

**Testimony of James Oliver, Transition Education Specialist, Horizons, Incorporated, South Windham, Connecticut to the Transportation Committee
SB 487 "AN ACT CONCERNING TRANSPORTATION OF ADULT STUDENTS IN TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS"**

February 09, 2015

Good morning (State) Senator Maynard, (State) Senator Leone, and honorable members of the Transportation Committee. My name is James Oliver, and I am a Transition Education Specialist with Horizons -- a private nonprofit agency located in South Windham. Our agency has been in operation for 36 years and provides individualized supports and services for people with special needs where they live, learn, work, and play. Horizons is a member of the Connecticut Association of Nonprofits.

I speak before you in support of SB 487 "AN ACT CONCERNING TRANSPORTATION OF ADULT STUDENTS IN TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS."

Between the ages of 18 and 21, transition education students often receive community-based vocational instruction from nonprofit agencies at local businesses. It is common for these students to earn a job at their community-based vocational instruction site (i.e. local businesses) once they age out of transition education services. Most of these students have graduated with their high school class and are choosing to stay in school to get vocational instruction. This instruction is geared towards helping students acquire job skills and aims to assist them with blending into the workforce. These students frequently feel extreme anxiety about receiving supports, because their past experiences in school and in the community left them ostracized from peers and adults because they were branded disabled.

Nonetheless, in late July 2014, transition education providers received an email from the State DOE stating that student transportation vehicles must now have large yellow "**Carrying School Children**" signs on the top of vehicles and large placards on the sides and rear of vehicles with the name of the agency, the agency's phone number, and the vehicles' fleet number (refer to picture of Horizons' vehicle). There are also special operator endorsements, insurance, and registration requirements. These new regulations announce to potential employers that transition education students are disabled children, which does not support the notion of a capable potential employee.

Horizons opposes the necessity for signage on the top, sides, and rear of agencies' vehicles. In our estimation these signs have little public safety value and serve to differentiate transition education students from other students and employees in the workplace. Horizons also contends that the special operator endorsements, insurance,

and registration requirements now mandated by the DMV are redundant because they mirror many of the measures Horizons and many other DDS affiliated providers take during the hiring process. This unfunded mandate costs thousands of dollars to implement and squeezes nonprofits who were already struggling to stay in the black.

In addition, these regulations severely limit where and when students can receive services. In prior school years, students were often transported to local businesses in the same vehicles that supported employment programs utilize. However, since the DMV's unfunded mandates were instituted, students are only transported in student approved vehicles. This means the pool of Horizons' vehicles approved for students has been reduced from thirty vehicles to three vehicles. Furthermore, of Horizons' 200 permanent staff (a driver's license is required for employment), only 10 drivers now have the necessary endorsement on their licenses to transport students. Consequently, some students have had to forgo community-based vocational instruction opportunities, which hamper their ability to understand their vocational strengths and preferences.

In light of these facts, I ask this body to pass SB 487 through committee and for the CGA to enact this bill into law. In doing so, you will empower transition education students by removing labels and by increasing their opportunities for employment. Furthermore, given the \$35 million cuts to DDS' budget over the past three years, enacting SB 487 will alleviate some financial stress felt by DDS affiliated providers, which will likely increase the quality of services for people with special needs. Thank you.