I am writing to you today after seeing some distressing news. I see there are five bills up for public comment tomorrow, February 20, 2013, on various handicap-parking laws.

Two of these bills are quite frustrating, and I would like to express my concerns regarding them. The first one is HB5123, to allow pregnant women the use of the handicap placards. The second bill is SB 137, to allow people with certain mental disabilities use of handicap placards.

These parking placards are not handed out as a privilege or a convenience, they are a necessity for those people who qualify for the following criteria as set forth by the Department of Motor Vehicle.

Qualifying Disabilities for Plates or Parking Permits

A qualifying disability is one or more of the following impairments, disabilities, or conditions that affect mobility and are permanent in nature:

- Use of portable oxygen.
- Legal blindness.
- Limited use, or no use, of one or both legs.
- Inability to walk 200 feet without stopping.
- A neuro-muscular dysfunction that severely limits mobility.
- A Class III or IV cardiac condition (American Heart Association standards).
- Severe limitation in the ability to walk due to an arthritic, neurological or orthopedic condition.
- Restriction because of lung disease to such an extent that forced (respiratory) expiratory volume for one second, when measured by spirometry, is less than one liter, or the arterial oxygen tension is less than sixty mm/hg of room air at rest.

As you well know, I have been living with two daughters who use wheelchairs for over 15 years now. In the beginning, there was trouble with the occasional person parking in the spots without a placard. Today we do not see that problem, but rather the issue is we rarely see an open handicapped spot. I cannot tell you how frustrating this problem has become.

My daughters and others that meet the DMV criteria deserve the right to free and direct access to public places like every other resident in the State of Connecticut. Today however, this is rarely the case. We are either hunting for a spot or struggling when we come out because people who have the placards do not understand the laws and parking in lines for ramps, etc. Most of the time, these laws are not enforceable.

Please strongly object to bill SB 137 authored by Senator Paul Doyle and HB5123 authored by Representative Lawrence Miller. If either of these populations should fall into the existing DMV criteria for the placard then by all means they should be assigned one. However, we cannot afford to drastically increase the number of placards that are already in use.

Besides objecting to the new bills, I would like to see some changes made to the laws in existence. As a State we have to stop tiptoeing around this issue and see it as it really is. We need to stand up for the rights of people who depend on those spots to conduct their lives and access public and private establishments.

I find as a society today we seem to be entitled, hurried and disrespectful. The overtones of the handicap laws need to change. I often hear from people, "I have a placard doesn't mean you can see my disability." I challenge that statement. If you look at the criteria for a placard, you will see that if people fit those criteria more often than not, there would be some sign of a disability.

We need to hold the medical practitioners responsible for the medical necessity slips they write out for these placards. If medical practitioners are held accountable for writing prescriptions, they should be held to the same standard for the placards. This is a very important document, and they need to start seeing the document as such.

We also need to establish a Committee of citizens. These volunteers should be trained and out in the community educating the people who already have the placards. People with disabilities have to be held accountable also, if they break the law they should pay for any crime associated with it. Having citizens in the public in an educating capacity, will keep illegal use down by relatives and friends who have taken over possession of placards from others.

I have watched as our State Government has skated around the issue for years now. The time to stop doing that is now. WE have to stop seeing these placards as a privilege; we have to stop handing them out so easily; we have to have respect for those who truly need them for free and clear access.

Please stop SB 137 and HB 5123. Let's start to fix a law that has been broken for years and start to treat it as the serious and vital law it truly is.

As always, the girls and I are available to help in any capacity.

With Sincerely Thanks and gratitude for all you do,

Mary Caruso
Samantha Bode
Alexandria Bode