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Honorable Glen Barnes, chair

House Appropriations Committee

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Bill  OB0678   Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library: Funding and Budget Submission

Friday, February 21, 2025

I am Ricardo Lopez, coordinator of library media at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf, a demonstration school mandated by the United States Congress to spearhead innovative practices in the education of deaf and hard of hearing students in the United States and its territories.  I hold a library media specialist certification from the Maryland State Department of Education.  My testimony is to support increased funding for the Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library (MD DCDL).

As a longtime resident of the state of Maryland, I have seen the needs of the deaf and deaf-blind Marylanders to have a centralized hub where they can find the reliable sources of information they need to carry on with their daily lives.  Before becoming a librarian, I have experienced the barriers and limited number of resources related to deafness, culture and education in several public libraries in the state and other places outside Maryland.

Libraries have transformed the way our communities by combining traditional spaces with vast online repositories of knowledge. For the Deaf community, digital libraries offer an invaluable opportunity to access resources, learn, and engage in culture without the barriers that traditional library formats might impose.  Both traditional and digital libraries cater to the diverse communication needs of deaf and deaf-blind customers by offering resources in multiple formats, such as captioned videos, transcripts, alternate text (alt text) and sign language-based content delivered in person or online.

Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library has been instrumental in fostering inclusivity and providing equal access to information. In an increasingly digital world, libraries have transformed from traditional spaces filled with physical books to vast, online repositories of knowledge. For the deaf community, Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library offers an invaluable opportunity to access resources, learn, and engage in culture as the barriers that traditional library formats might have imposed for many years. Members of our community benefit from the resources offered by the Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library.  As an example, schools serving students who are deaf, hard of hearing and hearing can access information available in the collection related to the deaf community.  These schools are from the metropolitan Washington DC/ Maryland / Virginia areas, but also from other states and territories. In 2019, I started a partnership between the school where I work and Washington DC Public Libraries, which provided access to a varied array of online resources for our students.  At this time I am working on a similar collaborative plan with MD DCDL.

Conversely, hearing customers benefit from the existence of the Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library to understand, learn and work with their deaf peers in schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces.  A digital library that is well-supported can offer not just educational resources, but also a platform for deaf culture, stories, and history, helping preserve and amplify the voices and experiences of the deaf community. This cultural representation is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring that the deaf community's rich history is understood and respected.

With an increasing number of educational and informational materials available in accessible formats, deaf, deaf-blind and hearing individuals can enjoy a more equitable educational experience, enabling them to learn at their own pace and on their terms.

Furthermore, the continued support for MD DCDL ensures that they remain adaptable to emerging technologies and platforms. Virtual learning tools, e-books, and interactive content are rapidly evolving, and it is vital that MD DCDL remains current with these trends to serve the deaf community effectively. Whether through new sign language apps, improved captioning services, or audio-to-text systems, MD DCDL must constantly improve to meet the evolving needs of users.

In conclusion, the need for continued funding support for the Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library cannot be overstated. It is a cornerstone in promoting accessibility, education, and cultural inclusion to all Marylanders. As digital spaces grow and evolve, maintaining these resources is vital in creating a more inclusive society where deaf individuals have equal access to knowledge and opportunities.

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