

Sponsor Testimony: Delegate Aaron Kaufman

For the Health & Government Operations Committee – March 8, 2024

Chair Pena Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee – I am Delegate Aaron Kaufman, District 18, Montgomery County.

I am asking for a favorable report on HB 1069 – Commission for the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing. This bill would establish a workgroup and then a commission – the bill has been amended to include these provisions at the recommendation of Eric Luedtke, the Governor’s Chief Legislative Officer. The Commission is necessary to provide and advocate for accessible and comprehensive services, foster inclusivity, equal opportunities and an improved quality of life for individuals in Maryland who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing.

According to the Maryland Association of the Deaf, there are 32,000+ residents in the State of Maryland who are deafblind – meaning they are both deaf and blind, thus they cannot see and they cannot hear. This population needs special services – including co-navigators who can assist them with navigating public transportation – one of our advocates almost got hit by a train because he could not

see the blinking lights or hear the bells when a train was coming – thank goodness he had a cane and he could feel the arms coming down to block the tracks. This population also needs assistance going to the grocery store, going to the bank, making their way through a doctor’s office building or a hospital to ensure they get to the correct location, and reading prescription labels. Usherla DeBerry, the Director of the Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) told me about a person who passed away because they took wrong medication because they could not read the label and did not have anyone to help them. This is a detriment to people’s health. The deafblind community also needs trained interpreters who know sign language and tactile sign language as part of communications.

The workgroup would be responsible for creating policies for the commission as well as publishing a report on best practices – including the provision of specialized case management, recommending outreach efforts, coordination with other state agencies, identifying barriers and gaps in communications and developing solutions to improve the quality of life for these residents. The commission would also be designated with the responsibility of assessing the exact number of persons who are deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing in Maryland, among other responsibilities. The work group will also appoint an Executive Director for the commission which will go into effect on July 1, 2025.

The additional \$70,000 in the fiscal note will be deferred until 2025 until the director for the commission is hired.

Maryland has a Commission on Disabilities and an Interagency Disabilities Board – both are excellent but are too broad to serve the specific needs of the deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing Marylanders. Our current governor is a wonderful advocate for these communities, but this has not always been the case with other Governors.

The commission would include a delegate, a state senator and representatives of organizations who serve the deaf and hard of hearing populations. Commission members will have to be residents of Maryland and be active in the discussions and policy making processes. Members of the work group and commission will also have extensive knowledge and experience with the deaf community. The legislation also establishes terms of service on this Commission. This commission is vital for serving populations in Maryland that are isolated from the rest of us.

I am honored to be working with Senator Mary Washington who is the Senate cross-file on this bill. I have been working with ODHH and MD Association of the Deaf on this bill since October – both entities are in support of this bill. Fourteen other states specifically have a Commission of the Deaf,

DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing. These states include West Virginia, Massachusetts, Illinois, Arizona and Colorado. This bill is an opportunity to help many Marylanders and their families.

I am asking for a favorable report on HB 1069. Thank you very much for your consideration of this bill.