



Written Testimony to the Ohio Representatives: Prohibit blindness (or other disability) from denying or limiting care of a minor

From Kara B. Ayers, PhD

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RE: House Bill 188: Prohibit Blindness from Denying or Limiting Care of a Minor

Sponsors: Rep Crawley and Rep Cross

Chair Lipps, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Boyd, and Members of the Ohio House Health Committee:

Thank-you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 188. With the addition of the newly proposed amendment, if passed, this bill would prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability alone in regards to caring for a minor. Bills like these are unfortunately needed to update [OH R.C.§2151.414](#), which currently makes disability itself grounds for termination of parental rights.

Policies like these are personally meaningful to me. My husband and I are both parents with disabilities. We are not blind, but use wheelchairs full-time. We have three amazing children who are now 12 years, 9 years, and 2 years old. Like many parents with disabilities, we are acutely aware that stigma surrounding disability could strip us of our most cherished roles at any time. In addition to the personal devastation, the toll on our children-of even temporary separation-would be immeasurable. These are fears that many parents with disabilities face on a daily basis. I shared more about this personal experience of disabled parenting in a recent TEDx Cincinnati talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STtI5wXxErY>.

For more than two years, I have provided testimony like this in support of an Ohio bill that would protect blind parents from discrimination. While I recognized that such a bill wouldn't protect my own family, I still found it important enough to fight for a smaller subset of our larger disability community. I am overjoyed and hopeful that with Representative Butler's proposed amendment, Ohio now has an opportunity to join other states in protecting the basic rights of all parents with disabilities.

I am also familiar with disabled parenting from the perspective of a researcher. I am the Associate Director of the University of Cincinnati Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCCEEDD). I am also a co-founder of the Disabled Parenting Project and a consultant for the National Center for Parents with Disabilities. The overarching theme of research conducted on and with parents with disabilities shows a stark contrast between what people may assume and the realities of these families. Large-scale studies show that parents with disabilities are NOT more likely to maltreat their children than parents without disabilities (Glaun & Brown, 1999,



Oyserman et al., 2000). There are studies to support how disabled parents use adaptive strategies to care for infants and toddlers (Powell et al., 2018) and studies that compare how parents with and without disabilities fare during the teenage years (Olkin et al, 2006). The outcomes of children or teens parented by people with disabilities do not differ from those parented by those without.

What is different about the experience of parenting with a disability is the high likelihood of scrutiny by the child welfare system. *Rocking the Cradle*, a 2012 report from the National Council on Disability delivered to the Congress, reported extremely high rates of child removal and premature termination of parental rights. In addition to the emotional toll of disrupting families, these removals incur excessive and unnecessary costs to the child welfare and family court system. Parents with disabilities are also more likely to lose custody of their children after divorce and face significant barriers to adopting children. Legal analyses of these cases show disparities based on disability status alone-not verifiable differences in parenting ability.

Perhaps the most important clarification I'd like to highlight in my testimony is this: **HB 188 would not provide extra or additional protections to parents with disabilities. It would simply remove disability itself as grounds for removal of children or termination of rights.** If any parent cannot meet his or her obligations to care for a child, the system should intervene. The Child Protective Services (CPS) system needs this equalizing policy to begin to address a history of disparate treatment of minority parents (Proctor & Azar, 2013), including parents with disabilities. Reasons for CPS intervention should be based in fact-not stereotypes and stigma about what society believes people with disabilities can and cannot do. HB188 would allow more fair treatment of families, which is in the best interest of children, families, and our society at large.

Thank-you for the opportunity to provide testimony on an issue that is both personally and professionally very important to me. Please feel free to contact me with questions about this issue.

Yours truly,

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- Powell, R. M., et al. (2019). "Adaptive parenting strategies used by mothers with physical disabilities caring for infants and toddlers." *Health & Social Care in the Community* **27**(4): 889-898.