



State of Wisconsin
Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities

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Thursday, February 18, 2021

To: Senator Devin LaMahieu, Majority Leader
Senator Janet Bewley, Minority Leader
Representative Jim Steineke, Majority Leader
Representative Gordon Hintz, Minority Leader
Representative Mark Born, Co-Chair, Joint Finance Committee
Representative Amy Loudenberg, Vice-Chair, Joint Finance Committee
Senator Alberta Darling, Co-Chair, Joint Finance Committee
Senator Luther S. Olsen, Vice-Chair, Joint Finance Committee

The new legislative session is beginning as Wisconsin's COVID-19 state of emergency is ongoing. The Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities (GCPD) together with its constituent disability councils want to ensure that people with disabilities are able to participate as full citizens in the legislative process. GCPD is deeply concerned with the process we have heard will be used this budget session, a practice that would allow individual committee chairs to determine the method for testimony offered by members of the public. Some may allow virtual testimony, while others may require an in-person appearance, or worse, that testimony be heard by invitation only. Such a practice is a clear barrier to input to the public record. As the largest minority group in the United States, the voices of people with disabilities are indispensable in the legislative process, and any practice that does not allow for the widely available virtual participation in government is a decision to exclude those for whom transportation is limited and/or personal health and safety would be jeopardized. Virtual participation—to which we have all become accustomed—is a reasonable accommodation for the accessibility, health, and safety of people with disabilities.

Transportation

While it may be an imposition for anyone to journey to Madison simply to provide testimony on issues that affect their lives, the burden on people with disabilities is far greater. For years, statutory councils and independent advocacy groups alike have consistently identified the lack of available and accessible transportation as priority issues in Wisconsin. People who live hours away from Madison should not be considered invisible citizens simply because available and accessible transportation does not exist for them.

Health Risk

People with disabilities as well as their support providers (often family members) must continue to avoid in-person contact until such time as the vaccine has become widely distributed. Failure to do

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so comes with a high risk. According to the Department of Health Services and Centers for Disease Control data, people with disabilities are more likely to contract the COVID-19 virus, more likely to be hospitalized as a result and, tragically, much more likely to die from it. In short, if they want their voices heard, Wisconsin citizens with disabilities would face the possibility of putting their health and well-being at serious risk. This is a critical concern, of course.

Recommendations

The in-person restrictions of 2020, while certainly frustrating to businesses, organizations, and private citizens, have taught us important lessons about the power of technology to provide broad and active participation from a safe distance. GCPD recommends that the Wisconsin Legislature:

- Develop and implement a practical process whereby individuals can provide testimony remotely to legislation and submit that testimony for inclusion in the public record of proceedings.
- Utilize widely available phone or video conferencing technology to facilitate meetings with constituents and advocates.
- Allow written testimony or remote/virtual testimony to be accepted as part of the public record on legislation being heard.

The GCPD is dedicated to enhancing the health and well-being of Wisconsin citizens who have disabilities. As a committee of Governor-appointed volunteers with cross-disability council representation (Board for People with Developmental Disabilities, Council on Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Council on Physical Disabilities, Statutory Council on Blindness), GCPD serves to advise the Governor, state agencies, and the state legislature on issues of concern for people who have disabilities.

Sincerely,

David Morstad

Chair

Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities

CC: Governor Tony Evers, Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes, GCPD Members