

Washington State Programs for the Blind

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Administrative patterns in State programs for aid to the blind vary among the States as do laws, appropriations, needs, and facilities. This article on the Washington State program is presented for its interest to Bulletin readers in showing the development of one type of State program; it does not imply Social Security Board recommendation for adoption by other States.

A STATE-WIDE PROGRAM of aid and service to the blind has been in operation in Washington since April 1937 only, although public recognition of special needs of blind persons was given in 1933, when the State legislature placed on each county the responsibility for granting pensions to certain blind individuals. In the 5 years in which the full program has been in operation, it has passed the experimental stage and another 5 years should bring substantially increased opportunities to blind people in the State.

Administrative supervision of the State program is the responsibility of the Division for the Blind, within the State Department of Social Security. Nine distinct programs or services are offered: public assistance payments to needy blind individuals; vocational aid and training; home industry and sale of products; vending-stand installation and supervision; home teaching; distribution and maintenance of talking-book machines; friendly visiting; surgical and other treatment to restore sight or prevent further loss of vision; and a program for prevention of blindness.

Our experience has indicated that a better understanding of the requirements of all these special services can be achieved and a more rounded program to all blind persons can be assured if the special services are combined within the division which administers or supervises aid to the blind. For this reason, and because of the prohibitive cost if not the technical impossibility of furnishing such services on a local or county basis, Washington established the technical services to the blind on a State-wide basis, under the supervision of the Division for the Blind. In Washington, for example, the complete ophthalmological examination required for all applicants for aid to the blind can serve also in determining eligibility for services under the vocational train-

ing, vending-stand, talking-book, and other specialized programs, and in determining the value of preventive or remedial treatment.

Whether they are recipients of aid to the blind or are financially independent, blind persons who are interested in any of the specialized services, such as vocational training or home teaching, make their application to the county welfare department. This application, together with all the facts considered pertinent, is forwarded to the Division for the Blind. From this point the application is handled by a technically trained person in the specialized field in which service is requested from the Division, either through personal conference or further correspondence with the county visitor. Requirements in education and specialized training have been set up through the merit system for home teachers of the blind, and for those responsible for all types of vocational training, working in the Division for the Blind. The county is kept informed of the situation, but the decision as to the feasibility and kind of service to be granted lies entirely within the State Division. To the blind person, however, the specialized services come through or in conjunction with the county welfare department.

Aid to the blind.—Financial assistance under the aid to the blind program is administered directly by county welfare departments under the general supervision of the State Division for the Blind. In June 1942 there were 990 recipients of assistance in the State, and the average monthly payment was \$35.77.

If there are a sufficient number of blind persons within a city or county to warrant a specialized case load, the Division encourages such specialization within the county welfare department. The needs of other members of family groups may also be cared for by the special worker to avoid the necessity for two workers. Sixty active cases are considered a full case load. In counties with

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relatively few blind persons, the use of the special case worker would not be justified.

Approximately 58 percent of the individuals receiving financial assistance would not, even if they had their eyesight, be expected to be even partially self-supporting, because they have passed their sixty-fifth birthday. Another 20 percent are limited to such activities as the home affords, or their physical condition is such that if they were not blind they would still be considered unemployable. For these persons, home-teaching, talking-book, and friendly visiting services are provided. Some 20 percent only are left who can profit by some type of vocational training.

Vocational training services.—In the selection of persons for vocational training, recognition is taken of the interests and capabilities of the person and the possibility of using them for self-support. No blind person is accepted for training who does not express the desire to be self-supporting, and it has been found that the majority of the younger blind especially want a chance to work and earn. Sometimes, however, it becomes a responsibility of the social worker in the assistance program or the home teacher to lead a person to the realization of his potential abilities. Moreover, it has been found that the continued supervision and interest of the Division for the Blind is often necessary or even essential to the efforts of the individual to remain self-supporting.

Eligibility for vocational training does not depend on need, although the majority of the persons accepted for training have had to depend on assistance payments from the county welfare department during the training period. To be accepted for vocational training the person must:

1. Be of employable age;
2. Be physically and mentally able to assimilate instruction and develop manual dexterity;
3. Have not more than 20/200 vision in the better eye with proper correction or an equivalent in restricted fields of vision;
4. Have resided in the State continuously for at least a year preceding application.

Before a person is considered for vocational training, the welfare department in his county obtains a complete ophthalmological report. What causes underlie his present situation? Can eyesight be restored? If so, plans can be made for this service. If not, is the condition such that

special care should be exercised as to the type of vocational work chosen? A case of near-blindness from progressive myopia would not be trained in work which would necessitate heavy lifting or bending over a bench for long periods. The ophthalmologist is consulted about work plans whenever there is uncertainty, so that any eyesight, no matter how little, may be protected.

Although the present facilities provide for only one or two occupational-therapy cases at a time, persons who need occupational therapy rather than vocational rehabilitation are accepted whenever equipment is available and instructors have time to give the necessary attention.

A training center for the blind in Seattle serves the entire State. The choice of training is between weaving and basketry at this time. Other products, such as pottery, metal scroll work, and leather goods were tried in the early days of the training center, but it was found that, although these products could be made satisfactorily by blind persons, they could not bring sufficient money returns in a competitive market to warrant continuance. Weaving, however, has proved to be a craft in which a blind worker can be self-supporting. Students are taught weaving of fine woolen yardage—in plain, stripe, plaid, and pattern materials—and also weaving with cottons. In basketry the products include bassinets, fishing creels, fireside baskets, pet baskets, or small baskets for packing fancy fruits and candies.

The costs of operating the training center are met by State funds appropriated to the Division for the Blind. Living arrangements for students during the training period, which averages 4 months, are made by the home county in cooperation with the county welfare departments of King County, where the training center is located. If a person requires financial assistance while he is at the center, he gets it from his county welfare department, usually from funds for aid to the blind. Room and board are available within a few blocks of the center.

When a person enters the training center, he agrees to attend regularly 5 days a week. He first has a conference with the instructor in charge, with whom he discusses his work ambitions, his special interests, what opportunity he has had to use them, and his work in an allied field. From this discussion, plus the trainee's apparent manual dexterity, physical condition, and alertness, comes

the decision as to the type of training he should receive. After a reasonable time for orientation, another conference determines the field in which he is to specialize.

During the period of training, the student receives individual attention with reference to the ease with which he gets about alone, his mannerisms, his ability to meet new people on a common ground, and other traits important to the enjoyment of normal living. The training period at the center is not divorced from social work concepts, but it is divorced from public assistance concepts. The social worker from the county welfare department is discouraged from interviewing a student at the training center and is expected to get necessary information or reports from the instructor in charge. To the student, aid to the blind is something he is putting behind him, and the training center is a means of becoming independent and self-supporting. Experience has proved the wisdom of keeping the two programs within the same Division separated in the student's mind. Their close correlation is left to the instructor and the county welfare department.

Home-industry program.—When the person has completed training, he returns to his own community to carry on his work under the home-industry program, usually in his own home. The Division for the Blind lends him any necessary equipment and sends him orders for work with the materials necessary to complete each order. Production and sale of articles are considered feasible only when the average home-industry worker can make at least 50 cents an hour for his work. Workers are paid on a unit piece-work basis, but their earnings vary with their skill and efficiency. Of 21 workers in March 1941, for example, 6 earned less than \$40 during the month and 4 earned \$100 or more.

The home-industry program is financed by a \$15,000 operating fund, which covers the workers' earnings, cost of material and finishing processes, and costs of selling. Merchandise is produced only as orders warrant, and the demand for some articles is seasonal. During the slack season it may be necessary for the home-industry worker to have financial assistance. Since the beginning of 1941, however, no worker participating in the home-industry program found it necessary to apply for aid to the blind.

During the period April 1939–March 1941 it cost the State \$8,407 to operate the home-industry program. During that same period, however, a saving of \$10,374 in assistance payments to the blind was possible because earnings in home industry made assistance unnecessary or decreased the amount needed. In addition, the earnings of the individuals engaged in home industries were one-third greater than the amounts they would otherwise have received in assistance payments. Since these home workers will continue to work and earn their livelihood, the savings to the State will amount to a much greater sum in the next biennium. These savings can well be set against the cost of operating the training program, which amounted to about \$18,000 from April 1939 to March 1941, and it is logical to assume that in another 2 years the savings will easily offset all costs of training.

Vending stands.—The Division for the Blind has been designated the State licensing agency for vending stands and is responsible for the establishment and continued supervision of stands placed in Federal and other buildings under the Randolph-Sheppard Act. These stands are operated by blind persons who sell candy, tobacco, magazines, and other small articles. Ownership of the stand remains with the sponsoring organization (usually a nonprofit group), but the vendor buys the initial stock on small payments and becomes the owner of the merchandise handled. The Division for the Blind gives the vendors their initial training and continued supervision and audits the monthly business statements.

For the month of July 1942 the total net earnings from 17 vending stands were \$1,685.97, or an average per stand of \$99.17.

Other occupations.—A number of blind persons are also in supervised work in private employment, as clerking in a grocery store or raising chickens or selling insurance. The placement of blind persons in private industry is a direct responsibility of the U. S. Employment Service through a specialized worker on its staff. Close contact is maintained between the employment service worker and the supervisor of the Division for the Blind.

Home teaching services.—The home teachers are directly attached to the State office and report daily to the Division for the Blind. Under cooperating arrangements with the county welfare

department, however, the home teachers go into a county and stay there, usually about 4-6 months, making the county welfare department office their headquarters. Under this arrangement, the home teacher is able to discuss with the county visitor the cases known to the county office and can consult with the specialized worker or the case supervisor on social problems arising among those with whom the teacher is working. The county welfare department, on the other hand, is kept aware of developments in the home teaching services.

Talking-book machines.—Distribution of talking-book machines is the general responsibility of the Division for the Blind. County welfare departments investigate eligibility, get the contracts signed, plan for the delivery of the talking-book machines, and notify the State office when a machine is in need of repair. At the end of July 1942 the Division had 267 machines on loan.

Friendly visiting.—Friendly visiting is a program handled cooperatively between the Division for the Blind, the county welfare department, and the local Junior Women's Club. It may be said that the Division for the Blind takes the initiative in the original development of the program and the county welfare department does the day-by-day work, along with the Junior Women's Clubs, whose members serve as the friendly visitors.

Restorative treatment and preventive measures.—Medical advisory and consultant service to the Department of Social Security began in April 1937 with the creation of a Medical Eye Advisory Committee composed of six doctors—five ophthalmologists and one physician from the State Department of Health—all serving on a voluntary basis. The chairman of the Committee, selected as technical consultant, has taken responsibility for final recommendation in all cases in which surgery or other treatment has been authorized. Close cooperation is maintained with State ophthalmologists and the State Departments of Health and of Education.

Advisory Committees

A significant characteristic of the Washington program is its use of lay and professional ad-

visory committees. Members of the Advisory Committee to the Division for the Blind, organized April 5, 1937, were chosen because of their interest in or technical knowledge of the field. The personnel included business executives, ophthalmologists appointed by the State Medical Association, the superintendent of the State School for the Blind, representatives of the State Departments of Health and of Vocational Rehabilitation, blind persons representing various sections of the State, and representatives of civic organizations. All new policies are discussed with the Committee, as well as the progress made in developing the various phases of the programs. The Advisory Committee also works through subcommittees, each one headed by an Advisory Committee member. A standing subcommittee is the Medical Eye Advisory Committee, the chairman of which is the ophthalmologist on the Advisory Committee. This subcommittee is responsible for setting up and maintaining an authorized list of eye physicians, and it works with the Division in establishing fee schedules and in defining the scope and work to be covered by the programs of prevention and of treatment.

Back of the service programs in Washington is the hope that the blind may have greater opportunity to live a normal life and that communities will realize that the blind can and will, if given the opportunity, take their place with sighted people in both industry and community activities. Sir Arthur Pearson stated concisely some of the essentials to be considered in a program for the blind: "Happiness comes from doing, from exercising one's creative faculties, whatever they may be; and he who finds ample opportunity for fundamental expression needs no one's pity—don't pity the blind. They don't want your pity, and they can't use it if you give it to them. There is something they want, and something for which they have a right to ask—that is, the normal spirit you are willing to extend to equals everywhere." Helen Keller has said: "It is good to give the infirm a living; it is better still to give them a life worth living; it is not so much the infirmity that causes unhappiness as a useless, dependent existence."