

LATE Testimony

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Comments:

LATE Testimony

Dear Chair Mizuno, Vice Chair Jordan and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to support House Bill 2401, allowing blind residents to obtain a disability parking permit.

I am a homeowner, husband and father of two young children, living in Mililani Mauka. I also happen to be blind. In spite of my blindness, I feel I am quite independent and able -- I walk my kids to and from Mililani Ike Elementary School, I cook most of our meals, I do the dishes and laundry, I help my kids with homework whenever possible, and -- thanks to assistive software -- like any one else, spend too much time on email and the web. For the most part, my family and I lead a very normal life, and I truly do not spend much time dwelling on matters, such as who is or is not making their services, products, websites, whatever, more accessible to the blind. I just find a way to work around it. Having said this, whenever I do see a compelling accessibility need for the blind that can be reasonably addressed -- especially if it has to do with greatly improving safety, I do feel compelled to speak up.

Currently, Hawaii allows disabled residents who require the use of a cane for mobility to obtain a disability parking permit. Oddly, the blind -- who also require the use of a cane for mobility, are excluded. The majority of other states, including disability-, veteran- and tourist-friendly states like California, Florida, New York and even our Nation's Capitol, allow their blind residents to obtain a disability parking permit.

According to the Center for Disease Control, about 0.03% of America's population is legally blind from diseases such as macular degeneration, diabetes, glaucoma, cataracts, and retinitis pigmentosa, as well as from injuries from accidents. If you believe the CDC, this means some 36,000 Hawaii residents are blind. I am not an expert on the subject but I am pretty confident not even a fraction of a fraction of these supposed 36,000 blind residents have been trained in cane travel. And these 36,000 blind residents are your parents, spouses, siblings, children, coworkers, and neighbors -- like me.

Our current law seems to imply blind residents only ride TheBus, TheCab or HandiVan, are picked up and dropped off curbside, and do not ride as passengers in cars. Or it seems to imply blind people only ride in cars if they have a dedicated, sighted guide who can patiently assist and attend to them through large, busy parking lots. Or it seems to imply that all blind residents have been trained in cane travel (aka Orientation and Mobility) by a certified instructor, and can skillfully and independently navigate their way through large, busy parking lots.

The truth is, Hawaii's blind belong to families just like yours and mine. Speaking from my experience, my family and I drive our car -- to the grocery store, to the shopping mall, to restaurants, to attractions, and to just about everywhere else. And, contrary to what the current law implies, my wife and children are not my dedicated, sighted guides. In fact, I was trained extensively in cane travel for over a year, and happen to think I'm one of the better cane travelers around. But I absolutely, positively feel I am putting myself and, sometimes, my children or other pedestrians and drivers in danger, every time I traverse a large, busy parking lot, especially at evenings and on the weekends, and particularly when it's raining.

What is it like? Just imagine walking blindfolded through a large, busy parking lot with your spouse pushing a shopping cart full of groceries, and your children are in tow each carrying a bag. Drivers are impatiently pulling out and in to park in stalls, other drivers are trying to maneuver around other drivers waiting for a space, car stereos are pounding, car alarms are

blaring, engines from large delivery trucks are rumbling. You are bumping into cars and carts and pedestrians. You are stepping into potholes, speed bumps and curbs. Several other families whose shopping carts and footsteps sound just like yours cut in front of you. Strangers are trying to give you instructions, encouragement, directions. Strangers are tugging your cane, tapping your shoulder. Drivers are beeping their horns ... are they beeping at you to get out of the way? Or are they trying warn you you're in a dangerous place?

Now, imagine if you, or someone trying to assist or avoid you, gets hit. What if it's your child? Who is liable? You? The good samaritan? The driver? The business owner? The State? Well, except for getting hit, all of the above has happened to me too many times to count. Personally, I feel it's only a matter of time before I or another blind person, or someone trying to help one of us, gets seriously hurt in a large, busy parking lot.

Please make our ever-growing number of large, busy parking lots safer for Hawaii's blind seniors, adults, children, veterans and tourists, by passing House Bill 2401, and allowing us to obtain a disability parking permit.

Warm Mahalo,
Keith Okazaki
95-1004 Mahea Street
Mililani, HI 96789

Good afternoon Honorable Mizuno:

My name is Jim Kennedy and I am writing as a follow-up to my verbal testimony this morning during the Committee meeting you chaired which addressed HB 2104. I am in favor of the bill's passing. While I am not blind, my wife, Vickie Kennedy, is and I can speak from both my observations of her and from my personal perspective. The following represents what I had to say, plus includes some additional thoughts that I feel are totally relevant.

I am totally in favor of allowing parking placards for the legally blind because to me the whole matter is simply about the safety of the blind, particularly those who are active in our state and communities. Can you imagine for a second, being blind and having to navigate from a parked car in the middle of a Ala Moana shopping center garage row for about 200 or 300 feet to just try to get to a sidewalk fronting the stores? Try doing it just once blindfolded, even with someone you know not far away. Scary!

Being able to park a car right up along the sidewalk gives the blind person a sense of orientation. The blind person needs to know in his or her mind's eye which way to go, and starting off at a sidewalk in front of your parking space helps give just that. For those who are actively mobile, using a cane or a guide dog, this is particularly important. The cane only works upon collision with another object, which could be an impatient driver of a car looking for a parking space. A guide dog is trained to help its handler get safely from point A to point B by taking the person down sidewalks, avoiding obstacles, and carefully helping the person across intersections. The guides are generally disoriented when left to wander down the middle of a drive between parking stalls.

What about the objections being raised? Here are my thoughts on those.

1. The State has too few handicap parking spaces as it is. This surely must be true, we see, it all the time. BUT that is not reason to deny a legally disabled person the accommodation for a parking placard.
2. There are so many blind folks, if the State gives placards to them it will cost maybe \$60,000. I would be shocked if the majority of the blind go for the placards. In Hawaii there are so many blind individuals who basically stay home, and really have given up on the idea of actively travelling around.
3. There are some who hold themselves as being THE EXPERTS and sometimes representative for the blind, and who say the placards aren't necessary. That may be true for some, but why should the State deny the benefit of one to a blind individual. They don't have to go for a placard, but let those who can truly benefit from the safety perspective get a placard.
4. Today, there was a woman who testified against the bill. She cited a committee of some sort that "unanimously" agreed to recommend against the bill. I am not sure everyone understood that only 3 of the 17 committee members were blind. I asked the lady afterwards if the public was given a chance to come and weigh in on its own thoughts. The answer: no they were not!
5. The National Federation for the Blind (NFB) was cited by the opposing woman as a key source for the committee's position against the bill. Well, the NFB can do a lot of good, but it also can do a lot of harm. The good they do is help foster self-confidence and more independence for the blind. But it usually is "their way or the highway!" Make no mistake about it, they are BIG

BUSINESS!!!!!! There are a number of blind individuals who have little or no respect for the tough, sometimes arrogant posture of the NFB. Besides this placard matter, do you know that they oppose: traffic light tweeters that signal a change in the light? Did you know that they have been against the use of those bubble bumps at intersections or along railroad platforms? It wasn't until not long ago that they even began to warm up to the idea that a guide dog could benefit its members. Ever go to an event where NFB had a major role? You can just hear the aggressive, sometimes hostile positions they can take. It can be outright uncomfortable sometime!

I am copying Representative Pine and Senator Espero asking that when the time comes to please support this effort to allow parking placards for the legally blind. Keith Okazaki and my wife, Vickie Kennedy, are also being copied as they also spoke in support of this bill.

I respectfully ask that you, as Chairman of the reviewing Committee, please support HB 2104 and this measure be allowed move up to the next level.

Mahalo nui loa,

Jim Kennedy

LATE Testimony

Dear Chairman Mizuno:

My name is Vickie Kennedy and I was present this morning to give testimony before your committee for House Bill 2104 regarding the Parking Placards being made available for the blind.

As I mentioned in my testimony, I believe that the parking placards are issued to those who have a disability because of health and safety reasons.

I was diagnosed legally blind 34 years ago with Retinitis Pigmentosa and now have been totally blind for the past 12 years. I was a cane user for about 12 years while living in Northern California and received my first guide dog from Guide Dogs for the Blind in June of 2000. Now, I am on my second guide, also from Guide Dogs for the Blind.

I have become quite the independent traveler with my guide and travel to the mainland on Guide Dogs for the Blind Board meetings, in the past travelling almost 10 times a yearly.

While living in Benicia, California, I was able to apply for a Handicap Placard due to my blindness. We would also bring the placard with us when traveling to Honolulu to visit with family a couple of times each year. When we retired and moved back to Honolulu, I was very surprised when I was informed that I wasn't eligible to get one here. Eventually, I did get a placard because of my balance issues and also for my bad back. I have an L-4 bulging disc with disintegration and osteopenia. As I said, I do have my good days and my bad.

Having the parking placard has made all the difference when my husband, Jim and I go shopping. When parking at a handicapped stall, I have instant orientation at the sidewalk and I know exactly where I am. I can separate from my husband, do some shopping with the help of sales staff, and when done, I can give the command of "find the door, and outside" to my guide and she will lead me to the door. Once outside, I am oriented and I can give the command of left or right and when I feel that we are near to the car, I ask my guide to "find the car," and both of my guides have been able to find our car. If the car should be at the end of a long row of parking spaces, this would be impossible, AND extraordinarily dangerous!

If the blind are denied to have the parking placard and have to park in one of the parking aisles in a vast parking lot, we would have no sense of orientation and risk the chance of getting hurt by cars trying to find parking stalls. As you have experienced, when it comes to finding available stalls, patience is not the virtue of many of our drivers, thus, putting the blind individual in danger.

Another very significant and important issue today is the numerous amount of the new hybrid cars – they don't make a sound, which is quite dangerous for us as we can't hear them. I depend on my guide to exercise the "intelligent disobedience" when I give her the command to go forward and she doesn't follow my command because she sees a car coming forward and I don't. This will be a growing issue in big parking lots.

Safety is the key element here and this is why I feel so strongly that blind persons be given the right to be able to obtain parking placards. I am copying Senator Will Espero and Representative Kimberly Pine, both of whom are delegates from Ewa Beach, where I reside.

I ask that you please consider passing House Bill 2104 mainly for the SAFETY of those of us who are blind. Thank you again for letting me testify this morning at the meeting.

Respectfully,

Vickie Kennedy and "Angela"