



COMMISSION ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Marc Elrich
County Executive

Seth Morgan, M.D.
Chair

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF MARYLAND SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER ACT HB535

Submitted by the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities

February 24, 2021

Dear Chairman Pendergrass and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

The Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities writes to you to request your support of HB535- "Maryland Sign Language Interpreting Act" and extend our appreciation for giving this issue the time and consideration it deserves. We encourage you to pass this bill, as it will require licensure for sign language interpreters working in the State of Maryland and ensure that the Deaf community members have access to qualified sign language interpreters.

While we may see interpreters during emergency briefings or updates regarding the current pandemic, those interpreters do not need to be qualified by law. Consider the example in 2017 when Hurricane Irma was about to make landfall in Florida. The Manatee County Board of County Commissioners hired an "interpreter" to interpret emergency information for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing views. While one may think, providing an interpreter may seem like a proactive and inclusive consideration, little did they know that they did more harm than good. Manatee County hired the "interpreter" only because he knew some sign because his brother was Deaf. He had no training or specialized skills to be signing to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community in Florida. Due to his lack of training, he was warning the community in sign language of "Pizza" and "Bear Monster" when the mayor was saying "water is rising" and "evacuate now." You may be asking, how does this happen? Well, the simple answer is Florida does not require individuals to hold credentials or licenses to provide sign language interpreting services in any capacity.

Out of 50 states, only five states have no legislation about ASL-English Interpreters, Maryland being one of those five states. The story about the interpreter in Florida made national news and was an embarrassment to Florida. We need to protect our Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community in Maryland by ensuring that our Deaf and Hard of Hearing community has equal access to information. This includes accurate and up to date information. To achieve this, we must pass this bill to ensure that all interpreters practicing within the State of Maryland are qualified and licensed before working in the State.

According to the Governor's Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing, there are over 1 million Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents in the State of Maryland. With our proximity to the world's only university, all programs and services are specifically designed to accommodate Deaf and Hard Hearing students. There

is no shortage of individuals who rely on interpreting services to navigate within a hearing world, whether it be a doctor's office, a job interview, or a press briefing; we must ensure that our interpreters in the State of Maryland are certified. HB535 will provide Maryland with the right tools and processes to ensure that practicing interpreters in Maryland are certified and held accountable.

This bill's passage is undeniably essential to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community in Maryland and is important for all residents in Maryland. With this bill's passage, we can ensure that everyone has equal access and everyone has the correct information. We urge you to support the passage of HB535 - "Maryland Sign Language Interpreter Act."

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Seth A Morgan". The signature is written in dark ink and features a long, sweeping horizontal line at the end.

Seth A. Morgan, M.D.
Chair