



February 3, 2026

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Judicial Proceedings
Government, Labor, and Elections
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Honorable Chair and Members of the Committee,

Deaf Equality writes in strong support of **SB0259** and **HB0435**, legislation that would expand access to open captioning in movie theaters across Maryland by amending the current statutory minimum threshold from eight screens to four screens.

Deaf Equality is a nonprofit organization providing policy advocacy and legal services for Deaf and hard of hearing communities nationwide. Our work focuses on advancing civil rights, eliminating barriers to public accommodations, and ensuring that accessibility policy reflects the lived realities of Deaf and hard of hearing people.

We are proud to have supported the Deaf community in Maryland, alongside the Maryland Association of the Deaf, in their long-standing efforts to pass legislation expanding access to open captioning in movie theaters. This legislation represents a critical step toward addressing persistent inequities in access to public accommodations.

Deaf Equality supports the proposed language in **SB0259** and **HB0435** for several key reasons.

First, the current eight-screen threshold does not reflect the realities of movie access across much of Maryland. In smaller cities and rural regions, particularly on the Eastern Shore and in Western Maryland, the primary or only local movie theater often operates with between four and seven screens. Under existing law, these theaters are excluded from open captioning requirements, effectively denying Deaf and hard of hearing residents in those areas with meaningful access to movie theaters. As a result, they have to travel significant distances to see a captioned movie in a theater.

Second, this amendment removes a longstanding and inequitable barrier to participation in public life. Movie theaters are not merely entertainment venues; they are cultural and social spaces where community members gather. Without consistent access to open captioning, Deaf and hard of hearing patrons are excluded from shared experiences that hearing patrons can access independently and spontaneously.

Third, this policy change is particularly important given Maryland's 1.2 million Deaf and hard of hearing population. Accessibility policy must account not only for population size, but also for geographic

distribution, ensuring that protections extend beyond major metropolitan areas and into the communities where people live, work, and raise families.

Fourth, there is no evidence demonstrating that expanded open captioning requirements result in a loss of revenue for movie theaters. To the contrary, expanding access meets existing, unmet demand. Deaf and hard of hearing patrons frequently self-exclude from theaters where captioning access is unreliable or unavailable. Increasing the availability of open captioned screenings allows theaters to serve patrons who would otherwise not attend, thereby expanding, not diminishing, their customer base. Open captions are also widely used and appreciated by many hearing patrons, supporting stable or increased attendance overall.

Finally, the proposed four-screen threshold represents a reasonable, targeted, and balanced approach. It meaningfully expands access while aligning with modern exhibition practices and existing availability of captioned film content. It ensures that accessibility is not limited to large multiplexes, but extends to the community theaters relied upon by many Maryland residents.

Passage of this legislation would position Maryland as a state that leads on civil rights and disability access. Even though this change may appear modest, its impact is significant. It sends a clear message that Deaf and hard of hearing patrons belong in Maryland's public spaces, cultural institutions, and shared civic life.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jacob', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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