



Attention:
NY State Disability Services Committee
Albany, NY

Dear Committee Members,

RE: Written Testimony for New York State Disability Services Hearing

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding employment pathways for individuals with disabilities. Alphapointe is dedicated to empowering people who are blind or visually impaired to achieve economic independence and personal growth. As the only remaining light industrial employer of people with vision loss in New York City, Alphapointe occupies a unique and vital position, offering meaningful job opportunities in a variety of fields.

Alphapointe currently employs over 100 individuals with vision loss in Queens, New York, with positions ranging from manufacturing and assembly to office administration, customer service, and supervisory roles. These jobs provide fair wages and benefits, yet many are not classified as “competitive integrated employment” under current state and federal definitions. This misclassification can restrict access to programs and limit recognition of the value these jobs bring to the individual, their family and our communities.

Congress has recently signaled its intent to address this definitional gap. **H.R. 7148, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026**, was signed into law by the President on **February 3, 2026**. Congressional guidance accompanying the federal budget legislation conveyed that Congress considers AbilityOne employment to qualify as competitive integrated employment, recognizing that the specialized, community-based, federally-supported jobs these programs provide offer fair wages, real career pathways, and genuine integration into the economic mainstream. We would urge that New York align its own policies and program classifications with this congressional intent and ensure that AbilityOne jobs — which employ hundreds of New Yorkers with significant disabilities — are recognized and supported accordingly. This is valuable guidance for state counselors when assessing job opportunities and work sites across the State of New York.

Recent data highlights the ongoing challenges faced by people with vision loss in New York. According to the Big Data Project, a study developed in partnership with Vision Serve Alliance, that was conducted by The VanNasdale Group LLC, specifically, Dr. Dean VanNasdale and Dr. John Crews, the unemployment rate and the inability to work among individuals who are blind often exceeds 70%, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions and improved employment pathways. Additionally, many encounter barriers such as lack of awareness about available services and transportation difficulties, which further hinder their ability to secure meaningful work.



New York 1.6 Prev Rate	Blind/VI	Sighted
Blind or Severely Visually Impaired 18-64	493,303	8.5MM
Working	47.7%	68%
Unable to Work	22.4%	6.0%
Fair/Poor Health	42%	14%
Less than High School	29.2%	12.2%
Diabetes	15.4%	7.1%
Depression	26.9%	16.3%

In addition to these challenges, recent findings from the Big Data Project further illustrate the employment landscape for individuals who are blind or visually impaired in New York. The data indicates that participation in the workforce among this population remains alarmingly low, with only a small fraction actively employed compared to their sighted peers. Furthermore, the slide highlights that individuals with vision loss are more likely to encounter extended periods of joblessness, and many report that lack of accessible training and support services significantly impacts their job search outcomes. These insights underscore the urgent need to address systemic gaps and ensure that employment initiatives are both accessible and responsive to the unique needs of people with vision loss.

Our agency offers robust rehabilitation services for those with vision loss, adaptive technology training, orientation and mobility training and ongoing career development support. These pathways enable individuals to acquire new skills and advance within the organization or transition to other employment. Alphapointe works directly with the New York State Commission for the Blind (NYSCB) to serve New Yorkers seeking employment and in need of skills training. As a proud member of the National Industries for the Blind network, Alphapointe collaborates nationally to expand opportunities and advocate for fair employment practices.

Despite these efforts, structural barriers persist. Rigid classifications undermine employment options for people with vision loss. Findings from the Big Data Project reveal that many individuals face significant obstacles in seeking help, including lack of awareness, transportation challenges, negative employer perceptions of those with disabilities, and other social and medical issues. As a result, the unemployment rate among people who are blind remains disproportionately high.



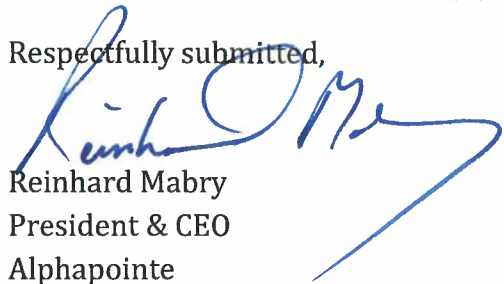
One of the most consequential and underappreciated structural barriers is the Social Security Disability Insurance cash cliff. Under current federal law, blind and significantly disabled SSDI beneficiaries who earn even one dollar above the substantial gainful activity threshold face the immediate loss of their entire monthly benefit — a sudden income shock that can amount to thousands of dollars annually. At Alphapointe, we observe the real-world consequences of this policy directly: employees decline pay increases, turn down bonuses, and refuse promotions. Some voluntarily reduce their hours specifically to stay below the earnings threshold and preserve their benefits. This occurs throughout New York State and across the country. This is not a failure of motivation or ambition — it is a rational response to a broken incentive structure that effectively penalizes work. The result is a systemic depression of labor demand among people with disabilities that no amount of job training or employer engagement can fully overcome.

While this is a federal policy matter, it directly shapes outcomes in New York. Congress has recognized the problem: H.R. 1175, the *Blind Americans Return to Work Act of 2025*, introduced with bipartisan support in the 119th Congress, would require the Social Security Administration to carry out a 20-year demonstration project in which blind SSDI beneficiaries receive gradually reduced benefits — rather than a sudden cutoff — as their earnings rise above the threshold. Alphapointe urges this panel and the State of New York to formally advocate for federal passage of this legislation. A state-level voice on this issue, particularly from agencies with direct programmatic experience, would carry meaningful weight with New York's congressional delegation.

Alphapointe urges policymakers to recognize the importance of choice in employment for individuals with disabilities. People with vision loss deserve a range of options, including jobs in specialized environments, and their preferences must be respected. Addressing misconceptions about the capabilities of people who are blind and promoting inclusive hiring practices are critical steps toward reducing unemployment and advancing equity.

In conclusion, we ask the hearing panel to support policies that validate the contributions of organizations like Alphapointe, ensure fair classification of jobs, and foster employment pathways for people with vision loss. With proper recognition and support, we can close persistent gaps and create a more inclusive workforce for all New Yorkers.

Respectfully submitted,


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