

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before this committee regarding S.B. 202. I am here to advocate for the rights of parents who are blind and visually impaired. I was born totally blind. I have never had any usable vision. People that meet me outside of my normal social circles have a myriad of reactions to me. They run the gambit from amazement to no way, you possibly can't, because I couldn't do what you do. I am a teacher, a musician, an outdoorsman, a dog owner, enthusiast of sports, grilling and learning about standard and assistive technology. My proudest accomplishments to date are a 14 year old son and an 11 year old son. People with disabilities are often judged on their capabilities unfairly. Medical professionals and social workers tend to look at situations through a medical lens. If it is different, they want to fix it and if they can't fix it, then they change or remove the problem, which has unhealthy consequences for the families involved.

I understand that newborns can be taken away from their parents immediately after birth by a social worker who may not realize the abilities of parents who are blind. This is heart breaking on many different levels. Parent's amount of usable vision, (how much a person can actually see,) will come up and dominate discussions and rulings in custody hearings. In 2013 during my divorce, my blindness was up for discussion and was used as a means for my boy's mother to gain full custody. It was claimed that I could not take care of my sons, transport to and from school or events, keep my house clean and much more.

Fortunately, I have shared custody of our children, due in large part to the work of our guardian ad litem, who visited my residence and reviewed my methods for transporting our children, giving them medicine, and meeting any of their needs. Being involved in my local community, speaking up when needed and holding fast to a belief that I am a valuable member of my community, I can do anything necessary to provide for myself and my family. It may look different. People who are blind, don't drive, so we hire drivers, use ride share services and other forms of public transportation. We have technology tools, methods of organization, and some of us build a strong support network. I see my children every day. I help with homework, make their meals, I am there for the choices they make, good and bad. We're involved in our community, playing recreational sports and I am involved in school activities. We ride bikes, camp, fish, shop, clean and do it all very successfully. I am a full time teacher at the Ohio State School for the Blind, guest lecturer at Ohio State and Shawnee State, provide classes for ESC of Ohio and have a technology consulting business where I contract with OOD and the I can Connect Program. I work a lot to provide for my children and to be a good example for my sons that it can take hard work to be successful.

A child needs access to both parents, if they are both loving and involved parents. Some blind people don't have that opportunity to show they are and can be great parents. I am writing this today to illustrate a point. As Ohioans, we are better than where we were. We are a state where we can look at someone's competencies or abilities and not their disability. We are better than we were 14 years ago when I went to the hospital to welcome my first born into the world and I felt the need to always have a friend who had normal vision with me at all times. We are in a better place where we can educate social workers to focus on important issues such as keeping families together, supporting our families and our communities. We have the opportunity to pass legislation to help reduce discrimination, support families and be better citizens of our wonderful Buckeye state. People who are blind need to have the same rights as any parent. And they also have to demonstrate the ability to carry out the responsibilities of being a parent, not on the sole basis of not having vision, but by their work ethic, their organization, their love of their family. Blind people are not asking for anything special or anything above anyone else. They are just asking for the rite to have a family.

Sincerely,  
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