

Thank you Chairwoman Tanzi and members of the Committee, I appreciate you taking the time to review my testimony.

I'd first like to thank Chair Tanzi and Rep. Courtvriend. I watch many hearings, and last year, after the Commission's hearing, I noticed you both raised the interpreter issue with the departments of Labor and Training and Education, as well as the Office of Postsecondary Commissioner. I also know that those agencies heard you and an ASL Interpreter Workforce group was formed. It included those agencies, multiple Health and Human Services agencies, the Governor's Office and the Legislature. This group has met to discuss the pathway needed to develop a local interpreter program, from k-12 education through post-college opportunities and apprenticeships. The work has begun, but that work now requires funding.

I'm going to provide a different perspective from much of the testimony you'll review for this agency. Mine reflects the needs of hearing people within the state who are asking for your support to improve services supported and provided by the Commission, and to make additional state investments towards that end.

While I am hearing, I have a disabled sister who is a member of the sign community. I say the sign community because the community of native American Sign Language (ASL) speakers is more than the Deaf. She lives independently in a supported living community where all of the residents are ASL speakers. Of course, this requires staff who also speak ASL, the majority of whom are Deaf. These are the people I depend on every day. You often hear from the long-term care community about how hard the work is and how hard it is to recruit qualified talent. Now add to that having to speak another language that you yourselves rarely come across in public, despite being at many more events than most people and being more connected to your communities because of your elected positions. Part of my testimony is to ask you to provide support for those people, who help me every day.

Last year, I told you about my need for interpreters as my sister's medical power of attorney. You may wonder why, because my sister has been my sister my whole life, so I must be fluent in ASL. I am not. I require an interpreter because of the lack of educational infrastructure supporting ASL in Rhode Island. I am the best user of the language in my family and that's embarrassing, because I'm not good. Partly this results from there being no access to ASL as a course of study for hearing youth. When I started seventh grade, in Providence's advanced academics program, I had opportunities to learn French and Italian, so I took French, because they said, "you need a language for college." In high school, I took Spanish because linguistic diversity in Providence seemed smart. Today I speak neither French nor Spanish competently, in part because it is not a daily necessity. But not until I was an adult and moved 2,000 miles from home (and my sister) to attend college, did I have my first ASL course. My youngest opted to go to the same college, the University of New Mexico, which has a dedicated interpreter program; not specifically for ASL, but they too are enrolled in their first ASL course. Had the opportunity been present in the K-12 system, my entire family, from my brothers through my children, could have taken classes to communicate directly with their sister and aunt; instead, we all need help.

Last year I told you about my need for an interpreter for both the explanation from the medical professionals to her and to ensure I can directly support and advocate for my sister when she needs me during medical procedures. I had requested an in-person interpreter, but was told when I got there that only video interpreting was available. Thankfully, in this instance they were wrong, and I was lucky to have an interpreter present who was being shadowed by a student who came here from Idaho State University for

interpreting hours to complete their degree. People are flying across the country to train as interpreters because we're not producing interpreters here.

This year, I want to tell you about my sister's Individualized State Plan. As my family, my sister's provider organization, and the Conflict-Free Case Manager from the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Disabilities and Hospitals sat to meet, there was conspicuously absent.. an interpreter. The case manager had requested an interpreter, and one was confirmed, but no one came. We moved forward to complete the plan, with staff from the provider organization interpreting; however, that is against the spirit of Conflict-Free Case Management. Why did no one come?

Of the over 200 interpreters licensed in Rhode Island, my understanding is that there are roughly 28 are actually present in the state of Rhode Island. Last year there were 30; roughly half of whom are over the age of 50. Two, or nearly 7.0 percent of all in-state interpreters retired. In 20 years, when most of today's interpreters are retired, my sister and I will still need them, but there is no development pipeline to fill that need. There are solutions and steps to be taken.

The Commission has requested 2.0 positions. The first is a Chief Community Engagement Officer, to expand services for the deafblind, because the state currently provides little to no support for tactile or pro tactile interpretation, despite Rhode Island having the second-highest deafblind population in New England, behind Massachusetts. The second position is an Administrative Officer position to serve as the operational lead for the Interpreting and Computer-Aided Real-Time Translation referral service, connecting qualified sign language interpreters and captioning providers to institutions that require their services and to develop a pipeline for interpreters to increase access.

Through your advocacy, all of the agencies necessary have begun working on an interpreter program. The Commission has laid out a plan for new staff to improve government services, both to an underserved population, and to a population that will soon be in crisis without further action. The challenge is funding.

I understand that this is a tough year to ask for money, but we know we have to start making investments today, before the problems are worse and more expensive because we did not lay the groundwork as early as we needed to. The Council on the Arts includes a general revenue appropriation of \$400,000 directed to Waterfire Providence to support its economic impact as a tourism draw; this funding represents about 2/3 of its salaries for its top three staff. The Finance Committee could shift this expense to the Commerce Corporation's tourism allocation supported by hotel taxes, freeing the general revenues for other use without costing the state anything, but providing a chance to improve its services.

Here is what I'd like to ask from this committee:

1. Add the positions the Commission requested, assuming 25.0 percent turnover, at a cost of \$200,000 supported by transferring the Waterfire Providence grant to hotel taxes as described above to improve access to multiple forms of interpreting services.
2. Support the work of the ASL Interpreting Workforce work group, by providing the other \$200,000 to support educational and apprenticeship opportunities, requiring a match for higher education activities from the Office of Postsecondary Commissioner's restricted receipts and for workforce development activities from the Department of Labor and Training's Real Jobs Rhode Island resources. It's worth noting that interpreters just entering the field can earn \$100,000 per year, assuming full-time employment, which we have the demand to support.

Another item I would ask you to consider, including perhaps a study commission for the legislature to build a greater understanding:

1. A study Commission to determine how to further support funding these activities, likely through an assessment on the fees paid by the professions which require access to interpreting services to provide full service to Deaf clients, including lawyers, medical professionals, and financial professionals, including the Computer Aided Real Time Translation and Interpreter Services, collections for which your staff's analyses seem to be reporting is in decline.
2. Lastly, interpreters are licensed by the Department of Health which only offers licensure once per year and during the pandemic failed to offer licensure opportunities at all. Interpretation is not strictly the domain of the healthcare industry and is not appropriately the purview of the Department of Health. Please consider amending Chapter 71 of Title 5 of the General Laws to transfer the authority to oversee interpreter licensure to the Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Chapter 23-1.8 makes the Commission responsible for, "acting on behalf of the special concerns of the deaf and hard-of-hearing persons in Rhode Island." Licensing interpreters certainly appears to be consistent with that charge, and I believe it's time to transfer the responsibility.

Again, I appreciate you taking the time to review my testimony, and I will appreciate your support for the commission and the preceding issues.

With Respect,

Timothy Donahue