etc. as part of their coursework. This bill proposes an annual amount of \$4000 per student to hire readers, notetakers, and interpreters, and to purchase technology to assist them in reading. This amount supplements, but does not replace, services provided by state vocational agencies, or the institutions attended by students. Instead, this fund provides print-disabled students options and choice in hiring readers and notetakers, interpreters, etc. In addition, these funds can be used to purchase assistive technology, enabling students to independently read text through the use of optical character recognition, speech, braille displays, or magnification. Additionally:

- The annual amount per student reflects a more realistic cost for reading and interpreting services during an academic year.
- The funds are allocated for each print-disabled student, and sent to the college, university, tech/trade school, or school for the deaf to be disbursed on behalf of the student.
- The student is able to exercise choice in hiring, managing, and paying his or her notetaker or interpreter.
- This bill provides choice to the print-disabled student, specifically allowing them to purchase assistive technology which best fits their individual needs.
- This consumer choice empowers the student to purchase the right equipment, rather than what is merely available through state-contracted vendors.