



*Live the life you want.*

Dear Chairman Latz, Vice-chair Goodwin, and Ranking Member Limmer:

I write to urge your support of S.F. 5097 as both a disabled parent and president of an all-volunteer, consumer-advocacy organization with members throughout Minnesota that has been working in the legislative arena to improve opportunities for blind people since 1920.

The sheer number of parents with disabilities in Minnesota shows that disability is not a relevant factor in the ability to raise children. Even so, because our society does not understand disability well, powerful advocates routinely question our ability to retain custody of our children based only upon disabilities without specifics.

One of our members was involved in a very hostile divorce case a few years ago. Despite his full-time job in childcare and his having stayed home to care for his daughter during the first year of her life, attorneys alleged that he was unsafe and the judge denied unsupervised parenting time. His rights to parenting time without interference were restored only after two years and financial ruin from legal expenses.

Having heard about this experience, we received a tearful call from another member just weeks before the birth of her first child. She wanted to ensure that we'd be present for her if she faced similar questions.

The good news today is that this proposed legislative solution does not involve any new funding or programs. Rather, the language amends Minnesota statute to strengthen protections related to adoption, child protection services, and legal custody and parenting time. Beyond the need for someone to provide clear and convincing evidence of specific behaviors that threaten the health or the safety of a child, the bill instructs courts to consider supportive parenting services. When I was a first-time parent, I learned how the simple act of gluing bells to my child's shoes helped me to track him on the playground, feeling for heat and texture to detect a diaper rash, and adding tactile markings to syringes guided me in measuring medication. These lessons, which groups like ours already provide free of charge, will keep disabled parents together with their children.

Thank you for your support of S.F. 5097 to protect the rights of parents with disabilities,

Sincerely,

Corbb O'Connor, President, National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota