

Chairman Howard, members of the committee, my name is Melanie Bush (spell first/last name.) I am speaking to you today as a proponent of HB 437.

I am a Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist. I teach blind people how to travel safely, efficiently and gracefully with a long cane. Each student is taught individually. Since May of 2005 I have provided this instruction as an independent contractor, working with early intervention agencies, special education cooperatives, Headstart programs and school districts. I have taught blind school-age students in Roy, Rocky Boy, Cut Bank, Browning, Roundup and Helena and provided consulting or assessment services in Great Falls, Wolf Point and Poplar.

HB 437 mandates Medicaid payment for Orientation and Mobility services for students 18 years of age and younger provided by a Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist or National Orientation Mobility specialist. Currently, school districts in Idaho, Michigan, Arizona and Colorado bill Medicaid for O&M instruction. In Montana, Medicaid pays for other specialized services, including speech, physical and occupational therapies.

Blind students in Montana have an Individual Education Plan which outlines the specialized services they need for a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. This plan is based on input from the student and family as well as assessments completed by a team of educational professionals. When Orientation & Mobility instruction is included in a student's Individualized Education Plan, the school district is mandated by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to provide the services in their home school district.

Independent contractors provide this invaluable, life-changing instruction through one-on-one instruction. Contractors receive referrals from the various agencies mentioned above. Frequently agencies mistakenly assume that Medicaid will pay for this specialized service since it pays for other specialized therapies. The cost of the contracted O&M services is a huge barrier that prevents blind students in Montana from receiving Orientation & Mobility instruction.

Vision Outreach Consultants from MT School for the Deaf & the Blind have referred students to me numerous times. Since the student's privacy is respected,

I typically receive a generic referral such as "There's a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student in Saco who needs O&M instruction. I have given your contact information to his parents and the school administrator." Typically I do not hear from the parents or the school regarding the child.

Orientation & Mobility instruction equips students to travel safely, efficiently and gracefully. Problem solving is taught and practiced during sequential lessons that begin in familiar surroundings before moving to less familiar and more complex and challenging environments. Landmarks and clues are chained together to teach routes.

During beginning lessons O&M Specialists maintain close physical proximity to the student. Information and assistance is given to facilitate skill acquisition and build confidence in the student. As students demonstrate travel skills in a wide variety of familiar and unfamiliar settings, assistance is decreased. Less feedback and help is provided as the student uses the learned skills. The O&M instructor increases the distance from the student and final lessons occur with the instructor out of sight and out of range. Through exploration and trial and error, young children learn to navigate at home and in the classroom. O&M instruction provides a foundation of skills and tools to be used in all settings. Exposure to the world provides opportunity for the student to use these tools to learn about and navigate around familiar and unfamiliar settings. Proficient cane travelers can function in environments that change or are unfamiliar using the skills of orientation and mobility.

Innumerable valuable lessons are learned during O&M instruction, such as learning how to organize and recognize coins and paper money as well as completing a purchase. O&M lessons are a great time to work on social interactions and appropriate behaviors. I tell students the world is our classroom. It is a great place for students to learn and refine O&M skills, problem solving skills and self-advocacy skills. Age-appropriate travel is an O&M Specialist measuring stick for each student. For example, a 3-year old traveling with a cane would hold an adult's hand while crossing a street while a 10 year old would not. In addition, this student would learn to decline assistance in a street crossing by saying,

“Thank you. I can cross the street independently.”

An Extended Core Curriculum for blind students addresses the innumerable skills and information not included in a typical school curriculum. The list includes and is not limited to: social interactions, self-advocacy ,and health and hygiene.

Mobility specialists must develop a relationship of trust and respect with each student over time. Unless this trust is present the student may not want to take any “risks” or travel in unfamiliar or quickly changing environments and the student’s ability to become a truly independent traveler is affected.

Knowledge of O&M, participation in O&M instruction and follow-through with the student by the student’s parents, siblings and extended family and community is crucial. Receiving instruction in the student’s community provides an opportunity to involve and educate parents, siblings peers and community members in this critical educational process.

Blind students living in Montana deserve and desperately need O&M instruction. Medicaid payment for this instruction would eliminate an immense barrier in the delivery of this instruction. Having these skills equips them for a fulfilling, purposeful, independent life. Receiving O&M instruction, for a blind child, is foundational to building to their quality of life.

Thank you very much.

## **ORIENTATION & MOBILITY**

**ORIENTATION:** the process of using the senses to establish position in space and relationship to other objects in the environment; the ability of a person to recognize her surroundings and their spatial relation to herself.

**MOBILITY:** the ability to navigate from one position in the environment to another; the movement of a person from place to place.

**ORIENTATION & MOBILITY:** A field of instruction, which teaches systematic techniques of travel and orientation to people who are blind or visually impaired.

**THE GOAL OF ORIENTATION & MOBILITY:** to enable a person to enter any environment, familiar or unfamiliar, and to function safely, efficiently, gracefully and independently by utilizing the two skills of orientation and mobility.

Orientation & Mobility is a vital area for children with low vision or blindness. Teachers with specific preparation, Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialists or National Orientation & Mobility Specialists, provide the instruction. As with all children with special needs, instruction needs to begin as early as possible. The instruction emphasizes the fundamental and basic right of people with visual impairments to travel as independently as possible, enjoying and learning to the greatest extent possible from the environment through which they are passing. It is essential for people to learn about themselves and the environment in which they move – from basic body image to independent travel in all settings.

Trained O&M Specialists assess children who have visual impairments and provide perspective, information and professional instruction to students, their families and the entire educational team.

O&M Specialist provide insight into blindness and the need for independent travel skills, including the skills and behaviors needed in developing independence such as, but not limited to:

- \*Sensory training
- \*Use of optical and non-optical low vision devices
- \*Self-protection techniques and sighted guide
- \*Cane travel and use of adaptive mobility devices
- \*Travel in familiar and unfamiliar environments
- \*Orientation and navigation skills
- \*Indoor and outdoor travel
- \*Residential travel
- \*Small and large business travel
- \*Public transportation

The constantly changing needs of students and the environments in which they travel determine *when* and *where* O&M instruction will begin and occur. Preschool age students need to learn about space at home and their preschool classroom. Junior or senior high students need to learn to cross streets safely or how to locate a store in a shopping mall. *The ability to move about environments safely, efficiently, gracefully and independently is the foundation for blind students living full, productive, meaningful, purposeful lives.* Students who receive regular, consistent, consecutive O&M instruction will be equipped for transitions from home to preschool, preschool to public school, public school to college, employment and the world beyond.

**WALK BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT VISION SERVICES, INC.**

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