

Proponent Testimony S.B. 202

Submitted by Christopher Sabine

Chair Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and Members of the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of S.B. 202, which would prohibit the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services from limiting the care of a minor based solely on disability.

I am a member of the National Federation of the Blind, the nation's oldest consumer organization promoting equality, opportunity and security for the nation's Blind. We believe in the full capacity of the Blind to lead meaningful and productive lives, including the ability to raise our children without interference based on unwarranted and false assumptions concerning our capabilities.

Like many of the workers who make decisions everyday regarding the custody, placement, and visitation of minor children, I have a professional background in social work. As social workers, we have an ethical obligation to consider the strengths, abilities and capacities of every person with which we work. Our code of ethics demands that our decisions be made nonjudgmentally, with non-possessive warmth and kindness, and without regard to negative stereotypes.

Yet, despite this, I am aware of several cases in which blind parents or relatives have had to prove their fitness to raise their child in the way they see fit to a worker from a county Department of Job and Family Services. As an organization, we have had to advocate for parents who have had newborn children removed from their care because a worker assumed the parent could not care for an infant, custody of their children denied them in a divorce case for similar reasons, and equal consideration denied them in foster care or adoption cases. Nearly all of these charges have been dropped after Blind Parents have testified to their ability to raise their children. As a Blind person, I find this unacceptable, and as a social worker, I find this professionally unethical.

The reality is that every day, Blind parents throughout the state raise healthy, happy, and successful children without difficulty, and most of our leadership are Blind parents. For those in legitimate need of intervention from a social service agency or outside organization, such interventions, including training on the skills of blindness, are available and offered to Blind people across the country every day.

We believe that S.B. 202 will ensure that no Ohioan with a disability should have to prove that they can care for a minor child for the simple reason that they have a disability. Your committee has the power to establish procedural safeguards requiring respect for the right to due process and equal protection for all Ohioans with disabilities in cases involving child custody, visitation, foster care, or adoption of a minor child, as ten other states have done. Similar legislation introduced in the House in the last legislative cycle met with broad bipartisan support and no opposition.

As a Blind person, I ask that you vote to pass S.B. 202 out of committee at your proponent hearing tomorrow and allow it to be heard by the full House. I believe this will help ensure that the rights of people with disabilities to care for and raise their children are fully protected.

Sincerely,

Christopher Sabine
6756 Tarawa Dr.
Cincinnati, Ohio 45224