



Equality

Disability Advocates Fight For Access To Legisla- tive Process

by **Christine Stuart**
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re-pandemic (CTNewsJunkie file) Credit: Christine Stuart photo

The legislative process, including public hearings, should be accessible to all, but individuals with disabilities have struggled this session to gain access and have been forced to file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice.

The issues started almost as soon as the legislative session.

On February 10, Mary Ann Langton, who has Cerebral Palsy, contacted the clerk of the Environment Committee because she wanted to give testimony about plastic straws. She arranged for her personal care attendant to read her testimony at the public hearing and was promised a specific window of time in which to give it since her speech is not always clear. Her personal care attendant is only with her for a few hours per day.

“The clerk told her she could not specify a time that Ms. Langton would be able to testify and she should contact her legislator. She did so. She was not provided with a time,” according to the complaint.

During another instance, five individuals who are deaf or blind wanted to testify and arranged for accommodations with the clerk to testify early in the day, but when the hearing started the sign language interpreter for the individuals had not arrived. When she finally arrived she signed for the first two, but then left saying she wasn’t hired for all five. A kind person who was not certified as a sign language interpreter accompanied the other three.

On March 16, Kathy Flaherty, executive director of the CT Legal Rights Project, requested accommodation for some of her clients at Whiting Forensic Hospital to testify so she contacted the clerk to set up an accommodation. She wanted them to testify in the first hour or two of

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the clerk agreed to ask the committee chairs. The response was “where people end up on the list after I randomly shuffle it is the Department of Justice complaint.

users were told there wasn’t enough room for five people in the hearing room at the same time, but could watch as they testified.

“The accommodations for this public process is random, haphazard approach,” Molly Cole, coordinator for the Cross Disability



She said they contacted Legislative Management now three times, but only received one response.

“We offered solutions and training opportunities, which they have not accepted,” Cole said. “There is still no uniform guidance for clerks in the building to provide needed accommodations in a timely and consistent manner.”

Jim Taburro, executive director of the Joint Committee on Legislative Management, said they haven’t received any communication from the Department of Justice.

However, “we have been in communication with the complainant and we stand on our record of providing accommodations for people with disabilities to testify at the Legislative Office Building,” he added.

Cole said his responses have been unacceptable.

“Since we’ve reached out to him the violations have continued,” Cole said. “It’s across committees, it’s not just one committee. It represents a lack of planned, coordinated effort to accommodate people with disabilities on an individual basis.”

The alliance wrote three letters to Tamburro before filing complaints with the Department of Justice. Tamburro did respond to one of their letters on February 17.

In his response Tamburro said “We have communicated with all committee clerks to remind them to be responsive to requests for accommodations should they require additional assistance with

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removing the 10 day advance request for sign language interpreted with a local architect and engineering firm who are accessible to conduct a study of the Capitol Complex.

Executive and legislative leadership have yet to meet with the group.

Legislative Management to put one person in charge of all of this protocol to handle these situations.

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