

Subject: Support for HB0098/SB0185
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To: House Appropriations Committee

I am testifying as a member of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland in support of the Co-Navigator bill HB0098/SB0135. As a Deafblind Marylander, who has received services from the former Support Service Providers (SSPs) now Co-Navigators, I know the need within the Deafblind community. Due to experiencing different degrees of vision and hearing loss, many Deafblind individuals are socially isolated from family, friends, and the communities in which they reside. COVID-19 has made this all too clear to all of us. But for those of us whose communication methods and preferences differ from society, it can be a daunting challenge.

This Bill intends to reduce those communication and navigational barriers Deafblind Marylanders encounter when they seek to engage in social discourse, purchase groceries, or attend religious services. It is important to recognize that Deaf blindness can occur across the lifespan of all ages. I lost my hearing when I was of working age, but others have lost it as children and as senior citizens. I hope that the training and recruitment of Co-Navigators goes across all counties in Maryland to ensure that Deafblind individuals in rural areas have an equal chance of obtaining Co-Navigators to suit their needs as those in urban areas.

There are two common daily events I will share in which using CoNavigators improved the situation. First, the grocery store which is close to my house is short staffed and frequently has no one to assist me in finding my groceries nor are they familiar in using my assistive listening device. The CoNavigators give me the opportunity to shop independently and use my preferred communication device without having to go into an in-depth explanation on what it is and how it works to the grocery store staff. The CoNavigators allow me to “browse items” if I am not sure what exactly I need without having the grocery staff pressuring me to hurry up. Second, when I am attending church, they orient me to the room’s floor plan by describing the layout. They provide protactile communication to let me know when the speaker or audience is laughing or singing. They inform me when we are to stand and sit. This helps me feel a part of the congregation and not separate due to my Deaf blindness. They also help me locate friends to talk to after the service.

HB0098/SB0135 will enrich the lives of all Deafblind Marylanders across the state. The Co-Navigation program will help the Maryland Deafblind to achieve independence and greater autonomy. Please vote in favor of HB0098/SB0135.