



Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

CREATING CHANGE • IMPROVING LIVES

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

February 14, 2023

SB 346: Maryland Sign Language Interpreters Act

Position: Support

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (Council) is an independent, public policy organization that creates changes to make it possible for people with developmental disabilities to live the lives they want with the support they need. Our vision is that people with and without disabilities in Maryland live, learn, work, and play together.

SB 346 is critical to ensure Marylanders who use sign language interpreters receive qualified and regulated communication support. According to the Governor's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, over 20% of Marylanders, age 12 or older, are deaf or hard of hearing in at least one ear. Almost 13% are deaf or hard of hearing in both ears.¹ Many of these individuals use sign language for communication.

WHAT does this legislation do?

- Establishes the licensing and regulatory system for sign language interpreters in Maryland and creates a state board in the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing to create licensing requirements and then license qualified people to provide sign language interpretation services.
- Requires people to be licensed by the Board before they can provide sign language interpretation services in the state unless the person is licensed in another state or with a national registry agency with comparable qualification requirements and submits an application in Maryland.
- Establishes the Sign Language Interpreters Fund to cover the costs of the licensing and regulatory system and support the licensure of marginalized interpreters, the development of mentorship programs, and provide financial assistance to applicants.

WHY is this legislation important?

- **Communication is a fundamental right and communication access is protected under federal law.** However, the right to communication is limited for many Marylanders because of the obstacles they face due to unqualified interpreters.
- **People who use sign language to communicate face unequal treatment in many settings that can be intensified with unqualified interpreters.** For example, with children who use sign language to communicate, access to unqualified interpreters in education settings can have lifelong impacts.
- **Unqualified sign language interpreters exacerbate the already difficult consequences of miscommunication in high stakes situations.** In fact, when a Marylander uses a sign language interpreter, such as to attend a doctor appointment or in court, they carry the burden of

¹ <https://odhh.maryland.gov/press-releases/featured-story/over-1-2-million-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-marylanders/>

miscommunication. This means, when an unqualified interpreter misconstrues the conversation with a doctor or a judge, the individual experiences serious consequences. The interpreter does not.

- **Currently there is no statewide system to regulate sign language interpreters.** While the ADA requires equal access to communication, it does not specify the qualifications needed by sign language interpreters. This bill clarifies a legal threshold for what constitutes a “qualified” sign language interpreter in Maryland.
- **It supports the licensure for sign language interpreters from historically marginalized communities.** While 22 states already have licensure requirements, very few focus on diverse and inclusive group interpreters.

People with disabilities want and need equal access to communication, and have the right to functionally equivalent communication. This is particularly true for people who use sign language. Maryland should have high standards and expectations of sign language interpreters. **Communication support must be effective, accurate, impartial, and include specialized vocabulary as needed. This bill is the step needed to make this happen.** For these reasons, the Council supports SB 346.

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