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Testimony of John Oliveira
Commissioner for the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
Fiscal Year 2026 Budget
March 25, 2025

Hello, Chair Kennedy, Chair Tyler, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

My name is John Oliveira, and I am the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Healey-Driscoll Administration's proposed Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) budget and its crucial support for Massachusetts residents who are legally blind.

House 1 recommends funding MCB at \$30.8 million, which is a \$368,000 increase - about a 1% rise over last year's budget. This investment will allow us to continue our critical work helping individuals who are legally blind achieve independence and full participation in the community.

During this past year, MCB provided 1:1 training to our Vision Rehabilitation therapists to give them foundational skills in teaching individuals how to use the Apple iPhones or iPads. Consumers were also able to supplement this training at the Carroll Center for the Blind and Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Our Vision Rehabilitation therapists have also worked with consumers on using Meta Glasses to better access information about their surroundings. MCB's Orientation and Mobility unit continued to provide orientation and mobility services relating to using the cane and other mobility travel aids. The Orientation and Mobility unit is currently developing a town hall to educate consumers regarding various guide dog schools.

Key Highlights of the FY26 Budget:

- **New Social Worker Positions:** The budget includes \$250,000 to create three new social worker positions. These positions will help enhance regional access to services, ensuring that individuals across the Commonwealth receive the support they need, no matter where they live.

- One of the positions is a social worker in the Springfield/Western Massachusetts area. This social worker will help alleviate the high caseloads experienced by the current staff in this part of the state.
- The second position is a vision rehabilitation therapist which will double the capacity of skills training in central Massachusetts. This vision rehabilitation therapist will go into consumers' homes and provide essential independent living skills training so that they can maintain their independence and live in the community they are familiar with.
- The third position will cover the City of Boston and surrounding towns including as far as the metro west area and south of Boston. This social worker/housing specialist will provide support for consumers who are currently unhoused and will serve as an advocate and assist in completing applications and locating suitable housing options along with social work case management. This position will fill a need that has been growing over the past several years and will be vital to bring consumers to a position where they can benefit from our Social Rehabilitation services.
- **Workforce and Provider Support:** The budget also supports the MCB workforce by annualizing collective bargaining agreements and provider rate increases. This is vital for maintaining a strong, well-equipped team to provide specialized, high-quality, and individualized services.

With these resources, MCB will continue to provide the following essential services:

- **Social Rehabilitation:** Offering skills training to help individuals live independently. We currently have approximately 2,250 active cases in our Social Rehabilitation program.
 - These services include vision rehabilitation therapist services such as cooking safely, managing your home with limited vision, laundry tasks, managing your monthly expenses using assistive technology or other adapted methods, adjustment to blindness counseling, orientation and mobility, and low vision magnification devices.
- **Vocational Rehabilitation:** Assisting individuals in achieving or retaining employment, with a focus on higher-wage opportunities. MCB is currently serving 982 Vocational Rehabilitation consumers.
 - These services include education, such as college or certificate training programs, and extensive independent living skills training such as record keeping, orientation and mobility, cooking safely, and a variety of other adaptive skills and low vision trainings.
- **Turning 22 Program:** Providing specialized services for young adults, including those who are DeafBlind or have additional disabilities. MCB is currently serving 1,100 consumers in this program. This program offers various residential services, case

management, and day programming to support them in living in a setting that is most appropriate for them.

Regarding the agency's federally funded programs, Vocational Rehabilitation, the Older Independent Blind program, and supported employment, we have received the funding expected to this point. These funds support services to consumers and cover personnel costs. However, given the broad swath of impending cuts under discussion by Congress, we are carefully monitoring federal budget developments, including via professional organizations such as the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation and the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind.

Our programs make a significant difference in the lives of the residents we serve. We receive consistent positive feedback from our consumers about the life-changing support we provide.

Looking ahead, we know the need for our services will continue to grow. Age-related vision loss is the leading cause of blindness in Massachusetts, and as our population ages, the number of people experiencing vision loss increases requiring MCB to provide the essential independent living rehabilitation services. Investing in three additional personnel will help reduce caseloads in western Massachusetts and double the number of rehabilitation therapists in central Massachusetts, allowing more consumers to receive additional visits and training. The addition of the housing specialist will provide a dedicated social worker to focus on the unhoused population in the blind community in Boston and the surrounding area.

By investing now, we are ensuring Massachusetts will be more accessible and supportive for everyone.

I am deeply grateful for the Legislature's ongoing commitment to individuals who are legally blind. Your support is crucial and makes a lasting impact on the lives of thousands of Massachusetts residents.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Oliveira". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" and last name "Oliveira" clearly distinguishable.

John Oliveira
Commissioner