

Orlando Sentinel

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*Fund the futures of kids with vision loss:
 From The Community*

By Meg Prewitt, Guest Columnist
 November 22, 2015

During last summer's special legislative session, state lawmakers took steps to partially fund a school-age program for children, ages 6 to 13, who live with vision loss. The funding, in the amount of \$1 million, was allocated to the Florida Association of Agencies Serving the Blind — a statewide network made up of 16 private, community-based agencies, of which Lighthouse Central Florida is one.

It is important to point out that of that \$1 million, only \$500,000 was recurring — an amount that does not go far enough to serve upwards of 900 students statewide within this age group.

As a volunteer leader at Lighthouse, I, along with my colleagues cheered this partial funding as a good first step, but because of the depth and breadth of the need statewide, we must again call on state legislators to fully fund this crucial children's program.



Here's why it's so important: Direct intervention services from FAASB agencies provide critical supplemental skills to the core academic curriculum received by children through the public-school system. This expanded core curriculum reflects best-practice educational standards for children with vision impairment and blindness, and it has been determined necessary to support their ability to succeed in school, to live with greater function and independence in daily life, and to prepare for a future of contributions to their communities.

Right now there is a six-year gap between children exiting vision-specific early-intervention programs and the start of teen transition programs. That is simply too long to allow these children the missed opportunity to build relationships and receive the critical expanded core curriculum training that will support their ability to succeed in school and function with greater independence in daily family and community life.

These children deserve the very best chance at success — that's why we are seeking an additional \$3 million to fund the gap in services for children ages 6 to 13.

We need to raise children who are confident, educated, independent and employable in the future. That means there can be no gaps in vision-specific services for children living and learning with vision loss.

Recent developments in the state Senate have made us optimistic that our voices will be heard.

Thanks to the leadership of Senate President Andy Gardiner, several bills are currently being considered in the Senate that would enhance early intervention for young children and employment opportunities for working-age Floridians who live with a physical or developmental disability, or both.

Termed the Cradle to Career Pathway to Economic Independence for People with Unique Abilities, the legislative package contains sound policy and has the makings to be a hallmark moment in Gardiner's tenure as Senate president.

With a young son living with Down syndrome, Gardiner is personally vested in the issue. He recently released this statement: "Instead of focusing on limitations, these bills celebrate the fact that each person is blessed with unique gifts and talents that can benefit businesses and contribute to communities across Florida. We should encourage and challenge people with unique abilities to utilize all of the resources our state has to offer as they journey toward economic independence."

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We couldn't agree more. The independence that the Senate's "cradle to career pathway" legislation seeks to promote for working-age Floridians living with a disability starts with youth initiatives like the school-age program, which pushes academic, social and independent life-skills development for children living with one or more disabilities ... including vision loss.

Let's teach our children early on to view their vision loss as a unique ability. These formative school years for children ages 6 to 13 are a time identified by educational experts as especially crucial in developing confident, independent adolescents, ready to move forward as educated, employable, successful community members.

Visual impairment doesn't have to break the human spirit. Through teaching, training, caring and compassion, Lighthouse Central Florida gives people with sight impairment the skills they need to achieve their full potential to live independently and increase their quality of life.

Since 1976, Lighthouse has provided education, life skills, job training and placement to more than 100,000 people with sight impairment and their families.

We urge Gardiner, his state Senate and Florida House colleagues to support the full funding of a school-age program for children living with vision loss at the amount of \$3 million. This investment would significantly enhance a learning experience that leads to rewarding economic futures.

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