

(H. B. 3004)

(No. 238)

(Approved November 3, 2006)

AN ACT

To designate the first week of November of every year as “Deaf-blind Persons Week in Puerto Rico.”

STATEMENT OF MOTIVES

Deaf-blindness is a multi-sensory impairment of persons with hearing and vision loss, according to the available literature. The loss of these two senses does not necessarily have to be complete. The group of totally deaf-blind persons is very reduced, consisting only of approximately between 5 and 10% of the collective total of deaf-blind persons. Therefore, the majority of deaf-blind persons retain some hearing and or sight.

It is believed that the proportion of deaf-blind persons in advanced western countries is of 15 out of every 100,000 persons. In addition, it is estimated that up to 20% cases may be congenital. Learning to communicate through touch is the main factor that makes difficult the social integration of deaf-blind persons. Deaf-blindness, as a disability, is the cause of multiple barriers, not only sensory, but also of mobility and orientation.

It is estimated that there are two principal causes of deaf-blindness: 1) congenital deaf-blindness, which appears before speech develops (relingual (sic) phase.) One of the main causes of this modality are maternal viral infections, such as rubella, meningitis, syphilis and premature birth. If Rubella acts on the fetus, especially during the first months of gestation, it may cause severe short or long term damage. The use of strong drugs by the future mother during gestation may be another cause of congenital deaf-blindness; and 2) acquired deaf-blindness,

caused mainly by the Usher syndrome. The Usher syndrome is a congenital hereditary and recessive illness (that is, the child is born with it, but problems appear later). Both parents must have a certain gene in order to transmit the Usher syndrome. Its symptoms appear anywhere between infancy and the third age.

Loss of several degrees of the senses of sight and hearing, in other words, deaf-blindness, affect immediate knowledge of what takes place in the surroundings, because the reach of sensory perception is much more restricted, which limits interaction with physical, intellectual and emotional surroundings.

In extreme cases, which are of total deaf-blindness, the world is restricted to what the person can reach with their fingertips. Starting from the fingertips, the person may possibly extend his/her world once again. The adaptation and integration of deaf-blind persons is based upon their intensive utilization of all the sensory resources they still have: visual and/or auditory remnants, touch, smell and taste. But it is their sense of touch that acquires a special relevance in their need for communication, learning, and acquisition of knowledge.

The sense of touch can be developed and become more helpful than is generally believed, as well as help us gather more information. Of the traditional five senses, the sense of touch is in fact the only one without which we would not be able to live. Let us imagine, for example, that we cannot feel the spoon we are holding to eat, the chair on which we sit, the bed on which we lie, or the floor on which we stand. Touch is the sense that keeps us in constant contact with reality, since it extends all over our skin, while vision depends on the eyes, hearing on the organs of hearing, smell on the nose, and taste on the tongue.

We receive sensations of pressure, cold, heat, etc. all over our skin. It is interesting that the most sensible part of our body is the tip of the tongue. If we test it, we shall see that it can even perceive the Braille System dots with more

precision than the fingertips. We all have proof that touch is used as a means for obtaining information from a very early age if we remember that very small children usually explore objects by taking them into their mouth.

After the tip of the tongue, the most sensitive area is the fingertips, which is the greatest treasure for any person who is deaf-blind.

It has been calculated that, with just five fingers, the human hand is a wonderful instrument, capable of assuming 300 million potentially useful positions.

Proof of this is the large amount of manual alphabets in the world, which are different from one country to another. The hand is not only useful for communication, but it is also an excellent means of obtaining information. Perhaps we can become aware of this if we stop to think about the countless amount of things we touch in a single day. Surely, a few of us can remember having contact with a certain object, but the deaf-blind person gradually develops the sense of touch as an information center. Elements as important as the mind and memory participate in this process.

On the other hand, we have the Braille System, which is an excellent means for increasing the level of knowledge of deaf-blind persons, as it is with blind persons.

A deaf-blind person never ceases to discover new ways to use his/her hands. Through practice, he/she perfects mental concentration and interpretation, while developing new muscular, neural, and cerebral habits that shall enable the capacity to communicate in society and to be able to cope with his/her surroundings.

Due to the importance of raising awareness about deaf-blindness in our Island, the present Legislature of Puerto Rico deems it of the utmost importance to establish and make legally official the designation of the first week of November of every year as “Deaf-blind Persons Week in Puerto Rico.”

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF PUERTO RICO:

Section 1.- The first week of November of every year is hereby designated as “Deaf-blind Persons Week in Puerto Rico.”

Section 2.- The Governor of Puerto Rico, by means of proclamation, shall encourage the People of Puerto Rico to observe the first week of November of every year as “Deaf-blind Persons Week in Puerto Rico.”

Section 3.- The Department of State of Puerto Rico, in coordination with the Department of Education, the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, the University of Puerto Rico, through the Technology Assistance Program, and with private and nonprofit entities that work with this population, shall take the necessary steps to comply with the purpose of this Act through the organization and holding of official activities that highlight the need to develop independent living for this sector.

Section 4.- None of the provisions of this Act shall be understood as lessening the freedom of any private or public entity to organize or sponsor activities on any date, including the first week of November, that tend toward the improvement of the quality of life of the deaf-blind population.

Section 5.- This Act shall take effect immediately after its approval.

CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify to the Secretary of State that the following Act No. 238 (H.B. 3004) of the 4rd Session of the 15th Legislature of Puerto Rico:

AN ACT to designate the first week of November of every year as “Deaf-blind Persons Week in Puerto Rico,”

has been translated from Spanish to English and that the English version is correct.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, today 13th of March of 2007.

Francisco J. Domenech
Director