

TESTIMONY supporting s.f.5097
Extending Protections and Due Process for Blind and Disabled Parents
Submitted by Steve Jacobson, Edina Minnesota

As a blind parent with two children who are now both self-sufficient adults, I am extremely aware of the need for this legislation. Please help through your support.

The public's understanding of disabilities, especially blindness, is often based upon picturing oneself with that disability. More than once, people have said to me something like "I try to imagine how I could be a parent with my eyes closed, and I just don't know how you do it." During my lifetime, I have seen people act upon their limited view of the capabilities of blind people as though their view, formed without experience or training, was proven fact.

For example, I was traveling with my kids one day when they were still quite young, and we were preparing to cross a street. My kids had been studying in school during that past week about crossing streets. I decided it was a good thing to try to bring what they were learning into their real-world experience. I asked them to watch the light and tell me when they thought we should cross, which they did successfully.

After we crossed, a complete stranger came up to us and, without ever addressing me, thanked my kids for being so grown up and helping their dad across the street. In my experience, it is generally not acceptable for strangers to talk directly with children traveling with their parents without at least checking in with the parent.

In her eyes, there was no recognition of the fact that I had traveled independently for thirty years before raising kids, and that I still do so. The fact that this had been a teaching moment never occurred to her. However, in her mind, My children were taking care of me rather than giving me any credit for raising them. In fact, I was not even treated as she would likely have treated other adults.

Over the years, I have observed that the idea that blindness is defined by closing one's eyes without any training or experience is often present even in those who are well educated. Social workers, medical personnel, and even lawyers and judges sometimes form their opinions in this way. To such people, blindness by itself is enough to raise questions about one's ability to be a good parent without pointing to any specific issue. It can, all by itself, be the reason to grant custody to the other parent without even considering issues associated with that other parent.

This bill does not assume all disabled people are good parents. Not everybody in any group, including those with normal vision, are good parents. It only asks for the same consideration given to others by our legal system and in other areas of human services. If there is an issue that is being raised, it must be specific. Blindness or other disability by itself does not make one a good or bad parent. Also, sometimes there are specific issues that can be easily corrected. That can be resolved before a final ruling is made.

My heart says that this bill should not be needed. Unfortunately, my experience and observations indicate to me that this bill is absolutely necessary to insured that blind parents are treated fairly. Even more important, this bill also increases the safety of kids by making certain that real issues around parenting are examined and considered, rather than having real issues obscured by blanket assumptions about disabled parents. Please, please help by supporting the passage of this bill.