

HIGHLIGHTS IN THE HISTORY OF COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND

1913-1963

Preliminary Investigations on Blindness

1903 – Governor Benjamin B. Odell, Jr., signed a bill providing for a three member commission to investigate "the condition of the adult blind in New York State." The Commission study found available records unreliable and that there was regrettable amount of unnecessary blindness.

1906 – A second investigation committee was mandated by law to make a complete census of the blind in New York State. In the taking of this census, the Massachusetts definition of the blindness was used. All persons were termed blind who..."with the aid of glasses yet were not able to distinguish form or color, to count fingers within one foot of the eye or to read writing or ordinary print." In the census, 5, 308 persons were identified as blind in New York State. A recommendation was made that a Commission for the Blind be established.

1913 – The New York State Commission for the Blind was established on April 30, 1913. It was comprised of a five member non-salaried board of commissioners. The original board had administrative functions and had the authority to appoint staff and fix their compensation. The first office of the New York State Commission for the Blind was opened on September 15, 1913 at 105 West 40th Street, New York City.

Mandated activities of the commission for the Blind under the 1913 Commission Act (chapter 415 of the laws of 1913) included:

1. Maintenance of a register of the blind in New York State.
2. Maintenance of a bureau of information and industrial aid, the object of which was aiding blind persons in finding employment and teaching them trades and occupations which they would be able to follow in their homes, and disposing of the products of home industry.
3. Inquiry into the causes of blindness, and inauguration and cooperation in preventive measures.
4. Investigation of the needs of blind person.

Permissive activities of the Commission for the Blind included:

1. Establishment of training schools and workshops for the employment of blind persons and payment of training and maintenance fees.
2. Amelioration of the condition of blind persons by the promotion of visits among them and teaching them in their homes.

The Commission for the Blind Community Services and Vocational Rehabilitation Services programs which were developed at a later date had their earliest beginnings in 1913 when one home teacher and one field agent began their employment. The Vending Stand Service also had its beginning in 1913, when the Commission field agent set up a blind man in business as a street corner news vendor, and the Production and marketing service when the Commission agreed to take over the home industry department of the MATILDA ZIEGLER MAGAZINE. This function involved furnishing to blind people in their homes, at cost, such material as could be made into saleable objects.

1915- The Commission invited a group of well-known ophthalmologists to act as its advisory council in the formulation of policies related to prevention of blindness.

Workshop opportunities for blind persons in various parts of the State were enhanced by the Commission through assistance given to local agency industrial centers for the blind.

1916- The Commission organized an eye clinic program at Sing Sing Prison. It continued to operate under the auspices of the commission until 1920 when responsibility for this function was passed onto the prison's medical staff.

The presently constituted Eye Health Service had its beginning in January of 1916 when two Social Service Nurses were added to the Commission staff for prevention of blindness work. During 1917 Commission Social Service nurses began working with local boards of education in providing sight-saving classes for groups of children with defective sight.

1920- A reorganization of the Commission for the Blind took place during 1920. Policies of the commission were reshaped; work of special sections was re-defined; work which did not fit into the general scheme was eliminated; and new branches were created. A special effort was made in this reorganization to obtain closer cooperation with local agencies for the blind throughout the state, and attempts were made to organize associations for the blind in communities where none existed.

During the summer of 1920 the Commission for the Blind conducted its first sale of articles made by blind persons in New York State at the Watermill Shop on Long Island.

1922- The New York State Blind Relief Act was enacted. Direct financial assistance was given to blind persons by local communities under the supervision of the Commission for the Blind which was responsible for investigating need.

1927- Plans were completed on July 1, 1927 whereby the New York State Commission for the Blind was made a bureau of the State Department of Charities.

1928- On July 1, 1928 a social department for the prevention of blindness was created by the Commission for the Blind. With the assistance of the Medical and Advisory Committee, a general program was initiated with emphasis on educational work, assistance to professional groups, and cooperation with State departments and local organizations.

1930- The Commission took a census of the blind persons in New York State. As of June 30, 1930 there were a total of 8,875 blind persons in the State. Of these 4, 580 were New York City residents, 4, 295 resided in areas of the State outside of New York City.

1933- The Bureau (Commission) was made a Division of the Department (renamed the Department of Social Welfare in 1929) and the Executive Secretary became an Assistant Commissioner of the Department.

Professional services for preschool blind children were inaugurated by the Division for the blind with the temporary employment of a preschool educator.

The Division for the Blind began sponsoring a "Survey on Eye Conditions" course at the School of General Education, New York University. Later this course was transferred to Columbia University where it was co-sponsored by the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind. The course became a required subject for teachers of the blind.

1935- As part of the WPA project the United States Library of Congress manufactured several hundred Talking Book Machines for loan to blind persons throughout the country. From the initial agreement of the Division for the Blind, to be responsible for the quota allocated to New York State, has grown the present day Commission for the Blind Talking Book Machine program.

1937- The State Department of Social Welfare Division for the Blind was renamed "Bureau of Service for the Blind" and the chief executives title was changed from Assistant Commissioner to Director. Various activities of the bureau at the time were prevention of blindness, home teaching, finding employment for the blind persons, industrial

employment in homes, stimulation of voluntary agency workshop programs through the loan of equipment and giving of instruction, sales of article same by the blind, and investigation of applications for relief under the provisions of the Relief Act of 1922.

1938- The Federal Social Security Act was enacted during this year. Aid to the Blind (AB) and other public assistance programs were established in New York State as locally administered public welfare programs supervised by the State Department of Social Welfare.

1941- The New York State Social Welfare Law was amended to provide that the Commission for the Blind would continue to exert and perform its duties subject to the supervision and control of the State Board of Social Welfare. It continued as a bureau of the Department of Social Welfare.

1944- The Commission for the Blind vocational rehabilitation program was established as a Federal –State program with its headquarters in Albany.

1945- The name of the State Department of Social Welfare Bureau of Services to the Blind was changed back to the Commission for the Blind of the New York State Department of Social Welfare.

Mandatory Reporting of blindness became law, and a legal definition of blindness was formalized in New York State. This definition is: "A blind person shall be defined as one who is totally blind or has impaired vision of not more than twenty/two hundred visual acuity in the better eye and for whom a diagnosis and medical finding show that vision cannot be improved to better than twenty /two hundred; or who has loss of vision due wholly or in part to impairment of field vision or to other factors which affect the usefulness of vision to a like degree."

1954- A study of the Commission for the Blind organizational structure and of each of its major program activities was initiated.

Amendments to the Federal Randolph-Sheppard Act (Public Law 565) tied the Concession Stand program more closely to the Vocational Rehabilitation program with emphasis on the small business enterprise aspect of the program.

1955- The Commission for the Blind was reorganized into three major program sections. The professional and Technical Services section included programs of Eye Health, Services for Blind Children, and Community Services. The Business Services section included programs related to Vending Stands, Production and Marketing, Office Management, and Accounting. The Vocational Rehabilitation Service constituted the third major section.

1956-60- A review of Commission for the Blind programs during this period resulted in a clarification of Commission policies and goals with primary emphasis being placed on the following: expansion of the interpretative, educational and standards setting roles of the Commission in the field of work for the blind; development and strengthening of local voluntary agency services for the blind; advisory and consultative role of the Commission; the coordination of the program of the Commission within the Department of Social Welfare and with other related State and national agencies; the advisory role of the Board of the Commission for the Blind; the elimination of segregation and preferential treatment unrelated to needs caused by blindness, the substitution of skilled professional services for those based on an emotional or "pity" approach to blindness; and the integration of blind persons into the normal activities and services of the community.

1961- As a result of an extensive survey of positions within the Commission for the Blind by the Civil Service Department Classification Division, minimum qualifications and salaries were raised for the majority of professional positions unique to the Commission for the blind, in line with the Commission for the Blind shift in program emphasis.

1962- Oscar Friedensohn was promoted to the position of Director of the Commission for the Blind. Mr. Friedensohn is the first man to hold this position in the history of the Commission

The Telephone Pioneers, a voluntary organization of long term Telephone Company Employees, agreed to repair Talking Book Machines without charge and are doing so in five major Upstate cities and in New York City.

The entire Register of the Blind was made available to the Department of Motor Vehicles for their action in arranging for up-to-date eye examinations for legally blind persons, who have retained their Motor Vehicle Operators Licenses in New York State. This process will be an ongoing one with all newly registered blind persons.

An institute relating to leadership in program planning was held at Arden House for administrators of all of the agencies for the blind in New York State. A new major office of the Vocational Rehabilitation Service, located in Jamaica, was opened to serve Suffolk, Nassau and part of Queens.

As a result of a change in programming the rest of the missions direct sales, the 78 Chambers Street Shop, was terminated. This change in focus has resulted in more extensive consultative and advisory production and marketing aid to workshops for the blind.

1963- The Commission for the Blind assisted in writing legislation which clarifies the sale of blind-made products. The bills have passed the legislature. The Commission also participated in legislation which mandates regular eye examinations for obtaining motor vehicle licenses. This legislation has also been enacted into law.

The first training unit in an agency for the blind was created for students from three New York City colleges. These students are studying for a Master's Degree in Guidance and Rehabilitation Counseling.

The Commission has undertaken a program of distribution of free radios to blind persons on public assistance. This distribution is being done for the American Foundation of the Blind.