

April 1, 2024

Elizabeth McGarr

S.F. 5097-Pro

To Senator Ron Letz and the Senate Judiciary and Public Safety Committee:

My name is Elizabeth and this letter is to express my support of bill S.F. 5097. I am a blind mother of a beautiful nine-year-old girl who was born eight weeks prematurely. During her first days in the NICU at St. Joseph's Hospital in Denver Colorado, my emotions, as all new mothers are, mixed and very intense. Along with the joy and anxiety of being a new mother, and the immense gratitude of having a healthy baby despite her early arrival, I felt fear that someone would deem me an unfit parent based on my disability. I had heard of a recent case where a blind mother had asked a typical question about breastfeeding to a nurse in the hospital which led to questions about her and her husband's ability to care for their child. Their baby was taken from them and they had to fight in court to have her returned to them causing unfathomable emotional and financial distress and affecting their ability to bond with their daughter in the first months of her life. I knew this was unlikely to happen to me as my husband was sighted and he would most likely be seen by others to be a competent adult.

As I traversed my first months of my daughter's life, months in which I stayed at home to care for her, that nagging anxiety remained every time I would go out in public, or to a doctor's appointment. I want there to be no reason for other disabled parents to feel what I felt or to experience having their child taken away under a misconception that they cannot parent effectively. I want disabled parents to be able to adopt and foster children and be protected from losing parenting time during custody cases.

The Minnesota legislature has demonstrated its understanding that disabled parents should not be denied a role in raising children merely on the basis of disability (M.S. 518.17 subdivision 1B) However, I believe strongly in S.F 5097's initiative to protect the rights of disabled parents by making petitioners prove the parents unfit based on their behaviors and not because of their disability. Disabled parents need the ability to show how access to supportive resources can alleviate concerns. I support the goal of keeping families together by strengthening legal protections for parents with disabilities.

Thank you for considering my words and I urge the committee to approve this legislation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth McGarr,

Teacher of the Blind and Visually Impaired with Southwest Metro Intermediate Schools