



Testimony of Ascentria Care Alliance Opposing New Hampshire House Bill 392 on February 5, 2025

Dear Representative MacDonald and Members of the House Health, Human Services, and Elderly Affairs Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 392. My name is Ann Dancy, and I am the Vice President of Operations for Language Bank—a program of Ascentria Care Alliance, a health and human services nonprofit organization offering services in New Hampshire since 1980. I respectfully urge you to oppose HB 392, as it would have far-reaching negative consequences for Granite Staters, particularly those facing language barriers and disabilities, including the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. Furthermore, dissolving the Office of Health Equity (OHE) could jeopardize vital federal funding that enables the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to communicate effectively with all New Hampshire communities seeking services.

Language Bank has provided language-access services in New Hampshire for over twenty years. We work with over 50 American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and hundreds of in-person interpreters representing over 60 spoken languages. This allows both those who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and those with limited English proficiency to effectively communicate and access services. Additionally, we offer translation services in more than 150 languages to ensure all can communicate and access services.

The proposed dissolution of the Office of Health Equity (OHE) threatens language and communication access for thousands of Granite Staters in the communities you represent and beyond. The OHE oversees Communication and Language Access Services within DHHS, ensuring that the general public, DHHS clients, and DHHS employees can access vital services without barriers. Without this oversight, communication access would become fragmented, leaving many without the support they need to navigate essential services. Effective communication and the removal of barriers are especially crucial in public health emergencies, health care delivery, cases of child and elderly abuse and neglect, and ensuring that investigations are completed professionally and without delay. In addition, the OHE trains all of DHHS employees to know when to work with an interpreter and how to work effectively with an interpreter.

Beyond its role in language access, the OHE plays a vital function in ensuring that DHHS adheres to federal civil rights laws, a requirement under federal law and DHHS contracts. If HB 392 passes, New Hampshire risks losing millions in federal funding due to non-compliance with federal mandates. While proponents of the bill suggest a state savings of \$100,000 per year, this figure pales in comparison to the potential loss of federal funding and resulting legal action by those unable to access services. The OHE currently manages \$4.6 million per year in federal grants and an additional \$700,000 in other federal funds, which could be jeopardized if the state is noncompliant with federal regulations.

Furthermore, during the COVID-19 emergency, the OHE was crucial in coordinating and supporting the Governor's press conferences, ensuring that ASL interpreters could provide critical public health information to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. This demonstrates the essential nature of the OHE's oversight and its role in communicating with the citizens in NH during local or national emergencies, thereby assisting with safety and ensuring communication access for all New Hampshire residents.

The following towns have DHHS offices where people receive services from Language Bank: Concord, Nashua, Manchester, Rochester, Keene, Conway, Laconia, Portsmouth, Berlin, Claremont, Littleton, Salem, Somersworth, Dover, Londonderry, and Hampstead.

On behalf of Ascentria Care Alliance and the thousands of individuals we serve across New Hampshire, we urge the committee to reject HB 392 and preserve the Office of Health Equity, which has long ensured access to

critical services for all New Hampshire residents, including those who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and those with limited English proficiency.

Thank you for your time and attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,

Ann Dancy
Vice President of Operations, Language Bank
A program of Ascentria Care Alliance