

- SUBJECT:** Providing co-navigation services to individuals who are deaf-blind
- COMMITTEE:** Human Services — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 10 ayes – Hull, Manuel, A. Davis, Dorazio, C. Morales, Noble, Richardson, Rose, Schatzline, Swanson
- 0 nays
- 1 absent — Slawson
- WITNESSES:** For - Cyral Miller, Alliance of and for Visually Impaired Texans; Jennifer Bailey; Chrispy Polanco; Kim Powers (*Registered, but did not testify*: Marc Hoskins, Disability Rights Texas; Jeff Miller, Disability Rights Texas; Amanda Tollett, Texas Medical Association; Sabrina Gonzalez Saucedo, The Arc of Texas)
- Against - None
- On - Ron Lucey, Governor’s Committee on People with Disabilities (*Registered, but did not testify*: Keisha Rowe, Health and Human Services Commission)
- DIGEST:** HB 645 would require the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to operate a statewide program to provide co-navigation services for individuals who are deaf-blind. The bill would define "co-navigation services" as assistance that enables an individual who is deaf-blind to physically access their environment and make informed decisions. The term would include the provision of visual and environmental information, sight guiding, and facilitation of communication using the individual's preferred language and mode of communication. The term would exclude services related to personal care, ordinary errands, decision-making, teaching, or formal interpretation in medical, business, or legal settings.
- The bill would require that co-navigation services be provided by

pecially trained individuals known as co-navigators, whom HHSC would be required to reimburse. The executive commissioner of HHSC would be required to adopt reimbursement rates that used a tiered wage scale based on a co-navigator's training, fluency, and skill in communication and mobility techniques used with individuals who are deaf-blind. HHSC also would be required to monitor co-navigator compliance with program rules, develop non-state funding sources to reduce reliance on state resources, and provide funds and technical assistance for training co-navigators and individuals who are deaf-blind who used the services.

The bill would authorize the executive commissioner to create an advisory committee to assist with the development and management of the program. The committee would have to include individuals who are deaf-blind and other stakeholders. The executive commissioner also would be authorized to adopt any rules needed to efficiently operate the program, maximize the number of individuals served, and ensure adequate training of co-navigators in the program.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2025. The bill would require HHSC to adopt necessary rules and begin to operate the program by September 1, 2026.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 645 would fill a critical service gap and benefit the state's deaf-blind community by providing structured co-navigation services that promote autonomy and independence. Many Texans who are deaf-blind currently lack access to trained professionals who can assist them in navigating both physical spaces and daily life tasks, often relying on family members, friends, or untrained, unpaid volunteers. This is particularly true in rural areas, where resources for the deaf-blind community are scarce or nonexistent. Providing co-navigation services tailored to each individual's preferred mode of communication would enhance a deaf-blind individual's mobility, communication, informed decision-making, and ability to engage with their communities, allowing these individuals to live with greater dignity and self-determination.

CRITICS

By creating a new state-led program, HB 645 could increase government

SAY: responsibility and spending rather than promoting private or charitable solutions and innovations in the co-navigation space.

NOTES: According to the Legislative Budget Board, HB 645 would have a negative impact of about \$2.2 million through the biennium.