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Testimony to the Public Safety and Security Committee
House Bill 5353: An Act Requiring State Buildings to be Accessible to Persons with Disabilities

Senator Hartley, Representative Dargan, and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee. My name is Mike Demicco, Representative of the 21st District, Farmington and Unionville.

Senator Beth Bye and I introduced House Bill 5353: An Act Requiring State Buildings to Be Accessible to Persons with Disabilities. As drafted, this bill would amend the general statutes to require that not later than January 1, 2021, all existing state buildings open to the public be handicap accessible. Thus, such buildings would contain a sloped ramp, an automatically activated door, and at least one bathroom and one elevator that is accessible to the physically handicapped.

The Americans with Disability Act of 1990 and the amendments since then have changed the lives of many Americans by providing them access to public and private spaces that were previously not available to them. The ADA provided the first comprehensive civil rights laws for individuals with disabilities and continues to play an essential role.

However, as you may know, the current law excludes buildings, including state buildings, built or substantially renovated before October 1, 1977 from the handicapped accessibility requirement (CGS § 29-269(a)). The law also allows the state building inspector and the director of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities to jointly grant a variation or exemption for the accessibility requirement in any buildings, including state buildings, when such construction would not be feasible or would unreasonably complicate their construction, alteration, or repair (CGS § 29-269(b)).

As a result of these exemptions, persons with disabilities are frequently unable to conduct personal business with the State as independent adults, and are thus denied our nation's promise of fairness, dignity, and equality for all.

I applaud the fact that this committee recently favorably reported Senate Bill 521, which requires the Department of Administrative Services to conduct a survey, within this calendar year, on the accessibility of state buildings for persons with disabilities. The bill before you today goes further, by requiring accessibility to be not merely studied, but in fact implemented.

House Bill 5353 will give all people in Connecticut, regardless of physical ability, equal access to their government. I urge this committee to make the needs of people with disabilities a priority, and not an afterthought.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.