



ROB HUTTON

STATE SENATOR | 5th DISTRICT

Wisconsin State Capitol

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December 5, 2023

TO: Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue

FR: Senator Rob Hutton

RE: Senate Bill 398 — a tax credit for transportation services for blind workers.

Good morning members of the Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue, thank you for the opportunity to speak on Senate Bill 398 — a tax credit for transportation services for blind workers.

The need for this legislation came to my attention during my visits earlier this year with employees of Beyond Vision and Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired. As the ability of these businesses to grow has allowed opportunities for physical expansion to new more modern locations, it also poses ongoing challenges for transportation accessibility for individuals located away from bus lines or for those who don't have carpool options.

This legislation will provide financial assistance for able bodied adults who want to participate in the workforce through a non-refundable tax credit for individuals who are legally blind (as defined by the IRS) to cover up to 50% of their work-related transportation costs. The credit is capped at \$1,500 per tax year.

Roughly 70% of individuals with visual impairments are unemployed. Senate Bill 398 will help combat the transportation barrier to employment within this community. The average monthly rideshare costs \$100.00 and with recent increases in inflation a maximum of \$1,500 a year will provide flexibility in meeting increasing prices in the transportation market.

In closing, this legislation is one more means to assist with workforce development through reliable and safe transportation for those who might otherwise be prohibited from contributing to society with their many skills and abilities simply because their vision is impaired. When we have a thriving workforce where all levels of talent can contribute everyone benefits.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration of this bill. I respectfully ask for your support of Senate Bill 398.



DAVID STEFFEN

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 4th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

December 5, 2023

Testimony to the Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue re: Senate Bill 398

Chairman Hutton and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor of Senate Bill 398. This bipartisan bill will create a tax credit for individuals who are legally blind to help cover transportation costs associated with getting to and from work.

Roughly 70% of Wisconsinites who are legally blind are unemployed. Access to affordable and reliable transportation is often the greatest barrier to employment for this community. While folks who are legally blind possess the motivation, education and talents to professionally contribute to the workforce, they remain almost entirely untapped, often due to transportation barriers. This bill works to remove this obstacle to employment for people who are legally blind and will reduce our statewide workforce shortage by empowering this often ignored population.

Under this bill, people who are legally blind (as defined and qualified by the IRS) will be eligible to receive a non-refundable tax credit to help cover a portion of the costs associated with their employment-related transportation needs. The tax credit will cover up to 50% of transportation costs and is capped at \$1,500 per tax year. As this credit is non-refundable, the credit is essentially self-funded via tax revenue generated by the claimant.

The Wisconsin Department of Revenue estimates that if all eligible individuals claimed this credit, it would cost approximately \$1.3 million annually—an investment that would pay dividends in terms of reducing the unemployment rate within this community. Wisconsin Economic Development Association (WEDA) recognizes the economic value of this legislation, which is why they have registered their support.

While many of us may not think twice about getting where we need to go, this is simply not a luxury afforded to individuals who are legally blind. This tax credit is a step towards removing this barrier to employment and restoring independence for this community.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak in favor of this legislation. I welcome any questions you have regarding Senate Bill 398 and ask that you will join me in supporting this proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Steffen".

David Steffen
State Representative
4th Assembly District



**Wisconsin Council of the
Blind & Visually Impaired**

754 Williamson Street, Madison, WI 53703
608-255-1166
WCBlind.org
info@WCBlind.org

To: Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue
Re: SB 398, relating to a tax credit for blind workers
Date: Tuesday, December 5, 2023

Dear Chair Hutton and Members of the Senate Committee on
Universities and Revenue,

On behalf of the approximately 110,000 Wisconsin residents living with blindness or significant vision loss, the Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired asks for your support of SB 398. The mission of the Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired is to promote the dignity and empowerment of Wisconsinites living with vision loss through public policy advocacy, education and vision rehabilitation services, including the free distribution of white canes.

The fastest growing population of people living with blindness are older adults whose vision loss is due to diseases like macular degeneration, glaucoma and complications from diabetes. The number is anticipated to double by 2050. Unemployment and underemployment rates among working-age adults with severe vision loss remain at very high levels, around 70%. Blind and visually impaired job seekers face significant barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment, including transportation access and affordability. Other barriers include lack of access to assistive technologies in the workplace and employer bias.

Since adults with blindness and vision impairment are among the 31% of Wisconsin residents who are non-drivers, we are dependent on public transportation, taxis, ride-sharing services, rides from family and friends, and walking to get to work, run errands and participate in community activities. The most affordable form of transportation, fixed route public transit, is only available in medium to larger cities, and even when available it may not get near enough to the user's

destination. This means that the individual must use more costly means of transportation like ride-share and taxi. It is unrealistic to depend on family and friends to provide consistent and sustainable transportation. The cost is often so prohibitive that individuals may only be able to afford to get to and from work and have little extra to do other necessary errands or visit family and friends. It is not uncommon for individuals to be forced to leave employment because they cannot afford the cost of transportation. It is important to note that in many of our rural communities, ride-share services are extremely limited or nonexistent.

Passage of SB 398 would reimburse a portion of work-related transportation for people with blindness and significant vision loss through a tax credit. The reduction of costly transportation expenses would allow workers to maintain employment or to accept a job they might otherwise have been unable to take. It also allows for more discretionary income to help stimulate the local economy.

It is imperative to note, however, that while passage of SB 398 has benefit for its intended audience, there are still hundreds of thousands of Wisconsinites who have limited access to transportation to get to work, healthcare appointments, grocery stores, and other community services and to maintain community connections to reduce social isolation and loneliness. Statutorily required programs like Specialized Transportation for Seniors and People with Disabilities (Wis. Stat. 85.21, 85.22 and 85.215) and public transit and paratransit remain woefully underfunded, even after the passage of the most recent state budget. These programs are critical lifelines for people throughout the state, particularly in our rural areas where options are extremely limited. Transportation access is an issue that our legislature must engage with if we are to see all our residents thrive and help build a robust economy with a healthy populace.

Thank you very much for your careful consideration of SB 398. We look forward to the committee voting to send the bill to the full Senate for a floor vote. The Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired is happy to serve as a resource to you as a trusted source of information on issues facing our state's blindness community. Please reach out to us with questions or for advisement on issues related to

transportation, healthcare access, access to vision rehabilitation services, voting access, education and employment.

Sincerely,

Denise Jess, Executive Director



December 4, 2023

Senator Rob Hutton
Chair
Senate Committee
on Universities and Revenue
313 South
State Capitol
Madison, WI 53708

RE: S398 - Transportation Tax Credit for Workers Who Are Blind

Dear Senator Hutton:

On Tuesday, December 5, 2023 the Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue will be hearing testimony on S398 that was introduced by Senators Hutton, Nass, Hesselbein and Taylor. We respectfully request your support and vote yes to move the bill forward out of Committee.

Beyond Vision's mission is to "Enrich the Lives of Americans Who are Blind Through the Dignity of Work Valued by Our Customers and the Community." We were founded in 1903 as a state agency. Through legislation in 1985, we were spun off from the State and became an independent 501(c)(3). Since then, we have maintained a strong partnership with the State of Wisconsin. In the last State biennium budget, Beyond Vision was awarded a \$5 million grant to help construct our VisABILITY Center. This workforce development investment will help us expand employment for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Currently, there are not enough workers to meet the needs of Wisconsin employers. Yet, 70 percent of working age Americans who are blind are not working. Several factors contribute to this stubborn statistic. One of those is reliable and affordable transportation. This is especially true for those who live in smaller communities and don't have access to options like city buses or subsidized paratransit programs.


S398 introduces a tax credit that allows individuals who are legally blind to claim up to \$1,500 annually in a tax credit for expenses incurred for transportation between work and home. Eligible transportation expenses include bus fares, paratransit fees, and rideshare expenses. The fact that this workforce development investment comes in the form of a tax credit minimizes administrative costs that would incur if it was done through a program or grant process.

Based upon our experience working with people who are blind or visually impaired, we strongly believe that this tax credit will incentivize people who are legally blind to remain in the work force. For those who are not currently working, the tax credit will minimize one of the factors that may be preventing them from engaging in the workforce.

The worker shortage will continue to be a challenge for decades. We need to do everything we can to get everyone who wants to work into jobs. We would appreciate your support of S398.

Again, thank you for your support of the commitment to upward mobility of Wisconsin citizens who are blind or visually impaired. If you have any questions, please contact me at rbuettner@beyondvision.com.

Sincerely,


Rob Buettner
Vice President of Human Resources
& Business Services
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West Allis, WI 53214
414.778.5800 (p)

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