



February 18, 2016

Dear Members of the Insurance & Real Estate Committee,

I urge you to **oppose Senate Bill 35 as written**. Please remove all language about guide dogs for the blind. I am the Treasurer of the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, the statewide organization of blind consumers. We have learned about the detrimental effects that this bill could have on the guide dog industry. While we appreciate that some well-meaning people may have authored this language in order to help us, it has serious potential to do a lot more harm than good. Since we are not experts on other types of assistance dogs, we will not speak for the consumers of other types of assistance dogs; by the same logic, we are the only ones that can speak for ourselves when it comes to guide dogs.

SB 35 will shift the acquisition of guide dogs to being governed by a medical model. Medical service providers will then be making decisions about what types of rehabilitation services we need, which they are absolutely not trained to do. Health insurance and medical personnel need to stay out of a process that is the domain of education and rehabilitation professionals.

SB 35 requires that guide dogs come from an "accredited, non-profit organization", but common standards do not yet exist. ADI, (Assistance Dogs International), attempts to do this, but it falls short, especially in the areas of consumer participation, consumer advocacy, and consumer rights.

SB 35 takes autonomy away from guide dog schools. By telling them that they must affiliate with other schools, they lose their independence and the freedom to innovate as they serve their consumers.

SB 35 will take us away from the philanthropic funding model, which is already working quite well, and stack yet another cost onto health insurance. The system isn't broken, and I don't want the Connecticut General Assembly to try to fix it. The cost of obtaining a guide dog is not obstructive whatsoever for blind people, and some guide dog schools make payment optional. Philanthropic funding seldom sustains once a mandate like this one occurs. Right now, guide dogs are funded through charitable donations. No doctor is required to say I need one, and no unit of government says where I must go to get a dog. Please do not let SB 35 change that! Please vote against Senate Bill 35 until the language about guide dogs has been removed!

I am eager to be of any assistance you need.

Sincerely,
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