



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Board of EDUCATION AND SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

February 9, 2011

Testimony of:

**Brian S. Sigman
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State of Connecticut
Board of Education and Services for the Blind**

RE: HB 5008 –AN ACT CONCERNING THE QUARANTINE OF BITING GUIDE DOGS

Good morning, Chairman Meyer, Chairman Roy, Senator Roraback, Representative Chapin and distinguished members of the Environment Committee. My name is Brian Sigman and I am the Executive Director of BESB, the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. I am here today to testify in favor of House Bill 5008, An Act Concerning the Quarantine of Biting Guide Dogs.

I wish to begin by emphasizing that the occurrence of guide dogs biting is so very rare that in my two decades of working at BESB, other than this one recent incident which has illustrated the need for such legislation, I do not recall even one situation that suggested any aggression on the part of such well-trained and essential travel companions for people who are blind.

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Indeed, even in this isolated example, it is questionable as to whether the guide dog actually bit a person or whether the person and the dog were both reaching for a Frisbee at the same time, resulting in an unfortunate, but likely non-violent, puncture of the skin. However, since current law requires that any dog that bites must be quarantined, with the exception of police dogs, there was no option for any action other than removing the guide dog from the public for two weeks, effectively quarantining the blind person as well.

No one would argue against the quarantining of any animal that is vicious or in situations where the degree of prior veterinary care and rabies vaccination is unknown. However, for those instances where it is clearly known that a guide dog for a blind person is up-to-date on its rabies vaccine and where veterinary care has been maintained, I am here today to ask that the Legislature please extend the same protection to guide dogs that currently exists in the law for police dogs.

Everyday, because of these loyal, well-trained and talented helpers, people who are blind are able to travel safely in their communities to go to work, buy groceries and participate in community activities. For those who rely upon these service animals to provide cues for when it is safe to cross the street or to alert the traveler of an imminent danger, such as an oncoming obstruction on the side walk, the absence of the dog creates a significant safety concern. Quarantining of the guide dog leaves the traveler with two unfortunate choices: risk traveling to work and other daily activities without the safety of their trained guide or sitting out the two-week period along side their service animal at home. Neither of these options is desirable, and in the very real recent example, the inflexibility of the current law resulted in the isolation of the person along with their dog.

Rigorously applying the law is quite understandable when our government is justifiably concerned with fighting the spread of serious disease. However, that inflexibility is, in itself, a cause for concern when the result is not merely that an animal is made to stay at home, but, in the case of a guide dog, the owner becomes relegated to the four walls of the home as well.

The change being proposed in Raised Bill 5008 still affords adequate protections for all of us who are concerned about the safety of others. Specifically, please note that three conditions must be met for the guide dog and its owner to avoid quarantine – 1) the dog must remain “under the direct supervision, care and control” of its owner, 2) the dog must have been “vaccinated annually” and 3) the dog must be “subject to routine veterinary care.” With all three of these precautions in place, the concerns of the general public are addressed and, on balance, the interests of the person who is blind can also be accommodated.

Please recognize the challenges that people who are blind confront every day and the added burden created by the current law. Please use your authority to remedy the situation by expressing your support for this proposed bill. I thank the Committee for your time and attention and I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

