



Acpd



Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities

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Statement to the Virginia Disability Commission August 23, 2006

Thank you for the opportunity to come before the Commission today. My name is Mike Hatfield and I am the Disability Resources Coordinator for the City of Alexandria government and I also serve as staff support to the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities, which serves as the DSB in Alexandria. Today, I want to briefly provide you with some insight on the local impact that the Rehabilitative Services Incentive Fund has had on the City of Alexandria.

RSIF grants have provided sustainable programs in Alexandria, which have demonstrated long-standing and ongoing benefits to its residents with disabilities. Past RSIF grants have funded an improved reservation system for the DOT Paratransit service, talking buses, a pilot test of audible pedestrian traffic signals, and assistive technology at JobLink, the City's employment center.

Back in 1998, an RSIF grant was awarded to Alexandria to implement a three-year employment initiative to increase employment for persons with disabilities living in the City. The RSIF grant initially supported an employment counselor for persons with disabilities at JobLink. Since then, JobLink has continued to expand its employment services and its state of the art assistive technology available for persons with disabilities. To this day, this program is still producing extraordinary results. The Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy has recognized JobLink as a national model and Best Practices site in services to persons with disabilities in a One Stop Employment Center for implementing and using assistive technology.

One of the statistics the City of Alexandria takes great pride in is that while roughly 70 percent of the nation's persons with disabilities are unemployed, nearly 70 percent of Alexandria's residents with disabilities are members of the work force. This accomplishment is evidence of the strong commitment the City takes in having persons with disabilities hold meaningful and gainful employment so that they can have full participation in community life. And all of this began, in part, with an RSIF grant awarded on the basis of shared investment in, and commitment to, the employment of persons with disabilities.

In 2002, with an RSIF grant, the City of Alexandria initiated a pilot program of installing, testing, and evaluating audible pedestrian signals at intersections in the City of Alexandria. The benefits of accessible pedestrian signals include providing directional guidance, increased safety, mobility, access to transportation and leisure activities and in short, providing for an overall improved

quality of life. The signals were deemed to be a resounding success. And now in the City of Alexandria, audible pedestrian signals are being installed at all new signalized intersections and in those intersections scheduled for upgrades. In addition, persons with disabilities are encouraged to submit suggestions for areas that would benefit from such signals.

These are just two examples of the impact of RSIF grants. The ACPD truly believes that additional funding for RSIF will lead to an increase in long-term system enhancements and improved services and access for persons with physical and sensory disabilities in Alexandria and other communities.

As you know, due to the drastic cuts to RSIF the number of grants awarded has declined significantly over the years and services and opportunities for Virginians with disabilities in most jurisdictions have languished.

For example, in FY02 there were 69 grants and 17 continuation grants. In FY06 only 12 grants were awarded. A full restoration of funding would ensure that all DSBs would be awarded an RSIF grant. The current funding sets up a formula where all local DSBs have to compete with each other instead of working together. Unfortunately, Alexandria has not recently had an RSIF award.

According to our most recent Needs Assessment, we still have ongoing unmet needs: including, but not limited to, accessible transportation; medical and therapeutic services including accessible, affordable medical insurance and services; and accessible housing. ACPD has been a leader among local communities in its efforts to provide, improve, or expand community programs, services, and access for its residents with disabilities, but we really want to ensure systems changes for persons with disabilities, not gap filling.

We are pleased that DRS has hired a full-time DSB program manager to provide technical assistance and strategies to enhance DSB communications and sharing of resources. This is a welcome step forward in support of increasing our collaborative efforts and strengthening the networking, partnership, and coordination of all DSBs. The ACPD believes that this enhanced effort can be used effectively to call upon our legislators to fully restore RSIF.

The ACPD hopes that the Virginia Disability Commission will call for the Virginia legislature to support the full restoration of RSIF so that every DSB can be awarded an RSIF grant to develop model innovative and sustainable projects to address the needs of Virginians with disabilities in their respective localities.

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