

Transcript
House Committee on Human Services Hearing on HB 3287
April 13, 2021

08:30 Committee Chair, Representative Frank James

The Chair lays out HB 3287 and recognizes Chair González to explain her bill.

08:46 Mary González, Bill Sponsor, Chair of House Sub-Committee on Appropriations: Articles I, IV & V

Thank you Chairman and Committee. I really appreciate you setting this bill: HB 3287. There are approximately 2,500 Texans who are deaf and blind: challenged with dual sensory loss of both hearing and vision. A small percentage of these adults strive to live as independently as possible, but face many barriers to participating in the activities that support living independently—activities that a lot of us take for granted. Many of these autonomous and largely self-supporting individuals don't qualify for the existing services, such as those available through the Medicaid DeafBlind Waiver Program. And as a result they receive little or no community access services. Instead, they must rely primarily on volunteers, friends, family members.

HB 3287 would implement the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities' policy recommendation to establish a Co-Navigator program, also known to some as a Support Service Provider, within the Health & Human Services Commission. Texas would join numerous other states in providing DeafBlind persons the services of trained personnel to convey varying environmental information, as well as verbal and non-verbal interactions. Co-Navigators would work with DB individuals and assist them to autonomously handle daily living and civic activities: including shopping, banking, traveling, voting, and attending medical appointments and community & civic events. Obviously it is very important for us to help, and think about ways that I would say we can support our DB community. And so with that, I reserve the right to close.

10:26 Chair

You certainly have it. Members, any questions for Chair González? All right, thank you for bringing this to us. All right, the Chair calls Kimberly Powers, DeafBlind Service Center of Austin, in testifying for the bill. And

we'll just let you know, we have Representative Hull, Representative Noble, Rose, Hinojosa, myself (Chair Frank), Representative Klick, Neave and Meza on the dais. State your name, who you are with, and your position on the bill please.

11:17 Kimberly Powers

Good morning, thank you. It's an honor to be here speaking to the legislature today. My name is Kim Powers, I'm a DeafBlind Texan, and I'm very anxious to tell you my story.

Back in the day I had a television program called "Kim's World." It focused on children with disabilities ... and we showed events such as hobbies, water skiing, jet skiing, horseback riding, teaching children aerobics. We visited the San Antonio zoo, and told children's stories. For example, one time I was the character of Snow White: dressed in character, with children sitting around me—but had no Co-Navigator. I thank my mother for volunteering as a Co-Navigator during that period.

Moving on, I then had come to the Capitol here to fight alongside with the Deaf Grassroots movement. I worked with the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities to help establish in Texas what was called Support Service Provider Coalition—now called Co-Navigators.

And now I'd like you all to imagine COVID hitting—and the DeafBlind community, the citizens feeling helpless and hopeless without the services they so need. The agencies who provided the services prior to COVID, were unable to help us, due to the close nature of our work. Meanwhile, my bills had stacked up, with no-one to read my mail to me. My medications all ran out. If I had technological issues with my equipment, such as this [showing committee an assistive device], I had no-one to support me. And it has been quite the experience.

And then all of a sudden, my sister unexpectedly died of a heart attack. And my daughter had to take on the role of a Co-Navigator, and drive me to Amarillo to be with family, attend the funeral, and then bring me back. And I thank her for volunteering and giving so much of her time to me. So imagine a life for us without Co-Navigators.

The Texas Co-Navigator bill: if you will consider and sign off on this bill, and provide HHSC with the ability to run this program, our family can just be our

family members, and no longer volunteer for us. Our family and friends can support us as friends and not volunteer their time. Establishing this program will allow them to be paid, and be paying into tax [supported] services. Thank you for your consideration. It's an honor to be here today. Any questions?

14:30 Chair

Thank you for your testimony. It really is amazing. Members, any questions? Yes, Chair Neave has a question for you.

14:35 Representative Neave

I just want to thank you for coming to testify to share your story. We really appreciate it, and it means a lot to us.

14:45 Kim Powers

You're very welcome. It's my pleasure to be here.

14:53 Chair

Thank you. Chair calls Lucy Robles, Deaf Grassroots Movement of Texas and self: registered for the bill. ... Okay, she is not here. Okay. The Chair calls Ron Lucey, Executive Director of the Office of Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities, registered neutral on the bill. ... Will you pull the microphone? State your name, who you're with, and your position on the bill please.

15:25 Ron Lucey

My name is Ron Lucey. I'm the Executive Director of the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities. I'm here to provide resource testimony on the bill. I also have a staff member here who has copies of our Co-Navigator / SSP Report, updated in 2020. I'd like her to share that with the committee.

Just to provide a little bit of background. In 2016, two hundred members of the Deaf Grassroots Movement came to the Capitol to meet with Governor Abbott. And Governor Abbott assigned my staff and I to meet with the Deaf Grassroots Movement—where we were educated on the unmet needs of DeafBlind Texans.

We issued our first Report to the Legislature in 2017. And the Governor's Committee voted unanimously to support a policy to establish a Co-Navigator (or SSP) program at HHSC.

Based on input from this committee in the immediate previous session, we went back and looked at the data in our report, and also eligibility guidelines, and have made changes to the report. And we are providing that report again today. I'm here to answer any questions you have on the content of that report.

Also, Ms. Turner is here today, and has more than thirty years of experience working Deaf Texans and can answer any questions about the challenges of individuals who are DeafBlind. With that I'll take any questions you might have.

16:56 Chair

Thank you very much. I thank you for all of your work in this area. Members, are there any questions? All right. Thank you very much.

The Chair calls Erik Hammer: [representing] self, registered for the bill. [Mr. Hamer approaches and orients at the podium.] All right, thank you very much. Just to let you know, we have Representatives Hull, Noble, Rose, Hinojosa, Frank, Klick, Neave and Meza on the podium, or on the dais.

18:00 Erik Hammer

Good morning Chair, Vice-Chair, and members of the House Committee. My name is Erik Hammer. And I am representing as a DeafBlind person, in favoring of the House Bill 3287.

I have been an Occupational Therapist for 27 years. I teach patients on how to regain their independent daily living activities related to impairment. I've worked in a private hospital, I've worked in an acute care hospital, as well as children's facility. I'm an advocate for independence and I intend to be a valued member of the community.

... [speaker struggles with testimony] ...

Okay, let me back up again, sorry. So Co-Navigators are trained to provide important visual and auditory information in daily activities, for DeafBlind

persons like myself with our preferred mode of communication, so that we can fully make informed decisions and participate in daily activities—like each of you.

My vision has continued to deteriorate. So I work more and more with Co-Navigators to complete my errands and to participate in daily activities—and not be a burden to family members and friends.

I have personally educated ... volunteers, as well as a student Sign Language Interpreter, to be my Co-Navigator ... because there is no service in Austin. ... There are services ... in Washington State, where I'm originally from, as well as thirteen other states that provide state-funded statewide Co-Navigator services.

I want to share ... take the time to kind of share you with my experience working with a [Co-]Navigator personally, to show you the way of how a [Co-]Navigator works with me. On job applications, and the medical questionnaires are very small print—or contrast—and so it's really hard for me to read. And so the Co-Navigator and I read together the form, and then fill in my answers and my responses to the ... on the form.

Grocery stores are very challenging. And the cashier register, or the cashier experience can be very stressful. So the Co-Navigator and I, we interact with the cashier, do the card-reader machine, and also try to use the self checkout screen, the touch screen. And so all those tasks are very challenging to do on my own.

With a Co-Navigator ... I am able to be more oriented to browsing the shelf and look for specific items on the shelf. And so that way, and so then I learn what's on sale to compare prices—so it allows ME to make the choice. Noisy and busy environments are very challenging due to my poor vision as well as my profound hearing loss. And so the Co-Navigator feeds information to me, as well as questions and comments: which allows ME to respond to the situation.

So please support the Co-Navigator services to the adult DeafBlind Texan, and ... favorably voting to support the HB 3287 out of this, outside of the Committee. We are able to make our own life choices. We are a viable citizen. We are able to be independent. So we need Co-Navigators.

Thank you for your time and attention. Feel free, I'll answer any questions you may have.

22:54 Chair

Thank you very much. You did a phenomenal job. Representative Noble has a question for you.

22:59 Representative Noble

Thank you very much for coming today and sharing this with us. I'm just, ... I'm trying to get a handle on what this would look like in your life. Would this be someone that you need every day? On occasion? All the time? Just kind of give me an idea of your life and how often you would need a Co-Navigator.

23:20 Erik Hammer

I've thought about being efficient. So I would plan ahead with setting a time and date of things I need to do, and try to consolidate all of the things I need to do. I'm a planner. So it would be planning ahead: from errands I need to run, any doctor appointments, and doing grocery shopping. So, that's how I would, that's what it would look like—the picture. ... EACH of you can go everyday, and do things you need to do. But a DeafBlind person, we kind of have to consolidate, to make things happen.

23:57 Representative Noble

Thank you.

22:58 Chair

Thank you. Members, are there any other questions? All right. Thank you for your testimony. You did a fantastic job. The Chair calls Randi Turner, Office of the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities. And I show that nobody else registered to testify on this bill.

24:23 Randi Turner

Good morning, ...

24:24 Chair

State your name and who you are with.

24:25 Randi Turner

Randi Turner. I'm with the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities. Just here as a resource if you have any additional questions about our report, or about the Deaf Community, or the Blind Community that I can answer for you.

24:37 Chair

Okay. Members, are there any questions? All right, ya'll did a phenomenal job doing this. Thank you very much.

24:43 Randi Turner

Thank you.

24:45 Chair

All right. At this time, there are no other witnesses signed up to testify. Is there anyone else wishing to testify on, for or against HB 3287? Seeing none, public testimony is closed. And the Chair recognizes Chair González to close on HB 3287.

And if I could just comment, thank you very much. I know we could have had tons of people in here at this point in session. We have about twenty bills to consider. I think you've given us a great idea about what this is about. There may be some questions for you. But, I really appreciate your consideration of the process. So at this point we'll hear your close.

25:21 Mary González, Bill Sponsor

Thank you. ... I appreciate your consideration. I appreciate all of the staff that helped make today possible. So, thank you so much. ... We all need wine. [The members, Mary González and others share a laugh.]

Members, this is a pretty simple bill. All we're trying to do is allow HHSC to create a Co-Navigator Program—that's it. If you allow me to allow HHSC, I will go find the money in appropriations—that's MY job. [again more laughter] So, let's work together and create this CoNavigator program. With that, I close.

25:49 Chair

All right. Thank you very much. If there is no objection, HB 3287 will be left pending. Is there objection? The Chair hears none. And HB 3287 is left pending without objection.