

Donna Nelson
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February 25, 2014
RE: HB 232

Dear Representative Thompson,

I strongly support **HB232, the Training and Disability ID Bill**. I support this piece of legislation because the primary goal of this bill is targeted education. This act will ensure that justice, law enforcement and emergency responder professionals will be informed as to what a disability might look like and what barriers a person with a disability might encounter. These professionals will become better equipped to interact with people who experience either apparent or non-apparent disabilities regardless of whether people with disabilities encounter the "system" as victims, witnesses, or alleged perpetrators.

I also support the ID component of the bill because it will enable people who experience a disability to voluntarily disclose pertinent information about their condition(s) in a discreet manner on an Alaska Driver's License or ID card. This discreet marker will assist a professional to recognize that the person in front of them has a disability even though it may not be initially apparent during an interaction. I have heard numerous stories from consumers in my role as an Independent Living Advocate regarding misunderstandings and even mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement due to ignorance of disability and its effects.

For instance, a person with no prior law enforcement contact and no record who happens to experience expressive aphasia (a neurological condition making speech production difficult, especially under stress) was involved in an accident. When the person could not produce vocalizations on command they were yelled at by the responding officer, degraded for perceived willful disobedience and ultimately charged with fault despite not having been the driver at fault. The person attempted to convey the need for an Epi-pen for asthma which was in the dash and was not allowed to retrieve it. They wound up in the emergency room with a severe asthma attack. If the officer and dispatch had been in possession of information about this person's disability, they undoubtedly would have reacted differently and this person would not have been medically compromised and in serious danger. They could have also avoided discrimination, humiliation and the law suit ultimately filed by the individual due to the gross mishandling of the situation.

Another example involves a Native Alaskan who experiences traumatic brain injury and associated physical disability. This individual staggers when walking due to hemiparesis or paralysis on one side of the body. The person was observed leaving a store (without the usual cane because they wanted to appear more independent) and was reported to police as being intoxicated. When officers responded, the person was resting their head on the dash of the car while texting in their lap. Officers surrounded the car, demanded the person get out and proceeded to test for inebriation. There was no evidence of intoxication or substance use so there

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were no arrests or charges, yet the person was not allowed to drive away. This person forced to walk away without evidence of wrong doing has a physical/ mobility impairment and a traumatic brain injury. To police and onlookers the individual was judged as "just another drunk Native."

These are just a few of the stories which I hear regularly and/ or have witnessed while in the community. No disability should ever be used or allowed as an excuse for bad behavior. However, citizens deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. When quick judgments are made without proper information and insight, questionable situations can arise. These occurrences put individuals at risk, violate their rights and expose public agencies such as emergency, fire and police to embarrassing and potentially expensive litigation situations.

Thank you for sponsoring HB232. Mandatory training to recognize and effectively interact with individuals with disability will go a long way toward preventing such misunderstandings and to protect the right of people with disabilities to be treated fairly and appropriately. HB232 will help improve the lives of Alaskans with both apparent and non-apparent disabilities.

Sincerely,

Donna Nelson
(Disability Advocate, Caring family member and
friend of individuals experiencing disability)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Donna Nelson', followed by a long horizontal flourish.