

Appropriations Committee

Bill: HB678

Tuesday, February 25, 2025 - 1:00 pm

My name is Brandt Van Unen, and I am the library coordinator for the Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library. I am testifying in support of House Bill 678, which will provide critical funding for the library and ensure we can effectively serve Maryland's D/deaf and hard-of-hearing community for years to come.

The Deaf Culture Digital Library is growing. We're experiencing increased usage by D/deaf and hard-of-hearing residents across the state. Our collections, services, programs, and resources are expanding, too. With these improvements come increased costs, which are projected to continue to rise. That's why it's important for the Deaf Culture Digital Library to receive the funding we need to serve Maryland's D/deaf and hard-of-hearing community best.

We are living in uncertain times, and historically marginalized groups are especially vulnerable. When these communities lack access to resources, they suffer, and society as a whole experiences the impact. The Maryland Deaf Culture Digital Library is becoming increasingly vital for the D/deaf community in Maryland and beyond. Without additional State funding, the library and the people we serve will suffer.

Where can Deaf individuals find support if there isn't a library designed to meet their needs? Without the library, where can hearing parents of Deaf babies turn to for reliable resources? Where can a young hearing teen find assistance to help pave the way for a career as an interpreter or a teacher? What about a Deaf adult who is down on their luck and looking for

information to help them get back on their feet? Or the hearing librarian looking for training the Deaf Culture Digital Library provides to serve D/deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons effectively?

As a Deaf individual, I have faced challenges in accessing opportunities both as a child and as an adult. Even today, I continue to struggle with my quality of life due to gaps in my education and general knowledge despite having earned two master's degrees. I wouldn't wish this feeling of inadequacy on anyone.

I want to share our commitment, as the DCDL staff, to providing access to resources. Our digital library website is designed to be of high quality and is updated monthly to celebrate contributions and raise awareness of holidays and historical events from a D/deaf perspective. Recently, we developed a statewide centralized calendar of ASL- and Deaf-friendly events to create opportunities for people to connect and promote inclusion. Additionally, we have improved accessibility for users with vision impairments by adding alt text. As a result of these efforts, website views and user numbers doubled in FY24 compared to FY22. I believe our work has positively influenced the quality of life for our customers and those around them.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the DCDL at every level of the D/deaf community and its allies. Without the increased State funding, the DCDL will struggle to serve as a bridge between the community and society, and in turn, everyone will suffer. The DCDL is a hidden cultural gem and a source of hope. We are gradually revealing it to the world for everyone to see, experience, and appreciate—especially those who are seeking to restore their optimism and believe in one another again.