



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

2/6/2024

**Testimony in support of HB 426**  
**Places of Public Accommodation - Motion Picture Houses - Captioning**

Chair Wilson and Members of the Economic Matters Committee,

**HB 426** would require movie theaters to offer open captioning by displaying the written text of the audio content on the big screen. This way, they can follow the dialogue and sound effects in real time without the need for a separate device, such as a handheld closed captioning device. In addition, open captioning ensures that they have the same access to the movie-going experience as everyone else, improving their overall enjoyment and engagement with the content.

Smaller theaters might offer a handful of screenings per week. Others might offer a dozen or more. I don't think it's an overreach to ask that just two include captions. Frankly, when we weigh the number of people this would benefit against the number it would hurt, it's surprising movie theaters don't already do this.

Many of the dozens of testimonials supporting this bill focus on its impact on deaf and hard-of-hearing people, a group that has historically been locked out of moviegoing entirely. In recent years, some developments have made it possible for these folks to attend screenings with closed captions shown on little handheld devices. Still, these have to be proactively requested, can be distracting, out of sync, or plagued with technical problems. Just take a moment to imagine that you're at the movies, and there's no sound. You have to glance back and forth between the action on the screen and a little device in your lap to keep track of what everyone is saying. Does that sound like it's worth the ever-higher price of a ticket?

Let us remember the vulnerable populations in our society. Seniors may struggle to hear every word in a movie with intense sound effects. Would they prefer to read captions on a small handheld screen? Or parents who want their children to expand their vocabulary and improve their literacy, as studies have shown that watching movies with captions can positively impact a child's literacy skills. And what about English learners of all ages, who are not only trying to comprehend the dialogue, but also the cultural references and humor that will help them improve their communication skills? Open captioning on the big screen can make these potential customers feel more welcomed and included in the movie-going experience.

Movie theater owners have reached out to me to express their concerns. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the industry. However, this bill has the potential to help the industry recover rather than hinder it. That is why I am bringing it to your attention. My goal is to attract more customers and support local businesses. I understand that not everyone may prefer open captions, so I am not proposing a universal requirement. Customers who strongly object to open captions can attend a different showing. Unfortunately, too many people have been denied access to movie-going for a long time, and this bill will help to change that.

Mother Teresa once said, "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love." Offering open captioning in movie theaters is a small step toward creating a more inclusive and accessible experience for everyone, particularly for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who might otherwise be excluded or face difficulties following the audio content.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. Bhandari", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

The Honorable Delegate Harry Bhandari  
Maryland Legislative District 8