

February 28, 2023

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Chair, Committee on Finance  
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**End Historical Discrimination with \$5M Investment to  
Create DeafBlind Inclusion in New York  
Yes to A4926/S2503**

**Request**

Please include \$5 million dollars in One House budgets to support [A4926/S2503](#) in order to create New York's Funded Statewide DeafBlind CoNavigator Program. The bills are sponsored by Assembly Member Stefani Zinerman (AD56) and Senator Cordell Cleare (SD30).

**Rationale**

A 2020 Texas Governor's Commission on People with Disabilities report indicated there are approximately 70000 DeafBlind in America.<sup>1</sup> New York has one of America's largest DeafBlind populations yet lacks effective dedicated programs that would allow us to live independently. In 2021, New York DeafBlind Advocates was formed by a group of New Yorkers from around our state that live with deafblindness. We recognized that electeds in local, state and federal government needed to directly hear from our community. Blind or Deaf groups do not represent our community. If they did, in 2023 we would not be begging for Albany lawmakers to create a Funded Statewide DeafBlind CoNavigator Program.

New York is one of America's most important and wealthiest states. Yet, DeafBlind New Yorkers do not have access to a program that is available in surrounding or smaller states, e.g., Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Alabama, Louisiana.

This critical program will help DeafBlind New Yorkers live independently. By investing in our CoNavigator Program, state revenues will increase from creation of good paying jobs and increased economic activity by our community. For example, according to Helen Keller National

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC), approximately 70,000 people in the United States are DeafBlind. I  
<https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/organization/disabilities/GCPD-SSP-CN-Report-2020.pdf> ,  
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Center's Voluntary Registry of Persons who are DeafBlind, Alabama has an estimated population of 107. <sup>2</sup>The Alabama program reported they pay their workers \$25 and \$30 an hour. <sup>3</sup>

I persuaded Helen Keller to conduct a survey for us in November 2022. They emailed and mailed a survey requesting feedback about this program to 708 individuals already signed up for registry. The survey link was circulated across our community. Results were prepared shortly after deadline of January 31, 2023.

The survey results were amazing! In less than three months New York's DeafBlind community added 209 persons to the existing Helen Keller's Voluntary Registry for New York— an increase of 23 percent! Of the 913 registered, 93 or 10 percent responded. **The overwhelming majority of responders expressed an interest in this CoNavigator program (89.2 percent). Those wanting a program were overwhelmingly working age (76.4 percent).** <sup>4</sup> The survey also provided information about the number of expected monthly hours to be offered. A majority of respondents wanted up to 20 hours (53%). Undecided was the next biggest group at 24%. Respondents wanting more than 20 hours totaled 23%. The results of the survey are compelling for two reasons: 1) results demonstrate that it is very challenging to estimate the deafblind population and 2) the actual number of deafblind presently hidden will emerge to increase the number of potential participants once the Funded Statewide DeafBlind Conavigator Program is up and running.

The costs that could not be determined include: inflation, initiating the program, e.g., recruiting individuals with very niche skills and expertise interested in establishing this vital program; up to five program staff; office space to house the program; creating curriculum to be used; hiring trainers to train trainers and the deafblind individuals that register to use the program. CoNavigators would be expected to provide their own insured vehicles and would be reimbursed for mileage at current state rates.

The requested \$5 million dollars funding to be included in One House Budgets would ensure the Funded Statewide DeafBlind CoNavigator Program has adequate funding to fulfill its goal of empowering New York's deafblind population to live independently as it looks to identify replacement sources of initial state funding, i.e., federal or private donations. Please contact me if you have any questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,  
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<sup>2</sup> Helen Keller National Center Voluntary Registry received September 2022.  
<https://www.helenkeller.org/hknc/national-registry/>

<sup>3</sup> Email 9/14/2022 with Tamara Hardaway, M.S., Case Manager for the Deaf Talladega Regional Center

<sup>4</sup> New York DeafBlind Advocates survey conducted by Helen Keller National Center February 2023