



DOAA

Georgia Department
of Audits & Accounts

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February 28, 2024

Honorable Marty Harbin
Chairman, Senate Government Oversight Committee
Coverdell Legislative Office Building, Suite 302-B
Atlanta, Georgia 30334

SUBJECT: Fiscal Note
Senate Bill 274 (LC 33 9444)

Dear Chairman Harbin:

This bill would create and establish functions for a new Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired that would provide “cradle-to-grave” services for individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or deaf-blind. Current services provided to these populations by the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA) would be transferred to the commission, including vocational rehabilitation counseling, operation of the Georgia Industries for the Blind, and operation of the Business Enterprise Program. The commission would be assigned to the Department of Human Services (DHS) for administrative purposes.

Overall Commission Funding

Estimating the unmet need for services that will be expected of a new agency is challenging. While funding for services already provided by GVRA will simply be transferred, the bill requires the Commission to provide a broader range of services. Current funding, primarily from the federal government, is limited to pre-vocational or vocational purposes for individuals aged 14 and older, as well as broader, independent living services for individuals over age 55. Additional funds would be needed to provide non-vocational services to young children, teenagers, and adults under age 55.

While we could not quantify the demand and cost for each service in the bill, a review of spending by Florida’s agency serving the blind, along with information provided by GVRA and DHS, allow for an estimate of the new commission’s budget. Based on this information and the transfer of existing funds from GVRA, additional funds needed by the commission would be \$17.2 million to \$22.4 million (**Table 1**). Additional one-time funds would be needed for new information systems.

Table 1. Estimate of Required Commission Funding

	Estimate – Florida Per Capita	Estimate – GVRA/DHS Info
Total Annual Funding	\$33.6 million	>\$31.1 million
Existing State/Federal/Other Funding	<u>\$11.2 million</u>	<u>\$13.9 million</u>
Difference/New State Funding	\$22.4 million	>\$17.2 million
Initial One-Time Costs	N/A	\$6.4 million

- *Comparison to Florida* – If funded similarly to the Florida Division of Blind Services, the commission would require funding of approximately \$33.6 million. Florida provides services comparable to those included in the bill, though Florida’s agency does not include an entity similar to the Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB).

This estimate includes \$28.9 million assuming that commission funding is provided at the same rate as Florida--\$104 per blind or visually impaired resident. An additional \$4.7 million (total \$33.6 million) in the commission budget is related to GIB, which generates the funds through sales of its products.

- *GVRA/DHS Estimate* – GVRA estimated at least \$31.1 million in annual costs for the commission, while DHS estimated that the commission would incur costs of approximately \$370,000 for its administrative support. The GVRA amount did not include several items with costs that are still unknown (see page 4). As a result, the GVRA/DHS estimate is likely to be lower than actual costs. Finally, GVRA estimated \$6.4 million in one-time costs for information systems.

Approximately \$13.9 million of the commission’s funding would be a transfer of state, federal, and other funds from GVRA. It is assumed that the balance would be state funds due to limits on the types of services that can be provided with federal funding.

The transfer of funding and the potential cost of the additional services are detailed below.

Transfer of GVRA Funding

The bill will shift funding for the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) and Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB) from GVRA to the new commission. Additionally, GVRA’s funding and responsibilities related to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) for blind and visually impaired clients will shift to the new commission.

- *Business Enterprise Program* – GVRA estimated BEP funding of \$4.37 million in FY 2024. This includes \$314,025 in state funding, \$3.44 million in federal funds, and \$616,007 in other funds, which are set-aside funds used for the federal match and are not related to operational revenue. GVRA noted that it currently provides administrative functions for BEP, but these services are not significant enough that it would be able to transfer administrative staff for these functions.
- *Georgia Industries for the Blind* – GVRA estimates annual funding of \$5.11 million for GIB, but these funds are earned by GIB product sales. GVRA also noted that it currently provides administrative assistance to GIB at no cost to GIB, and the new commission would likely need resources to support them.
- *Vocational Rehabilitation* – GVRA indicated that approximately \$4.42 million in annual funds could be transferred to the commission for VR services currently provided to the blind and visually impaired. These funds are used to pay for VR counselors, information system support, independent living services for VR clients and older individuals who are blind, and Georgia Radio Reading Services.¹ As shown in **Table 2**, these activities are largely covered

¹ GVRA indicated that funding to the Georgia Radio Reading Services corresponds with the bill’s requirement for the new commission to create and maintain an instructional media center for the production, purchase, distribution, reallocation, and warehousing of accessible materials for blind or visually impaired children and adults.

by federal funding because they serve either blind individuals seeking employment or older blind individuals.

Table 2. Funding for VR/Older-Blind Individuals

	State Funding	Federal Funding
Personnel Costs	\$356,055	\$1,315,565
Maintenance of Information System	\$0	\$777,867
Independent Living for VR Clients	\$64,423	\$579,804
Independent Living for Older Blind Individuals	\$92,944	\$836,492
Georgia Radio Reading Services	<u>\$400,000</u>	<u>\$0</u>
Total Costs	\$913,421	\$3,509,728

Costs for Additional Services

Estimated costs for program personnel, library services, administrative costs, and unknown program costs are discussed below.

Program Personnel Costs

In FY 2023, GVRA served 1,010 clients with disabilities related to blindness (984 for blindness/low vision impairments, and 26 deaf-blind clients). This is approximately 4% of the more than 28,000 clients served in FY 2023. It is unknown how much demand for counselor services will increase as a result of the establishment of cradle to grave services and the potential increase in VR service demand. We have included funding needs for 50, 75, and 100 counselors and a proportionate number of supervisors (1 for every 5 counselors), as shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Potential Costs for Counselors and Supervisors

Counselor Count	Counselor Salary & Fringe	Supervisor Salary & Fringe	Total
100 (Used in Table 1 estimate)	\$8,666,095	\$2,396,938	\$11,063,033
75	\$6,499,571	\$1,797,704	\$8,297,275
50	\$4,333,048	\$1,198,469	\$5,531,517

In addition to counselors, funding for additional positions such as occupational therapists, blind services coordinator, deaf/blind specialists, provider relations specialists, and rehabilitation technologists are estimated at approximately \$2.1 million. This does not include library services or certifying Braille instructors discussed separately below.

Library Services

The commission would be responsible for providing library services to persons who are blind, visually impaired, or physically disabled in cooperation with the Library of Congress. Similar services are provided by the University System of Georgia’s Georgia Library Service (GLS) for the Blind and Print Disabled, which receives federal funding due to its designation as the state’s network library of the National Library Service.

GLS currently has 14 FTEs working in two locations. In fiscal year 2024, the GLS budget is \$1.5 million, of which \$893,000 is federal funds and \$634,000 is state funds. If the bill moves the existing library services to the commission, the federal funding may not be available.

If the bill intends to create a second library system, the costs are unknown.

Administrative Costs

- *Administrative Staff* – The commission could require approximately \$3.3 million in funding for administrative staffing costs. In addition to an Executive Director, this funding covers approximately 27 staff in positions in areas including administration, IT, HR, communications, business development, and grants management. Some of these functions could be provided by DHS, potentially at a lower cost.
- *State Rehabilitation Council* – The commission will be required by federal law to create a State Rehabilitation Council and conduct a statewide needs assessment every three years. GVRA estimates that it spends \$1,500 to operate its council and \$160,000 for its needs assessment.
- *Technical Assistance* – The bill requires the commission to provide technical assistance to state agencies to ensure that information technology purchased or used by the agencies is accessible to and usable by blind or visually impaired individuals. The Georgia Technology Authority stated that it works with GVRA and the state Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) office when IT accommodations need to be purchased. It did not believe that the bill would result in additional costs in this area.
- *DHS* – As an agency attached to DHS for administrative purposes, the commission would be billed for reimbursements due to administrative or indirect costs associated with supporting the new commission. However, as noted above, the commission could have substantial administrative staff that would alleviate the need for significant DHS support. As a result, reimbursements to DHS are expected to be minimal.

Unknown Program and Administrative Costs

The bill requirements below will result in additional costs to the commission, but we were unable to provide an amount for each.

- *Assistive Technology* – The bill directs the new commission to purchase and distribute specialized equipment, devices, and technology from specialty vendors. GVRA currently utilizes Georgia Tech Tools for Life to provide assistive technology services to VR clients, though devices are not purchased for clients as required by the bill. The current contract is \$244,000 per year. It is unclear whether this contract will transfer to the new commission or if it will remain with GVRA.

We were unable to determine the number of individuals that would need each type of device that may be needed. According to Georgia Tech staff, per-unit costs for this type of technology vary significantly. Low-tech equipment, such as hand-held magnifiers and big-key/color-contrast keyboards, can range in cost from \$8 to \$135. Mid-tech equipment, such as big button phones, and currency readers, range from \$35 to \$139, while high-tech equipment, such as desktop video magnifiers, smart glasses, and talk-back technology, range from \$1,795 to \$4,500.

- *Centers for Independent Living* – The bill requires the commission to provide independent living services for blind or visually impaired individuals and to contract with private agencies that provide prevocational and other training such as instruction in Braille, orientation and mobility for independent travel, and homemaking skills. Centers for Independent Living across the state currently provide these services for VR and older-blind populations (see **Table 2** for details on current funding for independent living), but additional state funding will be needed to provide the expanded services.

We spoke to representatives from several of these centers. While they indicated that demand for services would increase under the bill, they were unable to provide estimates of the increase or the cost to provide expanded services.

- *Complaint Process* – The bill provides for a complaint process for applicants or recipients of commission services who are dissatisfied with any action taken or decision made regarding these services. After a complaint is submitted, the individual may choose to resolve the dispute through mediation conducted by a qualified and impartial mediator, with costs paid by the commission. If the dispute is still unresolved, the individual may request a three-person arbitration panel, with one member chosen by the complainant, one by the executive director, and one who is an impartial hearing officer.

It is unclear how often this process would be utilized, and thus difficult to generate a total cost estimate. Costs for mediators and arbitrators vary but can generally cost in the range of \$1,000 to \$2,000 per day.

- *Braille Instructor Certification* – The bill requires that the commission administer a statewide program to certify individuals who are qualified to teach Braille to blind and visually impaired individuals, including those attending elementary and secondary schools. There are currently providers (school systems and Regional Education Service Agencies) approved by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission to offer special education visual impairment endorsements to teachers in elementary and secondary schools. It is unclear what costs would be incurred by the commission to certify those with an endorsement or to certify those providing braille instruction to individuals outside of a school setting.
- *Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE)* – The bill also requires the commission to provide technical assistance to assist GaDOE and local boards of education in the provision of auxiliary aids and services to blind or visually impaired students and their parents by complying with the federal ADA and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
- *Deaf-Blind Organization* – The commission may contract with an organization knowledgeable on deaf-blind issues for services and techniques that lead to maximum independence and employment for individuals with both hearing and vision loss. The cost for this potential contract is unknown.

New Business Enterprise Program

As a note, the bill transfers the licensing of blind individuals to operate vending facilities from GVRA to the commission. The bill makes GVRA responsible for licensing individuals with other disabilities to operate vending facilities. However, GVRA indicated that all individuals licensed through BEP are blind or visually impaired. We did not estimate the cost of GVRA creating a new BEP program for individuals with disabilities other than blind or visual impairments.

Respectfully,



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State Auditor



Richard Dunn, Director
Office of Planning and Budget