
OLR Bill Analysis

sHB 5241

AN ACT ESTABLISHING A BUREAU COORDINATING SERVICES FOR DEAF, HARD OF HEARING OR DEAFBLIND PERSONS.

SUMMARY

This bill establishes the Bureau of Services for Persons who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deafblind as an independent office, that is within the Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS) for administrative purposes only. The bill requires the ADS commissioner to hire an executive director and an assistant and charges the executive director with various duties. It requires the executive director to report annually, starting by July 1, 2025, to the Appropriations, Aging, Human Services, and Public Health committees on the bureau's activities and recommendations to improve services.

The bill also adds eight members to the Advisory Board for Persons who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deafblind, changes the board's leadership, and increases its reporting requirements. It requires the board to hold an annual leadership roundtable meeting with various executive branch agency leaders, replacing a current requirement to periodically meet with them for this purpose.

Lastly, the bill requires each state agency to appoint an employee to act as a contact point for concerns related to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind. The agencies must (1) require this person to collaborate with the bureau's executive director to resolve concerns and (2) publish the person's name and contact information in a prominent place on the agency's website. This requirement applies to any office, department, board, council, commission, institution, constituent unit of the state higher education system, technical education and career school, and other agency in the executive, legislative, or judicial branch (CGS § 1-79(20)).

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2024, except provisions establishing the bureau are effective July 1, 2024.

BUREAU EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Appointment

The bill requires the ADS commissioner, in consultation with the advisory board, to appoint the bureau's executive director by October 1, 2024. The executive director must have the following qualifications:

1. professional experience in serving the needs of deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind people;
2. ability to communicate in American Sign Language; and
3. familiarity with effective interpretation methods to help deafblind people.

Responsibilities

Under the bill, the bureau's executive director has the following duties:

1. oversee ADS employees who provide counseling, interpreting, and other assistance to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, and deafblind, but not federally funded vocational rehabilitation employees;
2. annually update and publish a resource guide for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind on the ADS website;
3. maintain a list of registered interpreters, provided by the Connecticut Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, categorized by the setting in which they are qualified to work, and publish it on ADS's website;
4. help each state agency appoint an employee who will be a contact point for concerns related to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind and coordinate with these employees to resolve these concerns;

5. coordinate ADS's efforts to give information and referral services to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind, such as working with the ADS commissioner to establish an accessible website for ADS and bureau services;
6. help the ADS commissioner administer the department unit that registers interpreters and issues identification cards for them;
7. coordinate responses to consumer concerns, requests for assistance, and referrals to resources;
8. collaborate with interpreting services providers and training organizations to increase opportunities for mentorships, internships, apprenticeships, and specialized training in interpreting services for deafblind people;
9. partner with civic and community organizations serving deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind people on workshops and information sessions about new laws, regulations, or developments on services, programs, or health care needs;
10. raise public awareness of available programs and services;
11. help the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) implement telecommunication relay services (TRS) programs that use TRS and other assistive devices (e.g., telephone captioning);
12. work with the governor and Connecticut television stations on ways to increase accessibility of television broadcasts to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf blind; and
13. in consultation with the advisory board, identify needs and address policy changes to better serve this population.

The bill also requires the executive director to coordinate education and training initiatives. These include working with local and state public safety and public health officials, and first responders on best practices for serving and communicating with deaf, hard of hearing, or

deafblind people. The initiatives also include working with interpreters (sign language interpreters, oral interpreters, and interpreters trained to interpret for deafblind people) to maintain or enhance their skills in various settings.

ADVISORY BOARD

Membership and Leadership

The bill adds eight members to the current 15-member advisory board, as shown in the table below. It also replaces the ADS commissioner or her designee as a board member with ADS's human services advocate. Under current law, the board elects two chairpersons from among its members. Starting October 1, 2024, the bill instead makes the bureau executive director one chairperson and the other elected by the board from among its members.

Table: New Advisory Board Members

<i>Member</i>	<i>Appointing Authority</i>
Bureau of Services for Persons who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deafblind executive director	None
Interpreter organization representative	Bureau of Services for Persons who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deafblind executive director
Nonprofit Protection and Advocacy System (i.e., Disability Rights Connecticut) representative	Governor
Connecticut hospital organization representative	House speaker
Connecticut Tech Act Project representative	Connecticut Tech Act Project Advisory Council
Office of Health Strategy executive director or designee	None
PURA chairperson or designee	None
State contracted TRS entity representative	State contracted TRS entity

Annual Leadership Roundtable Meeting

The bill requires the advisory board to hold an annual leadership roundtable meeting with various executive branch agencies to discuss best practices and gaps in services for people who are deaf, hard of

hearing, or deafblind. The meeting includes the following participants or their designees:

1. commissioners of public health, social services, mental health and addition services, education, developmental services, children and families, early childhood, economic and community development, and labor; and
2. the Board of Regents for Higher Education.

The bill eliminates a similar requirement that the advisory board meet periodically with many of the same agencies for the same purpose.

Reporting Requirement

Current law requires the advisory board to make recommendations on the following topics and report them to the governor and the Human Services Committee:

1. technical assistance and resources for state agencies to serve people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind;
2. public policy and legislative changes needed to address gaps in services; and
3. interpreter qualifications and registration.

The bill makes this report annual, with the next report due January 15, 2025. It additionally requires the board to submit the report to the Appropriations, Aging, and Public Health committees.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Human Services Committee

Joint Favorable Substitute

Yea 22 Nay 0 (03/19/2024)