November 1, 2017

Chairman Ginter, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in consideration of House Bill 309 ("HB 309"). I am a member of the National Federation of the Blind of Ohio. We are the only organization that believes in the full capacity of blind people, and has the power, influence, diversity, and determination to help transform our dreams into reality. We believe in blind people because we are blind people. Our democratically elected leaders and our diverse nationwide membership are made up of blind people, our families, and our friends. We are bound together by our belief that the blind are capable of achieving our dreams and living the lives we want, and by the love and respect we have for one another and for all blind Americans. We support one another, act with courage and determination when we encounter barriers or experience setbacks, and engage in collective action to improve our lives.

The National Federation of the Blind is in full support of not making blindness an impediment to caring for minors. We believe that HB 309 will accomplish this task of battling low expectations and misconceptions of the capabilities of blind parents. Without this bill,

1. Newborns have been removed from their parents’ care because a social worker assumes that a blind person cannot care for an infant.
2. Blind parents have been denied custody of children in divorce cases because the sighted spouse claims that the blind parent obviously cannot keep the child safe despite the fact that blind people around the state successfully care for their children every day.
3. Blind parents or prospective blind parents have been denied equal consideration in foster care and adoption.

On a personal note, this issue means so much to me as a proud and loving blind parent. I cannot imagine my life had I been denied the privilege of raising my two beautiful daughters. When they were infants, I mostly cared for them by instinct and non-visual blindness skills, much as I use to care for myself. Babies did not come with manuals, I prepared as much as any parent would prepare. I was the most vigilant and fierce parent of all my sighted friends. Maybe I couldn’t physically drive them places, but they always got where they needed to go. Maybe I couldn’t see them on stage in the school performances, but I heard their voices and they knew I was there. Maybe I couldn’t see how fast they swam, or how close the race was, but I was always at the finish line telling them how awesome they were. Above all else, I believe that I have raised two independent, competent, compassionate young women. My youngest is a Mount Scholar at Ohio State University, studying Occupational Therapy, and my oldest just left for the Ukraine for 27 months with the Peace Corps.

The Legislature must establish procedural safeguards that require adherence to the Americans with Disabilities Act and respect for the due process and equal protection rights of blind parents or prospective blind parents in child welfare, foster care, family law, and adoption. You can add Ohio to the momentum that is gaining across the country for this kind of preventative legislation, as it has been passed in 7 other states in the past few years, from Maryland to Utah to Illinois.

The National Federation of the Blind of Ohio would like to thank the committee for their hard work on this vital legislation that would protect the rights of blind parents throughout the state of Ohio.

Sincerely,

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National Federation of the Blind of Ohio

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