

Testimony of James D. McGaughey
Before the Committee on Human Services
March 17, 2015

RE: Raised Bill No. 6765; An Act Concerning Interpreter Qualifications

Good afternoon Senator Moore, Representative Abercrombie and Members of the Human Services Committee. As an advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, I thank you for this opportunity to comment on **Raised Bill No. 6765, An Act Concerning Interpreter Qualifications**. I am unable to attend today's public hearing due to a prior commitment, but I want to state my reasons for urging you to support this measure.

The provisions of this bill reflect considerable thought and effort on the part of several organizations and State agencies that have worked together out of concern for the rights of deaf people. Deaf people rely on professional sign language interpreters to ensure equal access in courtrooms and law offices, hospitals and medical offices, and in public schools. Those are places where the stakes are often very high. In legal settings, people face jail time, judgments and awards, and determinations about parental rights. In medical environments they must make decisions about whether to give consent for surgical procedures; explain their symptoms (often in considerable detail); deliver babies; confront hard news and understand discharge instructions. For school children who are acquiring and developing language skills at the same time they are learning about the wider world, the stakes are equally high: Their future prospects, and those of the families and communities in which they will live and contribute, will ultimately be determined by the clarity and precision with which they can use language. And, like people encountering legal and medical issues, the ultimate outcome for them will often depend on the skills of the professional interpreters assigned to work with them.

The need to update Connecticut's statutory standards for sign language interpreters arises both from advancing requirements that have been established by national credentialing bodies, and from more immediate, very real concerns over the quality of interpreting being done here in Connecticut through video interpreting services, and by unregistered, sometimes unqualified interpreters. In coming up with the concepts embodied in this bill, the Task Force established by the Connecticut Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (CRID) in conjunction with the Connecticut Association of the Deaf (CAD), diligently sought input from a variety of sources. Working with the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) and the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (P&A), the Task Force refined its original proposal, allowing additional time for educational interpreters to obtain necessary credentials, and making provision for interpreters operating under supervised internships in legal and medical settings. By referencing and adopting national credentialing mechanisms and training requirements, the proposal obviates the need to periodically amend the statute to ensure conformity with advancing, state-of-the-art standards.

Clarity about these things will benefit all concerned. Deaf people will know that interpreters registered in Connecticut to practice in specialty areas meet recognized national standards for those specialties. Practicing interpreters seeking additional credentials will have clear goals to pursue. And, entities that are required by law to provide access and "effective communication" for deaf individuals will have assurance that, by using interpreters registered in Connecticut, they can meet those requirements.

In addition to the provisions contained in this bill, the Task Force also recommended language establishing an Interpreting Standards and Monitoring Board to oversee compliance with regulatory requirements, issue and take action on interpreter's State registration credentials, and investigate complaints. The Task Force envisioned the Board as being comprised of volunteers from various interest groups, and recommended that it be located at DORS. DORS, however, states that it does not have the resources necessary to support such a volunteer Board. That is unfortunate. Since the dissolution of the Commission on the Deaf and Hearing Impaired as a separate agency, no one has been clearly responsible for "minding the shop". (And, even when CDHI was fully operational, it lacked the kind of enforcement authority needed to ensure everyone played by the rules.)

Although I believe the provisions in Bill No. 6765 will go a long way toward improving things in Connecticut, I also believe the need for a Standards and Monitoring Board will not go away. Technology is bringing new possibilities - and new dilemmas - to the world of interpreting. Mobility is increasing, as are demands for qualified interpreters from educational and social institutions and expectations for quality within the Deaf community. Without a designated entity to keep abreast of things, decide questions, anticipate developments and guide policy, uncertainty will continue. For a minimal investment in a support staff position, Connecticut could resolve that uncertainty. I hope that you will explore this concept in the future.

Thank you for considering these comments. If the Committee has any questions about my testimony, please feel free to contact me.