

February 17, 2015

Committee on Insurance and Real Estate

SB 234 – AN ACT REQUIRING HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE FOR  
THE PURCHASE OF ASSISTANCE DOGS

Good afternoon Sen. Crisco, Rep. Magna, and committee members. I'd like to tell you how my Service Dog, Tippy, helps me. I had been struggling with an undiagnosed neuromuscular disorder given a "working" diagnosis of "Bi-lateral restrictive lung disease, secondary to a proximal myopathy" for over 22 years. In 2008 I had 3 visits to the ICU because I was not strong enough to take adequate breaths. I had begun to stay home, not venturing out on my own.

When applying for A Service Dog, NEADS/Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans had an on-line application. Shortly after filling it out, I received a call and arranged an interview at the organization and was required to have a doctor fill out a form stating how a Service Dog would benefit me. My interview took over three hours, and in it I was asked where I lived, and the types of wildlife we come across. Because at the time I lived near the shore, my dog would be "socialized" around ducks, seagulls, and boating sounds, turkeys, deer, cats and dogs. I was asked what activities I participated in, how active my life was, and any specific skills I needed the dog to perform, aside from the usual skills they train them all to do.

I was approved for a dog, and needed to start raising the funds. I was lucky, in that my local rotary paid nearly all the funds. There isn't always an organization able to make such a donation, and it is expensive. It can cost \$25,000 or more to raise and train a dog from puppy to "working" status.

Tippy accompanies me to church, and is with me when I go everywhere. He's quiet under the table when eating out, and is more patient than me when waiting in lines. He knows to stay "still" when given the command so that I can place my hand on his head when I am dizzy. Tippy picks up everything I drop, including coins, so that I don't fall picking them up. He picks up my cane when it's dropped or out of reach, empties my clothes dryer, retrieves my phone, and gets my keys off the counter. He will help pull off socks and slacks when I am too sore or dizzy. Tippy puts his paws, "Up" when asked so I can remove items from his pack or pay the cashier, or puts his paws on my lap with a simple, "my lap". Perhaps the most important part of Tippy's "job" is helping me up when I fall. He knows just where to stand to support me as I rise, regardless of how or where I fall. He supports me when I get up from a chair. He opens the refrigerator to remove medication, and opens handicapped doors with a simple nose, "nudge". He is able to open some doors with a rope on the handle, and "tug" me up an incline if it is too steep. Tippy loves his job, and is very focused on helping me. And, let's not discount the loyalty and affection he offers, and is given in return. There are so many more behaviors/skills, but I think I've hit some of the more important.

Following a stroke in March of 2014, several seizures, and a diagnosis, at long last, of Parkinson's Disease, Tippy continues to rise to the occasion. Thanks to him, I get up each morning looking forward to the day ahead.

Because of Tippy, I am able to volunteer with US Pain in CT, NJ, NY, MA, and before the FDA in Washington, DC, testifying for patient's rights. He sits at my feet when I fly, and quietly awaits me while I speak. Before Tippy, I was afraid to go out, that is no longer the case.

I urge you to pass SB 234 so that others can find the independence a Service Dog can restore. It is expensive, but well worth the cost.