



# DAVID STEFFEN

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 4<sup>th</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

October 10, 2023

## Testimony to the Assembly Committee on Ways and Means re: Assembly Bill 408

Chairman Macco and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor of Assembly Bill 408. 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 Assembly Bill 408 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  
4<sup>th</sup> Assembly District



# ROB HUTTON

STATE SENATOR | 5<sup>th</sup> DISTRICT

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October 10, 2023

TO: Assembly Committee on Ways and Means

FR: Senator Rob Hutton

RE: Assembly Bill 408 — a tax credit for transportation services for blind workers.

Chairman Macco and members of the Assembly Ways and Means Committee, thank you for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 408 — 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 a challenge for transportation accessibility as individuals are now located away from bus lines or their spouse's place of employment is too far away to carpool thus eliminating a reliable mode of transportation.

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. Assembly Bill 408 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 vote in support of AB 408.



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

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To: Assembly Committee on Ways and Means  
Re: AB 408, relating to a tax credit for blind workers  
Date: Tuesday, October 10, 2023

Dear Chair Macco and Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

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 AB 408. 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, complications of diabetes and glaucoma. The population is anticipated to double by 2050. Unemployment 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 or 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 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, but 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.

The passage of AB 408 would help reimburse a portion of work-related transportation for people with blindness and significant vision loss through a tax credit. The reduction of managing 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 AB 408 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 AB 408. We look forward to the committee voting to send the bill to the entire Assembly 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 advisement on issues related to transportation, healthcare access, access to vision rehabilitation

services, voting access for people with disabilities, education and employment.

Sincerely,

Denise Jess, Executive Director