

Dated: February 1, 2023

The Sherlock Center Vision Services Joint Task Force
Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Dear Speaker Shekarchi and President Ruggerio;

We are pleased to provide you with the following summary of findings and recommendations of the Sherlock Center Vision Services Joint Task Force (the “*Task Force*”).

The Task Force consisted of the following members of the General Assembly:

- Representative Julie Casimiro, Co-Chair
- Senator Valarie Lawson, Co-Chair
- Representative Thomas Noret
- Representative William O'Brien
- Representative Raymond Hull
- Senator Sandra Cano
- Senator Frank Lombardo
- Senator Frank Ciccone

The purpose of the Task Force was to determine how to continue the operational funding for the Sherlock Center Vision Services.

Accordingly, over the course of seven (7) meetings that began in September, 2021 and ended in April, 2022, the Task Force heard testimony, and reviewed presentation material, pertaining to critical issues related to vision services and the Sherlock Center including funding, staffing, governance and structure, the need for operational improvements, and the use of alternative programs by certain municipalities. Such testimony and material was presented by various individuals, subject matter experts, and organizations, including:

- The Executive Director of the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities at Rhode Island College.
- The Interim Executive Director of External Affairs and Communications at Rhode Island College.
- The Deputy Commissioner for System Transformation at the Rhode Island Department of Education
- The Director of Office of Student, Community & Academic Supports at the Rhode Island Department of Education
- The President of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals
- The President of the Howard Union of Teachers
- The Rhode Island School Superintendents Association
- The Rhode Island Parents of Blind and Visually Impaired Children
- The Rhode Island Vision Education and Services Program Educators

Dated: February 1, 2023

- The Director of the Rhode Island School for the Deaf.
- The Director of the Rhode Island State Crime Laboratory.
- The Executive Director of Pupil Personnel Services, Cranston Public Schools
- A Teacher of the Visually Impaired, Cranston Public Schools
- The Director of Special Education of the Coventry Public Schools
- The Chair of the Rhode Island Vision Education and Services Program Advisory Board.
- Members of the general public.

We would like to express our gratitude to all members of the Task Force for their willingness to take part in this process, and we appreciate the investment of the time and talent that they graciously provided.

Sincerely,

Julie A. Casimiro
House of Representatives Co-Chairwoman

Valarie J. Lawson
Senate Co-Chairwoman

Dated: February 1, 2023

RIVESP Staffing

The RIVESP staff includes 10 Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs), 1 part-time Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS), and 1 part-time support staff. The Vision Services Coordinator position is currently funded by Rhode Island College. The Sherlock Center continues to have two open positions posted for COMs. To date, there have been no applications for those positions. The Sherlock Center also has a standing part-time posting for a TVI who could help with assessments, as needed.

RIVESP Financial Projections for Fiscal Year 2023

REVENUE	\$1,556,630
EXPENDITURES	\$1,825,160
LOSS	(\$268,530)

Funding

- This is the primary concern
- Current funding is based on a contract with RIDE which expires in 2025.
- Sherlock is paid under a fee-for-service model by LEAs and Sherlock receives federal IDEA funds from RIDE.
- The fee for service model is a challenge.
- There needs to be a predictable, set budget for the RIVESP program to ensure funding for overall operations, technical assistance, and professional development.
- The RIVESP program goes out to bid every 3 years.

Options/Initiatives to Address Funding Concerns:

1. Consider the Rhode Island School for the Deaf funding as a potential model:
 - Create a \$3 Million line-item included in RIC's approved budget.
 - Access Federal and State grant applications through RIDE and RIC, as appropriate.
 - RIC to pursue capital funds for Sherlock, as needed.
 - This would be a state-funded model and any municipality may participate.
2. Consider utilizing the "URI Crime Lab" as a potential funding model (Similar to the Rhode Island School for the Deaf).
 - RIC could receive a direct appropriation to operate the RIVESP program as URI does for its Crime Lab.
 - The URI Crime Lab also relies on federal grants that pass-through state agencies to pay for equipment and training, but not for hiring staff since grant money can disappear.
 - This would be a state-funded model and any municipality may participate.
3. Consider using the IDEA Part B State Discretionary Funds (\$684,600, which is allocated to the Sherlock Center) to offset costs incurred by school districts that hire their own TVIs. Any IDEA Part B State Discretionary Funds that are not utilized by school districts that hire their own TVIs shall be re-allocated to the RIVESP program.

Dated: February 1, 2023

4. Suggest that Sherlock present to the House Education Committee and/or the House Finance Committee as well as the Senate Education Committee and/or Senate Finance Committee.

RIVESP Services and Program Overview:

The Vision Program is currently providing services to 32 LEAs and Charter Schools. This year, two new districts, East Providence and West Warwick, rejoined the Sherlock Center for vision services in September. In January 2023, Coventry entered into a service agreement with the Sherlock Center for Vision services.

Providence, Cranston, and Newport do **NOT** use Sherlock for TVI. Providence and Cranston have their own TVIs. All students who require services from TVIs have received such services.

RIVESP provides COM services to the following 9 school districts: Westerly, Chariho, North Providence, Northwest Regional, Woonsocket, Newport County Regional, Narragansett, Jamestown, and Portsmouth.

RIVESP will continue to strengthen its program to provide COM services for those school districts who receive TVI services.

Suggested Governance and Structure of RIVESP

- Appoint a full-time director who will:
 - Have full decision-making authority.
 - Develop and manage the program’s budget.
 - Participate in the collective bargaining process.
 - Develop staffing policies to ensure the highest quality education.
 - Coordinate with RIVESP.
- Establish a board of directors or advisory council to:
 - Provide community oversight.
 - Identify the educational needs of students.
 - Oversee educational policies to meet the needs of the students.

Next Steps

- Develop equitable and efficient caseloads for the TVIs and the COMs.
- Further develop and implement the teacher evaluation process.
- Review and clarify assessment requirements/forms/processes.
- Develop a district guidebook and staff procedural manual.
- Review and adopt, as applicable, other states’ approaches to COM service provision and available programs that support a pathway to different levels of certification of COMS and implement accordingly.

Dated: February 1, 2023

Final Recommendation of the Task Force

Of the options/initiatives that the Task Force considered in order to address the funding concerns related to the Sherlock Center Vision Services, the Task Force recommends utilization of a funding model that would entail the following:

- Creating a \$3 Million line-item included in RIC's approved budget.
- Accessing Federal and State grant applications through RIDE and RIC, as appropriate.
- RIC pursuing capital funds for Sherlock, as needed.
- State funding together with funding from any municipality that may decide to participate.