

**Joseph J. McNulty, Executive Director
Helen Keller National Center**

The Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) is authorized through the Helen Keller National Center Act (CFDA No. 84.128) and is under the jurisdiction of the Labor/HHS Appropriations Subcommittee in the House and Senate. It is currently funded at \$9.1 million. The Center is requesting an increase of \$2 million in FY 2014.

The HKNC Act identifies five purposes of the Center:

- (1) to provide specialized intensive services, or any other services, at the Center or anywhere else in the United States, which are necessary to encourage the maximum personal development of any individual who is deaf-blind;**
- (2) to train family members of individuals who are deaf-blind at the Center or anywhere else in the United States, in order to assist family members in providing and obtaining appropriate services for the individual who is deaf-blind;**
- (3) to train professionals and allied personnel at the Center or anywhere else in the United States to provide services to individuals who are deaf-blind; and**
- (4) to conduct applied research, development programs, and demonstrations with respect to communication techniques, teaching methods, aids and devices, and delivery of services.**
- (5) to maintain a national registry of individuals who are Deaf-Blind.**

To accomplish its mission, the Center operates a comprehensive rehabilitation training program at its headquarters in Sands Point, NY, and ten (10) regional offices in MA, NY, MD, GA, IL, KS, TX, CO, WA and CA.

The following is a breakdown of HKNC's funding for fiscal years 1999-2013:

<u>Fiscal Year</u>	<u>Appropriation</u>
1999	\$ 8,550,000
2000	\$ 8,550,000
2001	\$ 8,717,000
2002	\$ 8,717,000
2003	\$ 8,660,000
2004	\$ 8,666,000
2005	\$10,581,000
2006	\$ 8,511,000
2007	\$ 8,511,000
2008	\$ 8,362,000
2009	\$ 8,362,000
2010	\$ 9,181,000
2011	\$ 9,163,000
2012	\$ 9,146,000
2013	\$ 8,680,000 *

* Reflects a 5.1% reduction through sequestration.

With the exception of a one-time increase of \$2 million in FY 2005 and a \$1 million increase in 2010, HKNC has been level funded for the last 15 years. Had the Center received an annual COLA over this period of time, its funding would be at more than \$12 million – approximately 40% above its current level.

In June of 2011, the WESTAT Corporation completed a two year evaluation of HKNC on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration. Among its conclusions were that, "HKNC appears to be meeting its mandate to provide services to any deaf-blind individual, family members, and service providers, and conduct applied research and demonstrations" and that, "the preponderance of evidence from multiple data sources indicates that HKNC is providing services to address the vocational and independent living needs of D-B individuals, and many stakeholders familiar with HKNC's work consider HKNC to be the 'gold standard' for provision of services to D-B individuals."

If the Center is to continue to successfully meet its Congressional mandate, it must address two significant challenges: a rapidly growing number of people eligible for its services and a critical shortage of personnel across the country trained to work with people who are dual sensory impaired.

At the time HKNC was established in 1967, it was estimated there were approximately 70,000 individuals in the United States who were Deaf-Blind. Due to a combination of medical advances that have enabled significantly disabled infants to survive into adulthood, improved genetic testing to better identify people with dual sensory impairments, and the "Graying of America," a 2007 study conducted by the Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University estimated that the number of individuals in this country with a combined vision and hearing impairment is nearly 1.2 million, the overwhelming majority of whom are 55 years of age and older.

For a Deaf-Blind person, the greatest barrier to finding employment and living a full, productive life is the lack of people with the skills to help him or her reach their full potential. The shortage of highly qualified personnel in Special Education and Rehabilitation is well documented. In the area of low incidence disabilities, particularly Deaf-Blindness, it is at crisis levels.

A good example of this is the recently created National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program (NDBEDP) whereby the Federal Government has set aside up to \$10 million each year for the training in and purchase of telecommunications equipment for people who are Deaf-Blind. Recent advances

in technology have led to greater community participation and opportunities for employment in careers that were not thought possible as recently as ten years ago. People with combined vision and hearing loss are now able to communicate with their families, neighbors and coworkers and can access information on the web, e-mailing, instant messaging and joining in chat rooms and list serves. Unfortunately, due to the small number of assistive technology instructors capable of working with individuals who are Deaf-Blind, there are many people unable to take advantage of this program.

With the support of short term funding from two foundations, the Center has recently established two significant programs to address this crucial need for qualified personnel. The first is a series of one week, “train the trainer” seminars that prepare assistive technology instructors to effectively teach people who are Deaf-Blind on the use of various types of equipment available through the NDBEDP such as iOS devices, smart tablets and refreshable braille displays. The second is the Information, Research and Professional Development (IRPD) Department at HKNC which is creating an expanded web site that will offer, among other things, distance learning opportunities and on-line courses in a variety of disciplines and content areas.

Unfortunately, both these projects are only funded for one more year and will be discontinued without the more permanent funding provided by an increase in HKNC’s Federal appropriation.

Helen Keller was the first Deaf-Blind person in history to earn a college degree, graduating from Radcliffe College in 1904. It was fifty years before Robert Smithdas followed in her footsteps and graduated from St. John’s University. Bob went on to earn a Master’s in Rehabilitation Counseling at New York University, becoming the first Deaf-Blind person to receive a graduate degree.

Today, it is not a question of whether or not Deaf-Blind people can live and work in their communities. There are Deaf-Blind people across the country with high school diplomas and college degrees, holding down jobs in a wide range of careers, and enjoying full, rich lives. It is up to us as a society to give them the resources of a quality education, vocational and independent living training and sufficient follow-up supports to reach their full potential.

An increase of \$2 million in HKNC’s FY 2014 appropriation will provide the Center with the capacity to maintain and expand its programs designed to increase the number of professionals throughout the United States trained to work with individuals with dual sensory impairments.