

Honorable Gene DiGirolamo
49 East Wing
P.O. Box 202018
Harrisburg, Pa 17120-2018

Dear Representative DiGirolamo and Members of the Human Service Committee:

My name is Renee Fisher. I am from Pittsburgh PA and I am Deaf. I work as a Support Service Provider (SSP) for individuals who are both Deaf and Blind (DeafBlind). I am writing to emphasize the extreme importance and urgency to continue funding for the SSP program in Pennsylvania via HB2069. Sighted individuals are able to drive where they would like, when they would like. We are able to watch tv, talk on the phone, go out to have fun, try new things, and explore the world around us. But DeafBlind individuals are the exact opposite. DeafBlind individuals have to rely on others to provide basic information that you and I take for granted. As you can imagine, having one's independence limited causes loneliness, isolation, depression, and can lead to even more serious mental health issues.

Think of your experience going to a grocery store. You get in your car, go to the store, get what you would like, check out and go home. For a DeafBlind person, this experience is much different. They have to contact someone who is willing to pick them up, drive them to the store, guide them inside, and explain to them everything around them. A family or friend may be in a hurry and tell the DeafBlind person to just "wait in the car" (alone) while they get one or two things they need. But an SSP would provide so much attention, information, and independence. An SSP would guide the DeafBlind person through the store letting them know as much information as possible: how many other people are also shopping there, what new products are being displayed, name brand options, different kinds of canned soups, if there are free samples to taste, which checkout line is shorter, and the list goes on and on.

Now imagine doing ALL of your errands this way with only five hours a month! Impossible! And that leaves no time for fun, doctors appointments, socializing, or business. Sighted people do not live their lives five hours a month, so why should DeafBlind individuals be forced to?!

Another concern is safety. A DeafBlind man was seriously injured when he was walking on a sidewalk and wasn't aware of construction happening in his path. Two other DeafBlind individuals were hit and killed by a car. A cane provides very limited information. These situations could have been prevented with the use of SSP services.

As I mentioned, I work as a Support Service Provider (SSP). I have trained and worked in Seattle, Washington, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Seattle is known for their very large DeafBlind community. I have extensive training and experience in DeafBlind culture, SSP expectations, the responsibilities of facilitating communication, providing environmental information, and guiding.

My training allows me to provide services to the wide variety of DeafBlind individuals in the community. Because vision and hearing loss varies, so do communication preferences - American Sign Language, Spoken English, Tracking, Tactile Sign Language, Fingerspelling, Print-On-Palm, FM System, or other technology. SSPs are trained and are matched with DeafBlind individuals based on several factors, with communication styles being one of the most important.

The general public is ignorant about how to communicate with DeafBlind individuals, so most of the time they are ignored. SSPs are able to remove this barrier by facilitating basic communication and allowing a connection to be made between these individuals.

Let me clarify that SSPs are **not** Personal Care Attendants. DeafBlind individuals are very capable of taking care of themselves. If an individual would like to learn different independent living skills, there are places such as the Helen Keller National Center that provide specific trainings. SSPs do not “take care” of individuals. SSPs provide environmental information.

I cannot imagine what would happen to the DeafBlind individuals in Pennsylvania if SSP services are discontinued! This community, that already begs for information and human connection, is at great risk for being pushed even farther to the side. PLEASE continue SSP services!

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Renee Fisher