

03/31/2025

My name is Mary Beth Donelan. I am currently an SSP for a DeafBlind resident in Cincinnati.

I am writing to ask for your support for an amendment to HB 96—the DeafBlind Fund. The fund has support of Republicans and Democrats. Both Representatives Jeff LaRe (R) and Crystal Lett (D) have drafted amendments to continue the important services for DeafBlind Ohioans through the GRF 415515 DeafBlind Fund.

For the past year and a half, the DeafBlind Fund has been used for a Support Service Provider (SSP), or CoNavigator (CN), Pilot Program. The fund was first added in the 2024-2025 Ohio Biennial Budget with support from Republicans and Democrats and signed by Governor DeWine. The DeafBlind Fund was under Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities. The fund was administered by the Columbus Speech & Hearing Center (CSH).

Included is a flyer explaining the purpose and needs for the specialized services for the DeafBlind in Ohio. These services allow individuals to take part in our community and function independently doing necessary tasks.

Those who are DeafBlind are concerned for their future. We need permanent funding for services to keep this basic quality of life.

I would greatly appreciate your support of HB 96 DeafBlind Fund. And I would greatly appreciate your support in finding a permanent solution for services to our underserved DeafBlind Ohioans.

Sincerely,

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Support Service Provider (SSP)/CoNavigator (CNs) Program

Ohio Population of the DeafBlind

Deafblindness is a dual sensory loss of both vision and hearing. DeafBlind struggle to communicate and navigate the world without these two primary senses. For most, vision and hearing continue to get worse over time. In Ohio, there are about 84,797 DeafBlind individuals. This number is growing as the population ages.

Support Service Providers/Co-Navigators (SSP/CNs)

Trained SSP/CNs help people who are DeafBlind by providing mobility guidance, visual and audio information, and communication support.

Without SSP services, individuals who are DeafBlind do not have access and guidance to:

- Environmental and social surroundings,
- Identify and interact with people,
- Basic tasks: clothing and grocery shopping, reading mail, paying bills, banking, scheduling doctor visits,
- Make informed, autonomous choices,
- Attend religious and social activities,
- Develop trust with a consistent provider,
- Complete online forms for services, and
- Know danger and safety issues.

Funding Need for DeafBlind Services in Ohio

We have asked for \$565,000 to continue to grow the SSP/CN program to serve more of the 84,797 DeafBlind Ohioans.

With this funding:

- Program services will continue for current DeafBlind clients (30+), services will start for waitlist clients (20+), and services will expand to new applicants (about 2.5 per month),
- Connection Events will be held in cities where the DeafBlind live to reach isolated DeafBlind individuals and employ SSP/CNs in those areas.
- Ongoing SSP/CN trainings will improve direct services.
- Training for the DeafBlind will build up confidence, trust, and use of services.
- DeafBlind culture training will help agencies better understand and serve the DeafBlind.

Permanent Funding Solution

DeafBlind Ohioans need continuous, ongoing funding for services. With cooperation from state agencies, we can find a solution to provide consistent and needed services to DeafBlind consumers. Agency cooperation could include: Independent Living Centers, State Departments with Personal Care Assistance Services, Department of Aging, Department of Transportation, Mental Health agencies, and Departments of Developmental Disabilities.

Accomplishment of the 2024-2025 SSP Pilot Program

The 2024-2025 State funding of \$100,000 per year was provided under Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) to the Columbus Speech & Hearing Center (CSH). This funding was used to create a statewide SSP Pilot Program.

CSH created a strong foundation with the help of OOD and the Helen Keller National Center. An SSP Advisory Committee guides the program's growth and development. The advisory committee is made of DeafBlind Ohioans and advocates for the DeafBlind community. A statewide coordinator was hired who is fluent in

American Sign Language and Tactile Sign Language and has expertise in working with the DeafBlind. Program eligibility, applications, and guidelines were established.

Due to funding limitations, the program focused on serving the DeafBlind in 4 major cities. The initial goal was to serve 10 DeafBlind adults; however, the program served triple that (33). There is a waitlist for services and applications continue.

Through the SSP/CN program, CSH has worked with the following organizations:

- Ohio Association of the DeafBlind
- Ohio Deaf Friends of the Library
- Ohio Deaf Association
- Ohio Deaf and Blind Education Services
- Ohio Center for DeafBlind Education, University of Cincinnati
- Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities
- Speech and Hearing Centers throughout Ohio
- Columbus State Community College
- Kent State University
- Sinclair Community College
- Capital University
- I Can Connect
- Columbus Colony Elderly Care Nursing Home
- Columbus Zoo and Aquarium
- Columbus Museum of Art
- Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council
- National Federation of the Blind Ohio Chapters
- Helen Keller National Center

In addition to working with the listed agencies, CSH partnered to create two major community events:

- ***Columbus Zoo & Aquarium*** - Blind, Deaf, and DeafBlind Accessibility Day.
- ***Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council*** - "My Life My Story", live presentations by DeafBlind individuals at the ***Columbus Museum of Art***.

For further discussions or questions about the SSP Pilot Program, please contact CSH:

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