

To Chairman Pena-Meinyk, Vice Chair Kelly and the members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

I represent the Maryland Sign Language Interpreter Licensure team under the Maryland Association of the Deaf. I am writing in favor of HB260. Over the past several years, we've collaborated with a variety of groups reflecting the diversity of our community to bring this bill together to protect deaf consumers and our interpreters in their highest regards of the profession.

As you may know, in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law, requiring qualified interpreters to be provided for any business providing services to the public. Unfortunately, without federal or state requirements for qualification, people who simply know some sign language, but lack the training in interpretation are working in high stakes situations and causing undue harm to the Deaf community. Many of us saw an example of these situations in 2017 in Florida when a signer was put on the news stations warning of Hurricane Irma and instead warned of a pizza bear monster. Without critical information being relayed, Deaf people remained in harm's way. This was a very visible example of something that happens daily in the state of MD in college classes, courtrooms, physicians offices, hospitals and job interviews. HB260 is, at its heart, a consumer protection bill.

The bill not only licenses interpreters, but also contains a provision to develop regulations for agencies. This is an important provision because there are agencies out there using deceptive practices to fill jobs with unqualified interpreters. At times these interpreters are not given the information necessary to determine whether they are qualified. Yet, they bear the brunt of the penalty unless agencies also face regulation. Agencies will be part of the process for developing these regulations to make sure their voices are heard as well.

Although adding a layer of regulation, this bill will not create a shortage of qualified interpreters. The intention of this bill is to increase the pool of skilled interpreters in Maryland. To those ends, there are provisions for the establishing of supplemental workshops and programs to help interpreters, especially historically marginalized groups, become licensed. The only interpreters who will be filtered out are those doing harm by working while not qualified for the job.

The bill contains no grandfather clause for signers who have been working for years because some of these signers are the reason we need this bill. Some have been practicing in the profession for a long time as unskilled interpreters doing harm. Those who are skilled will be able to get a license via one of the 3 mechanisms for qualifying for licensure. The large majority of interpreters will be licensed by virtue of national or regional certification. For the minority who are not able to take the exam, the Board will establish criteria to show a minimum competency.

There are businesses in Maryland that already follow the practices outlined in this bill. Many of the reputable interpreting agencies employ only certified interpreters or those who have met a minimum criteria for qualification. They believe in the spirit of what we are proposing.

Maryland businesses in general will also benefit from this bill as it takes the guesswork out of hiring a qualified interpreter and prevents miscommunications that can lead to legal action or harm to both parties. The businesses or agencies who would oppose the bill are the ones who have been hiring non-qualified, non-certified, and in some instances, fraudulent interpreters for purely financial reasons. The practice is being done because there is a lack of regulation or enforcement of such and there are no consequences.

We Deaf people live with the reality that our voices might never be truly heard. This bill provides a way for the state to recognize protections that ensure we don't lose that opportunity before we even get a chance to try. Because of the current lack of consumer protection, there have been cases where medical and legal ramifications have been permanent and life-changing. There is no telling the countless voiceless that have suffered from this lack of protection.

I'd like to leave you with some statistics from the state of Maryland:

468 Certified Interpreters: Live in Maryland

124 Certified Interpreters: Live in DC

82 Certified Interpreters: Live in North Va

25 Certified Interpreters: Live in Del

Total nationally certified Interpreters Available to Serve Maryland from Region: 699

This number doesn't include those who are eligible for a provisional license or for a full license by meeting other criteria. This is the largest number of qualified interpreters clustered in one region in the entire country.

I ask you to help Maryland get back on track by joining the 40+ other states who already have some form of interpreter regulation. Help us protect Deaf and hearing consumers from undue harm by fraudulent signers and set a minimum standard for working interpreters.

Stephanie Summers