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Testimony of John Oliveira
Acting Commissioner for the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind
Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
May 9, 2023

Good morning, Chair Kennedy, Chair Livingstone, and members of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities. As you may know, I am John Oliveira, Acting Commissioner of Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on MCB's priorities and initiatives, in addition to sharing more information about the Commission.

MCB has been serving residents of the Commonwealth who are blind since 1906. Helen Keller was one of the first commissioners.

Today, MCB serves more than 30,000 residents who are legally blind and DeafBlind. Our mission is to provide them with access to employment opportunities and social rehabilitation with the goal of increasing their independence and community participation.

The charts attached to my testimony show the breakdown of our consumers by county and age. More than two-thirds of the residents we serve are age 60 or older, with the average age being 81. Age-related vision impairment exceeds any other etiology in Massachusetts.

Per Section 136 of Chapter 6 of the Massachusetts General Laws, all eye care providers licensed in the Commonwealth are required to report within 30 days all cases of legal blindness to MCB. Our Central Registration team then registers the patient, and the case is assigned to a counselor.

MCB has three principal services that support our mission:

- **Social Rehabilitation** – Promote and support independent living in a community-based setting
- **Vocational Rehabilitation** – Prepare consumers to engage in competitive integrated employment or supported employment and achieve economic self-sufficiency
- **Turning 22** – Provide residential care, case management, and specialized services for DeafBlind and multi-disabled consumers

MCB also has five programs to support those services:

- **Employment Services** – Employment Services Specialists prepare consumers for the job search process, including resume development, cover letter and business correspondence creation, mock interviewing, and employment networking strategies.
 - *Summer Internship Program* – 2023 marks the 19th year of this unique public-private partnership that creates valuable opportunities for high school and college students who are legally blind. Approximately 70 students have signed up for this summer's program.
 - *Visions of Employment Webinar* – Employers are invited to join MCB every fall to learn about the support our agency provides before, during and after the hiring process.
 - *Virtual Reverse Job Fair* – Job-ready candidates introduce themselves and present their skills and experiences to hiring managers and industry professionals.
- **Orientation & Mobility (O&M)** – Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists assist consumers with long cane training, public transportation, orientation to new environments, GPS applications, and more. The O&M department is active in providing in-services for human guide training around the Commonwealth, in addition to proudly organizing MCB's annual White Cane Awareness Day celebration.
- **Vending Facilities Program** – Operating under the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act, this program prepares interested consumers for a challenging and rewarding career in concession management. Currently, MCB has more than two dozen vendors who operate stands at federal and state buildings across the Commonwealth. With more remote employees resulting in less foot traffic to buildings, MCB is working to innovate

these locations, so they remain profitable for the blind vendors. The agency is investing in 24/7 self-check-out micro-markets, which allow the vendor to remain open for business around the clock without having to staff the counter. The anticipated increase in sales could result in more income for the blind vendor. The first micro-market opened at the stand located right here in the State House in March.

- **Older Independent Blind** – Federal funds are used to provide independent living services to people ages 55 and older who are blind and visually impaired.
- **Assistive Technology** – This unit provides assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices and technical consulting to consumers to help in the workplace, classroom, or with the management of their home.

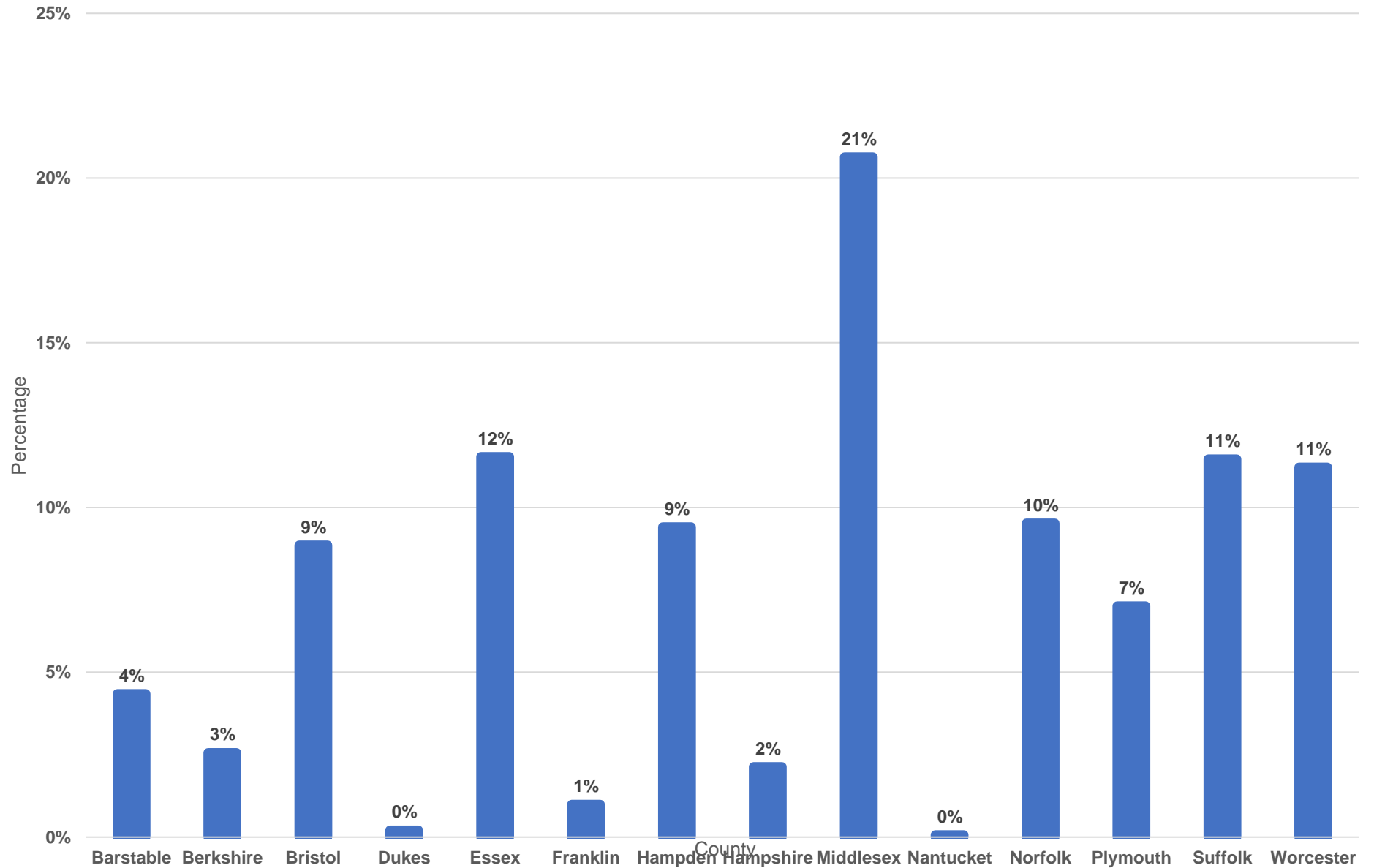
MCB will continue providing important social, vocational, and residential programs, while seeking opportunities for continued innovation.

In my 35 years working at MCB, we have always been a tight-knit agency. We have a great staff of approximately 130 employees who are committed to working together to serve the people of Massachusetts who are blind and visually impaired.

I am truly humbled to have been named Acting Commissioner by Secretary Walsh and I thank her and the entire Healey-Driscoll Administration team for their commitment to MCB and the community we serve.

I thank you for your partnership and the opportunity to testify here today. I look forward to our ongoing work together, and I am pleased to take any questions from the Committee.

MCB Consumer Breakdown by County



MCB Consumer Breakdown by Age

