

Testimony Opposing SB 325 An Act Concerning the Failure to Comply with Mandatory Evacuation Orders

Members of the Public Safety and Security Committee, my name is Jeff Tang, the Membership Coordinator for the Connecticut Citizen's Defense League (CCDL), and a Street Captain in my local Neighborhood Watch, residing in Fairfield. I'm testifying not only on behalf of my own sentiments, but also on behalf of the 2031 CCDL members I represent. I oppose SB 325 because it makes my family and myself less safe, and will harm the State's budget.

While I don't count myself as a "survivalist" of any sort, my father and grandfather taught me the importance of taking care of myself and my family rather than delegating that task to another. My family has weathered several hurricanes in this area, most notably Gloria in 1985, and most recently Irene this past year, and each time we took what we considered appropriate precautions to protect ourselves. As a man accustomed to solving problems, be it home repair or disaster planning, I feel both fear and outrage when I consider SB 325. My fear is at the conditions I and my family would face should we heed a mandatory evacuation order in the midst of a disaster, away from any preparations and removed from any plans we would have made. My outrage is toward the authors of this proposed bill, that they would not only declare that I have no right to protect myself, my family, and my property in an emergency. Instead they would both literally force me to leave should a politician decide it necessary, and make me pay to be taken away against my will.

In 2010, I found myself driving from Greenwich to Stamford during rush hour while it was snowing. The roads were completely impassible--not because of the snow but because of the traffic. I realized that should I ever need to evacuate, even the back roads would be completely clogged, as evacuees reported along the Gulf Coast before Hurricane Katrina. During that drive, I realized that evacuation is an absolute last resort, since it would risk weathering a disaster on the road. I would certainly never dream of staying in my house in the event of a chemical spill or fire, but the most common disasters we face in Connecticut, storms, are best faced at home.

Evacuations, of course, are not proposed lightly, and evacuation planners try to account for the needs of every individual. But such a top-down approach inevitably leaves some to fall through the cracks. For instance, what of an individual requiring oxygen therapy, as my grandmother may soon need? Would officials under mandatory evacuation orders to not only "tell everyone to leave" but actually make everyone leave have the time or patience to account for specialized oxygen equipment? Or would they allow such a person to stay? What of that person's caregivers--would they be allowed to stay, or be punished as criminals because they refuse to abandon family members? My family was able to check in on my grandmother during Hurricane Irene--but what if we were forced from our homes, no discussion possible, as would be the case under an enforced mandatory evacuation notice?

Where would those evacuated go? Rather than waiting out a storm in my home or a neighbor's, would I be forced to "camp" in a high-school gymnasium, like residents of New Orleans camped in the Superdome during Hurricane Katrina? While I would hope that officials would allow me to evacuate to a nearby family member's house not in an evacuated area, would

they instead feel obligated to further "provide" for me by removing these options, as they removed my option to stay at home?

Underlying these fears is a belief that State and local governments are not the appropriate primary providers of disaster services. Official sources, be they private power companies or public works departments, had a poor response to Hurricane Irene. My neighbors and family had much better success in taking care of ourselves and one another. Individuals are much better able to prepare for contingencies than any organization, let alone an all-encompassing one like a State or local government. This is why the role of government is to be the provider of last resort, for those who have been unable to prepare well enough--and why it is both impractical and unethical to force individuals to relinquish their own plans in favor of a single evacuation order. And given the financial situations of most municipalities and the State, I don't think they can afford to be the sole provider of disaster services, to the exclusion of the individual efforts of private citizens.

In fact, the authors of this bill seem very presumptuous to me. While I realize that the State of Connecticut does a lot of good, this bill gives me a bad impression of the State government and legislature. The State and municipalities cannot protect me as well as I can protect myself, yet the State effectively claims that I have no right to protect myself. My emotions border on anger when I think that I would be tried as a criminal for doing my duty toward my family members. This is very heavy-handed legislation which makes a mockery of my rights, and I daresay violates the United States Constitution. If I were forced to leave my home during a disaster, and suffered any damages as a result, which I could have prevented had I stayed, I would certainly pursue legal action against the authority issuing the mandatory evacuation order. After all, the State expresses an opinion in this bill that I should be liable for any damages it incurs on my behalf, so I find it only fair to return the favor. I suspect this bill, should it become law, will cost the State more money than it will save.

Mandatory evacuation orders are already, by definition, mandatory. Ignoring them is something no citizen takes lightly or without good reason. Using heavy-handed legislation to literally force citizens to comply, and push off the costs on them, is bad governance, and will end up working out badly for the State and municipalities. Thus, I strongly oppose SB 325.

Thank-you for hearing and reading my testimony. Jeff Tang, membership@ccd1.us