

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE

Joint Committees: Senate Standing Committee on Disabilities & Senate Standing Committee on Labor

Chairs: Senator Patricia Fahy & Senator Jessica Ramos

Subject: Examining barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities in New York

Location: Van Buren Hearing Room A, Legislative Office Building, Albany, NY

Introduction

Chairs Fahy and Ramos, and members of the Committees, thank you for convening this critical hearing. As the Associate Executive Director at the Helen Keller National Center, headquartered in Sands Point, I am here to address the profound and specific employment barriers facing DeafBlind New Yorkers.

While the integration mandate established in *Olmstead v. L.C.* promised equitable access, the reality for the DeafBlind community remains one of systemic exclusion. Today, I will outline how the rapid deployment of certain technologies, severe communication deficits, and compounding economic pressures are actively keeping capable DeafBlind individuals out of the competitive workforce.

The Technological Wall: Algorithmic Bias and AI Application Screening

The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence in workforce development has created an invisible but impenetrable barrier. Employers increasingly rely on AI-driven Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) and automated screening platforms to process candidates. These systems are fundamentally ill-equipped to account for disability-related nuances. For a DeafBlind job seeker, whose primary language may be American Sign Language (ASL)—which possesses a completely different syntactic structure than English—AI screening often flags their resumes or cover letters as "unqualified" due to non-traditional formatting or phrasing. Crucially, employers are adopting these systems without establishing alternative, human-led screening pipelines. This removes the opportunity for a candidate to request a reasonable accommodation during the application phase, effectively locking DeafBlind New Yorkers out of the job market before a human being ever reviews their credentials.

The Secondary Digital Wall: Inaccessible Workplace Infrastructure

Even when a DeafBlind candidate successfully navigates the biased hiring process, they frequently encounter a secondary digital wall on their first day. Modern workplaces rely heavily on proprietary software, internal databases, and web-based management systems that are often built without digital accessibility in mind. When these fundamental workplace tools are incompatible with screen reading software or refreshable Braille displays, the employee is immediately handicapped by the employer's infrastructure. Placing the burden on the DeafBlind employee to constantly request ad-hoc workarounds for inaccessible IT infrastructure sets them up for failure and breeds frustration for both the employee and the employer.

The Communication Deficit: Over-Reliance on VRI and Interpreter Shortages

Equitable access to information in the workplace is a civil right. However, the recent mobilization of technology-based communication methods has severely compromised this right. Since the pandemic, there has been a massive shift toward Video Relay Interpreting (VRI) platforms.

While VRI may offer a stopgap for some, it is inherently inaccessible for the DeafBlind community, who largely rely on tactile communication modalities, such as ProTactile philosophy and Haptics. Compounding this issue is a drastic, systemic reduction in the availability of qualified, in-person interpreters—a crisis rooted in the collapse of New York State's training pipeline.

Prior to the pandemic, New York State proudly boasted five interpreter training programs. Due to severe cuts in program funding and declining enrollment, that number has plummeted to just one: the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology. This bottleneck has drastically widened the gap in the availability of qualified ASL interpreters, and even more critically, those with the highly specialized skills required for ProTactile and DeafBlind interpreting.

When employers and state agencies default to VRI as a cost-saving measure, or simply because in-person interpreters are impossible to secure, they strip DeafBlind employees of equitable access to workplace onboarding, daily meetings, and professional development. This lack of access directly limits employment pathways and permanently stalls career advancement for capable individuals.

Economic Pressures: Inflation and Wage Inequality

The structural barriers mentioned in the Committees' agenda—specifically the subminimum wage and benefits cliffs—are deeply exacerbated by the current economic climate and geographic realities. In the New York City metropolitan area and across the state, severe wage inequality is compounded by a lack of living expense subsidies. DeafBlind individuals bear extraordinary out-of-pocket expenses for the medical equipment, assistive technology, and mobility aids necessary to achieve a baseline of sustainable living.

Furthermore, navigating inaccessible infrastructure forces many DeafBlind New Yorkers to rely on costly ride-sharing services and complex public transit arrangements. This immense financial burden restricts access to community resources, severely limits mobility, and ultimately drives down workforce and community participation.

The Missing Link: Support Service Providers and CoNavigators

To overcome these barriers and truly actualize New York State's "Employment First" philosophy, we must address the glaring gap between personal care assistance and full independence. Support Service Providers (SSPs) and CoNavigators (CNs) are essential professionals who provide environmental and visual information, along with mobility assistance, enabling DeafBlind New Yorkers to manage daily living needs, access healthcare, and participate socially. Crucially, SSPs and CNs support DeafBlind workers in varying, vital aspects of their employment.

This service is the definitive bridge for individuals with complex needs to achieve and maintain competitive employment. Yet, despite the clear necessity, initiatives to introduce funding for SSP and CoNavigator programs at the city, county, and state levels have consistently failed to materialize. Today, Monroe County remains the sole funding source, isolating this critical lifeline to DeafBlind residents within that single county. Leaving the rest of the state unfunded effectively abandons our most vulnerable job seekers, directly contradicting the goals of our workforce development systems.

Additional Structural Barriers: Navigating Fragmentation and the Vendor Crisis

Beyond these deficits, DeafBlind New Yorkers face massive logistical barriers due to fragmented service delivery and a systemic collapse in provider availability. As noted in this hearing's purpose, navigating between OPWDD, ACCES-VR, the New York State Commission for the Blind (NYSCB), and the Department of Labor is exhausting. For a DeafBlind individual requiring specialized Orientation and Mobility (O&M) training alongside vocational support, the lack of inter-agency coordination can delay job placement by months or even years.

Compounding this fragmentation is a severe decline in qualified, competent vendors in these specialized areas. Stagnant and delayed increases in state service rates have proven catastrophic for provider retention. Consequently, our remaining vendors are severely overstretched, forced to cover vastly expanded geographic territories to serve individuals with disabilities. This bottleneck has drastically slowed training progression for DeafBlind individuals, leaving them languishing on waitlists rather than actively entering the workforce.

Furthermore, this systemic delay has severely weakened crucial employer relations. As workforce dynamics shift, employers are aggressively pursuing cost-saving measures that actively harm the ability of disabled individuals to secure jobs. The historical governmental strategy of offering disability tax incentives is no longer sufficient; these incentives simply do not hold enough weight in modern corporate tax-saving strategies to offset the perceived costs or delays associated with hiring individuals with complex needs.

The Transition Cliff: Special Education to the Workforce

We must also address a glaring failure in our pipeline: the transition from special education to the competitive workforce. When a DeafBlind young adult ages out of the educational system, they step off a "services cliff." The robust, mandated supports they received under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) abruptly vanish, replaced by the fragmented adult system.

To fix this, New York must mandate stringent accountability in transition planning and workforce readiness. Schools must be held operationally accountable for ensuring that exiting students and their families are actively connected to their next phase of life. This requires explicit, documented information-sharing and warm hand-offs regarding adult

Vocational Rehabilitation services, OPWDD services, public welfare programs, and community-based disability advocacy networks.

Furthermore, this transition cannot rely on the honor system. We urge the creation of a centralized, inter-agency database housed within the State Education Department to track and confirm the continuity of care for individuals with disabilities. Without a centralized mechanism to hold agencies accountable and track a student's navigation from the classroom to the workforce, we will continue allowing our most heavily invested-in youth to fall into immediate, preventable unemployment upon graduation.

Conclusion

Meaningful employment for DeafBlind New Yorkers cannot be achieved through automated, one-size-fits-all technological fixes or siloed agency responses. It requires deliberate, human-centered policies, investment in in-person tactile interpreting resources, and a streamlined pathway from workforce development to competitive employment.

Thank you for your time, your leadership on this issue, and your commitment to dismantling these barriers.

Sincerely,

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