



October 2, 2015

The Honorable Paul LePage
Office of the Governor
#1 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0001

Dear Governor LePage:

The State Rehabilitation Council for the Maine Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (SRC-DBVI) has confirmed that extraordinary efforts are underway at the Maine Department of Labor (Maine DOL) to dismantle the Maine Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI), a division within the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS). These efforts have been described by DOL officials as efforts to consolidate or realign staffing of DBVI and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR).

The SRC-DBVI requests that you take immediate steps to stop these extraordinary efforts to dismantle DBVI. The SRC-DBVI strongly believes these consolidation or realignment efforts are certain to have profoundly negative impacts on consumers of the specialized blindness and low vision vocational rehabilitation services needed by people with blindness or significantly low vision to gain and maintain employment.

By way of background, DBVI and DVR exist as two divisions within BRS because the services provided by DBVI and DVR are fundamentally different. DVR provides vocational rehabilitation services to people with disabilities who are not blind or visually impaired. These (so called) "general VR" services are fundamentally different from the services provided to Maine consumers who are blind or significantly visually impaired because primary blindness habilitation and rehabilitation in Maine is not available through the educational and health care systems. Consequently, DBVI provides primary vision rehabilitation and educational services to students, working-age adults and seniors with blindness or low vision, but DVR does not provide similar services to people with other disabilities because they receive primary rehabilitation through the health care and educational systems before seeking vocational rehabilitation services from DVR.

The SRC-DBVI is the voice of blind and visually impaired consumers. It is authorized by the federal Rehabilitation Act with the task of reviewing, analyzing, and advising DBVI regarding the performance of its responsibilities. The Rehabilitation Act clearly states that the SRC-DBVI is to assist in the preparation of the State plan and amendments to the plan, reports, needs assessments, and evaluations of the efficacy of vocational rehabilitation services.

At the SRC-DBVI meeting on September 16, the Council asked Acting BRS Director, Karen Fraser, the following question: “**As the mandated partner, how do you see DOL/BRS and the SRC moving forward together to resolve these issues?**” Karen responded:

As DBVI comes to final determination about its fiscal shortfall in FFY 2015 and forward, it will **keep the SRC informed and seek input** regarding DBVI’s responsibilities in serving individuals who are blind and visually impaired in Maine. Specifically, the SRC plays an important role in developing DBVI’s State Plan, evaluating the effectiveness of the VR program, gathering public input and advising the agency. DBVI will work with the SRC to improve the data provided at SRC meetings and **seek SRC representatives to participate in DBVI initiatives that are undertaken to improve services.**

In the two weeks following the September 16 meeting, dramatic staff reductions at DBVI have been made and the SRC-DBVI was not consulted. Karen Fraser has ignored the commitment she made to “**seek SRC representatives to participate in DBVI initiatives that are undertaken to improve services.**” In fact, these radical staffing reductions were announced to DBVI staff on September 30 before the DBVI-SRC was informed about them. Karen Fraser clearly has neither sought input from, nor kept the SRC-DBVI informed “regarding DBVI’s responsibilities in serving individuals who are blind and visually impaired in Maine.”

As the federally mandated partner of DBVI, the SRC-DBVI respectfully requests that Maine DOL/BRS immediately cease all efforts and activities associated with what DOL/BRS is referencing as realignment of the Maine Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired, including but not limited to the elimination of positions or forced retirement, the creation of a hostile work environment for current staff at DBVI, and the intentional exclusion of the SRC-DBVI in the evaluation of the current and future efficacy of DBVI. Additionally, the organized blindness consumer community in Maine, including the Pine Tree Guide Dog Users and the American Council of the Blind of Maine have requested that DOL Commissioner Paquette appoint an Acting DBVI Director who has expertise in delivery of blindness rehabilitation services who is an advocate for blind services. The SRC-DBVI concurs with this request.

The SRC-DBVI is the voice of Maine consumers. DOL/BRS leadership is making decisions with no regard for what Maine people think. The SRC-DBVI requests DOL/BRS to cease all efforts and activities associated with the “realignment” of the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired **until a full complement of appropriate stakeholders can be assembled to address all issues and options and an appropriate, good faith process can be undertaken.**

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the SRC-DBVI,

Kathy Despres, SRC-DBVI Chair

Cc: Jeanne Paquette, Commissioner, Department of Labor