February 20, 2026

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Maryland Senate
Maryland General Assembly
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: SB 645 – OPPOSE

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Jake Thomas and I hold five national certifications as an American Sign Language (and court certified) interpreter. As National Testing Systems Coordinator for the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf for nearly six years, I have led in the development and recertification of several knowledge and skills assessments for certifying professional sign language interpreters. I write to respectfully encourage opposition to SB 645.

The 2023 Maryland Sign Language Interpreters Act was passed after years of advocacy by Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, and Hard-of-Hearing Marylanders who shared their lived experiences and documented harms before this body. The General Assembly responded by establishing a statewide licensure system designed to:

- Protect consumers
- Establish minimum competency standards
- Create a formal complaint and enforcement pathway
- Ensure accountability in medical, legal, educational, and behavioral health settings

SB 645 makes substantial structural changes before that system has been fully implemented. Specifically, the bill:

- Expands the Board to 11 members
- Reserves 4 voting seats for ex officio and government-agency affiliated members
- Reduces independent licensed interpreter and consumer representation
- Allows Board action to occur without a practitioner or consumer majority present

Professional licensing boards are structured to exercise independent regulatory judgment in the public interest. Expanding institutional representation departs from Maryland's established licensing model and risks weakening the independent oversight framework enacted in 2023.

SB 645 also delays full licensure implementation until July 1, 2027, extending the period during which consumers lack a fully enforceable statewide standard and an operational complaint pathway.

In addition, the bill inserts non-standard procedural barriers before specialty standards in high-risk settings may even be drafted. This further delays protections where competency safeguards are most critical.

In 2023, the General Assembly enacted this framework to protect consumers and ensure accountability. SB 645 alters that framework before it has had the opportunity to function as designed and risks weakening the very protections the Act was intended to provide.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to oppose SB 645.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
Jake Thomas, CI, CT, OTC, NIC, SC:L

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