

**HB 98 - Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing - Deafblind Co-Navigation Services  
Program**

**Committee Testimony – House Appropriations – Tuesday, January 30, 2024**

**Bill sponsor: Delegate Aaron Kaufman**

Chairman Barnes and Vice Chair Chang – I am Delegate Aaron Kaufman, District 18, Montgomery County. I am introducing HB 98 -the DeafBlind Co-Navigation Services Program bill which would secure funding and establish a program to train persons to be co-navigators to assist the 32,000+ defblind residents of Maryland. Senator Mary Washington is the senate cross-file on this bill.

**This bill is very important. I have had a number of conversations with advocates of this bill including representatives from the Maryland Association of the Deaf, the Governor’s Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing which is supporting the bill, and the National Federation for the Blind which also supporting the bill and residents who are both deaf and blind.**

Persons who are both deaf and blind want to lead as independent lives as possible – this is possible with the assistance of trained and qualified co-navigators. Persons who are both deaf and blind cannot see and they cannot hear. They cannot see blinking signals or hear audio to let them know they can cross the street, they cannot hear the train bells or see the arms coming down at an intersection to alert them that a train is coming – an advocate I

spoke with almost got hit by a train because he could not see the train arms coming down – luckily he had a cane and he was able to stop behind the arms.

Deaf/blind persons also have a lot of difficulties navigating their way through doctor's office buildings and conversing with doctors because they cannot see or hear. If they do not have a person with them who can sign and translate, persons who are deaf/blind are unable to communicate with their doctor and thus not be able to make informed decisions about their health care. Persons who are deaf/blind cannot read a prescription or communicate with a pharmacist unless they have someone with them who can help them. This is dangerous because they could take wrong the medication or take the wrong dosage. This issue can lead to worse health outcomes.

Persons who are deaf/blind feel very isolated and alone, and that has a negative effect on mental health. They are very reliant on friends and family to help them, but friends and family also have their own responsibilities to tend to. In my conversations with members of the deafblind community people have shared with me that they feel very isolated and it is very hard on them.

Co-Navigators can help deafblind individuals lead more independent and fruitful lives.. Co-navigators will assist persons in completing basic but vital tasks such as going to the doctors' office, reading prescription labels, going to the grocery store, assisting persons through bus or train stations and airports.

Washington state has had co-navigation legislation on the books since 1979. Minnesota, since 1980, Florida since 2004, and California has followed suit since then. Several other states are looking into establishing similar programs.

As a person with a disability, we want to live independent lives as possible. The primary goal of the Americans with Disabilities Act is to give people with disabilities the support they need to be part of the fabric of the community. This bill would further that aim and would grant members of the deafblind community with greater independence and a greater sense of dignity. Having a trained co-navigator will reduce persons reliance on friends and family, which sometimes can cause friction.

**I am asking for a favorable report on HB98. Thank you very much for your time.**