



**Sponsor Testimony for House Bill 587**  
**State Representative Marlene Anielski and State Representative Darrell Kick**  
**House Health Committee**  
**June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Representative Anielski:

Good morning Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the House Health Committee. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to offer sponsor testimony on House Bill 587, which would provide Medicaid coverage for white canes to individuals that are blind or visually impaired.

Here is a little history of the white cane. The cane originated in 1921 by an Englishman named James Biggs. Biggs lost his vision following an accident and began using a cane, painted white, to navigate his way around and to attract attention and increase awareness of those around him.

Then in 1930, George A. Bonham, President of the Peoria (Illinois) Lions Club, suggested that the white cane have a red band on it to be more widely visible. Once the Peoria Lions Club implemented the idea, the club began passing out white canes in order to improve the mobility for those that were visually impaired. The other Lions Clubs across the United States took notice and began implementing the canes use as well, which quickly gained acceptance among those that were visually impaired.

Today, white canes provide visually impaired individuals greater independence. The person can be mobile and the white cane assists with navigation. White canes can mark paths, signal the user to an obstacle, and improve the confidence of individuals with reduced vision.

Most of us assumed white canes were already covered under insurance plans, Medicaid in particular. White canes are not. As we understand it, the National Coverage Determination (NCD) states that a white cane used by a blind person is not covered as durable medical equipment because it is more an identifying and self-help device rather than an item that makes a meaningful contribution in the treatment of an illness or injury. The exclusion appears to date back to the beginning of the Medicare rules in 1965. While a white cane does not treat an injury or illness, neither does a wheelchair, walker, or support cane, each of which are covered as durable medical equipment. All of these pieces of equipment are all key to greater independence for individuals that utilize them.

Gaps in insurance coverage exist for many services and equipment for individuals that are blind or have low vision. House Bill 587 aims to take a first step towards providing insurance parity

for these individuals by requiring that Medicaid include white canes as durable medical equipment.

Representative Kick:

While some white canes are available through Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities' (OOD) Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living programs, the white canes are only obtainable by individuals that are actively seeking employment and some seniors. OOD resources are strained, and services provided have been reduced in recent years. For example, OOD used to cover 60 hours of Orientation and Mobility training for white cane usage, which is generally what is needed to be white cane proficient. Due to budget cuts, OOD currently only covers six hours of training.

White canes cost around \$50, with minor additional costs for accessories such as the replaceable tips, which wear down from use. According to claims data from the Department of Medicaid, 1,823 Aged, Blind, and Disabled (ABD) individuals are identified as blind, while 7,961 individuals have a primary diagnosis of blindness or low vision. The department provided a potential annual fiscal impact analysis that estimates the low-end impact of the bill could be \$87,679 and the high-end impact could be \$384,566. The estimates include initial, minimal mobility and orientation training, which is not explicitly included in our bill, but the department feels should be included in estimates.

While we are both sensitive to increases in the Medicaid program, we feel that it is past time to modify the outdated exclusion and provide coverage for visual impaired Ohioans that are in need of white canes. In conversations with blind and visually impaired individuals, we understand that introduction of House Bill 587 has lifted spirits and made them feel as though they are being heard. Passage of the bill will signal the legislature's support for individuals that use these important medical equipment tools to regain independence.

Please join us in support of House 587. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony. We are happy to answer any questions that you may have.