

WDBTAP, the Wisconsin Deaf-Blind Technical Assistance Program, has been a godsend for my son Mac and for me.

To explain the impact, I first need to share Mac's story.

Mac is 15 years old. He was born premature with prenatal alcohol exposure that injured his eyes, auditory system, and overall neurological development. As a result, he lives with cortical visual impairment (CVI), cortical/cerebral hearing impairments, and many complex medical conditions. He was abandoned at birth by his developmentally delayed mother and entered Wisconsin's foster care system.

When Mac came to us at 17 months old, he was the size of a 3-month-old infant, severely malnourished, and medically fragile. Doctors told us the damage was too great, and that he might never do anything. But Mac proved them wrong. He fought to thrive and never let anything stop him.

Early Diagnoses and Challenges

By age 3, Mac had been diagnosed with autism and qualified for early intervention services, including supports from the Wisconsin Autism Project. His medical records also showed optic nerve hypoplasia, which made him eligible for special education supports under visual impairment, OHI, and speech/language categories.

Hearing tests revealed significant loss in his left ear. His ABR showed that sounds reached the brainstem, but in real-world environments—with noise and confusion—his brain could not process speech effectively. This is common in fetal alcohol syndrome, with auditory processing disorders affecting 80–90% of individuals.

In school, we quickly learned he could not rely on vision or hearing like most children. Yet, because Wisconsin's IEP categories don't recognize auditory processing disorders, his needs were often dismissed. The lack of appropriate accommodations created barriers from the start.

Losing and Fighting for Supports

When Mac entered kindergarten, he was at grade level with proper supports. But after a change in special education leadership, many of his accommodations and assistive technology were removed. His learning began to decline.

Mac's health also made regular attendance nearly impossible. Illness and weight loss kept him homebound for much of the year. Even then, virtual technology was inaccessible to him without accommodations for both vision and hearing.

At home, I unknowingly acted as an intervener—repeating everything said so he could process it, modifying lighting and positioning, and discovering how capable he was when taught in the right ways.

The Turning Point: WDBTAP

Everything began to change when I called DPI and was referred to the Wisconsin Deaf-Blind Technical Assistance Project (WDBTAP).

For the first time, someone understood Mac's combination of neurological vision and hearing challenges. They explained Wisconsin's new deaf-blind qualifier and advocated for Mac and educated the school District. Through their expertise, Mac finally qualified as deaf-blind. This hopefully would give us access to services, training, and resources that we had been fighting for since kindergarten.

With these supports, he was able to take the Forward Exam in 7th grade—with his long-time OT and speech therapist delivering the test verbally at home—and scored proficient at the 3rd/4th grade level despite years of being denied school-based instruction.

WDBTAP not only gave us validation but also tools, assistive technology referrals, and hope. Their staff encouraged me on days when I wanted to quit the fight because, unlike others, they "got it."

The Medical Reality

Further testing revealed the depth of Mac's challenges. He has a 16p11.2 chromosomal duplication, a YY1 gene deletion, cervical instability from a malformed C1 vertebra compressing his brainstem, and complex neurological issues affecting vision, hearing, breathing, and movement.

Despite his medical fragility, Mac has proven his intelligence.

After life-saving surgery this year, he regained clearer speech and showed strengths that educators had long overlooked.

Dr. Christine Roman, a CVI expert, assessed him as a "trapped child" whose abilities had been underestimated for years due to lack of appropriate supports.

Why WDBTAP Matters

WDBTAP trains teachers, supports families, connects us with assistive technology, and provides expertise in CVI and deaf blindness and other auditory processing, and education about intervener services. Students like Mac risk being mislabeled as "uneducable" when, in reality, they can learn some at grade level—if they are presumed competent and supported appropriately.

Now, with WDBTAP scheduled to close on September 30, 2025, Wisconsin's most vulnerable children will lose their only statewide resource.

Families will have nowhere to turn. Schools will again fail students with combined vision and hearing loss under IDEA and FAPE.

A Plea

Mac's story proves that children with deafblindness are intelligent, capable, and full of potential when given the right supports. Programs like WDBTAP prevent discrimination, provide equity, and unlock opportunities that should never be denied.

Closing WDBTAP will lock children like Mac out of education. Wisconsin must not allow this to happen.

Presume competence.

Protect the right to learn.

Save WDBTAP.

Sincerely,

Ann Yurcek