

H. 143

Thank you, Representative Wood, for sponsoring this bill to enhance services for individuals who are DeafBlind, like myself.

Back in 2007, we did a needs assessment with a group of people who are DeafBlind. The top wish was having access to a Support Service Provider (SSP). There were several years of interruption to get this needed service in Vermont.

Vermont had lay off of staff who oversaw Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind which had been housed under Commissioner of Department of Aging and Disabilities (DAIL).

Then Tropical Storm Irene flooded the state and documents were lost. We had to wait until the State recovered before submitting a bill through Legislature.

We got a grant from the State Independent Living Council to establish a pilot program. Vancro, took up the program. It has had proven success.

Several states in USA are asking their legislators to help set up SSP programs to enhance the lives of people who are DeafBlind.

This is an important program that helps connect us back to the community of our choice. Without an SSP program many individuals who are DeafBlind would be totally isolated, depressed and wanting to end their own lives. This is not hyperbole. We did have one individual who tried to commit suicide.

The term DeafBlind includes individuals who have both vision and hearing loss. These individuals may use various communication methods.

Please note there is a new term for SSP program popping up around USA. It is a Co-Navigator. I would recommend we add this term into the bill.

Below is information what an SSP or Co-Novator role is:

SSP (Support Service Provider):

- Role: Provides visual and environmental information, and facilitates communication.
- Function: Acts more like a “neutral assistant,” similar to a sighted guide or interpreter, without influencing decisions.
- Goal: Empower the DeafBlind person to make their own choices by giving access to information.

- Origin: Traditional term, widely used in support services and training programs.
  - Example: Describing surroundings in a store, guiding a person through a crowd, or relaying information from others.
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#### Co-Navigator:

- Role: Collaborative partner in navigating daily life, situations, and decisions.
- Function: More of an equal, active participant who works with the DeafBlind person, not just for them.
- Goal: Reflects a more inclusive, person-centered, and empowered model.
- Origin: Emerged from within the DeafBlind community as a preferred term.
- Example: Helping plan a trip together, discussing choices, and co-experiencing events in a more engaged and conversational way.

#### Population:

People who are DeafBlind are a low incident population in Vermont(though not a disposable one). We tried to use traditional services offered by Green Mountain Transit such as on demand transportation. The biggest barrier is communication with drivers, store employees, the general population and so on.

The big cultural issue for me is that I need to be touch to get attention and use Tactile American Sign Language (TASL). It is very difficult trying to communicate within the hearing norm. That is why an SSP program is essential. It allows for people who are trained to work with individuals who are DeafBlind.

#### Social:

SSPs help me to connect with day to day life and reconnect to

the Deaf community by attending social gatherings, meetings, and meet ups once a month in various locations. An SSP allows me to get to a physicians appointment and to make a recycling run. Access to an SSP means my life is not confined to 4 walls but is broadened to community of all forms....it helps me and it allows me to help others.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify for this need for long term existence amidst the whole of society.

Submitted by:

René Pellerin

Waterbury Center, VT