

Full Testimony in Opposition to HB 525

Good morning, Chair and Members of the Committee.

My name is Michelle McConaghy, and I serve as the Executive Director of Northeast Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services (NDHHS), a nonprofit organization that has been empowering, educating, and advocating for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community throughout New Hampshire since 2001.

With the full support of the NDHHS board, I am here today to strongly oppose HB 525, a bill that threatens essential services that support accessibility and independence for Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.

As a Deaf individual, I ask that you not compare me to another Deaf person and wonder why we have different communication methods—that’s a conversation for another day. What matters today is that I, like many others, rely on ASL interpreters to ensure full participation in society and access to 100% of the information being shared.

And please—don’t even get me started on lip-reading. It is not a reliable alternative. Only 30-40% of spoken language can be accurately understood by reading lips. Instead of asking a Deaf person, “Can you lip-read?” a better question is: “What is the best way to communicate with you?” Because communication is a shared responsibility.

Imagine Life Without Full Access to Communication

If you’re comfortable, I invite you to close your eyes and think about how you access information in your daily life. Incidental learning is everywhere. You overhear conversations in a grocery store checkout line or restaurant. You learn about a college fair just by walking down a school hallway. You hear about a job opening over the cubicle wall from a coworker. You listen to NPR radio on your way to work.

Now, imagine trying to make a phone call—only to be hung up on because the person on the other end assumes it’s spam when one calls through relay services.

These are things you take for granted, but for Deaf individuals, they are barriers. Beyond these everyday moments, we must constantly advocate for communication access—whether requesting an interpreter for a job interview or a medical appointment. Access should not be a battle. Yet, too often, it is.

The Impact of Language Deprivation:

The consequences of language deprivation are severe. By age four, a hearing child of hearing parents has a vocabulary of approximately 5,000 words. A Deaf child born to Deaf parents who sign also acquires 5,000 words in ASL.

However, 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, and those children may have a vocabulary of only 50 words by the same age. That gap continues into adulthood, with the average Deaf adult reading at a fourth-grade level.

Language deprivation leads to cognitive delays, mental health challenges, lower quality of life, and limited health literacy. HB 525 would create additional barriers, making these problems worse instead of addressing them.

This Bill Affects More Than Just Deaf and DeafBlind Individuals:

This is not just a Deaf issue. It impacts the broader population of people who are hard of hearing, which ODHH also serves.

Think about your colleagues who wear hearing aids. Thirty percent of New Hampshire residents experience hearing loss, yet on average, it takes seven to ten years for individuals to act on their hearing difficulties. Untreated hearing loss can lead to increased stress, cognitive load, and social isolation. This may affect blood pressure levels, as well as elevate the risk of dementia, falls, and depression resulting from isolation. I am curious, how effective is the FM system in this building?

Why the Current System Works:

NDHHS works closely with ODHH's State Coordinator, Beth Keller, who is Deaf and fluent in ASL. The support and understanding she receives from the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, particularly under the new leadership of Richard Sala, is already resulting in improved programming for our community.

Moving that program to the OPLC would have a profound impact on employment opportunities for our community and ODHH's capacity to respond to statewide needs that affect the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind communities.

The Danger of Transferring Oversight to Office of Professional Licensure and Certification:

The NHILB is crucial in maintaining interpreter quality through proper licensing and oversight. Transferring these responsibilities to OPLC—an agency without expertise in Deaf culture, language, or accessibility—would weaken oversight and reduce service quality. Knowing that the NHILB is supported by an agency that can communicate directly in ASL provides reassurance and guidance to complainants, fosters trust in the complaint process, and ensures that concerns are handled fairly and effectively.

This is not just a bureaucratic shift. This affects real people.

Deaf individuals are more likely to report accessibility concerns when they trust that their complaints will be handled by someone who understands their experiences. We already have to self-advocate constantly—it's exhausting and frustrating.

Why You Must Oppose HB 525

1. Linguistic & Cultural Understanding – ASL is a visual language with distinct grammar and structure. The current setup ensures accurate interpretation of complaints and prevents misunderstandings that could lead to dismissals of valid concerns.
2. Trust & Accessibility – Many Deaf individuals hesitate to file complaints due to accessibility barriers. I recently attended an NHILB meeting, and I can tell you firsthand that positive changes are happening to further build trust and direct ASL communication.
3. Accountability & Bias Prevention – There have been cases where hearing administrators unintentionally prioritize the perspectives of hearing interpreters over Deaf consumers, leading to conflicts of interest. Ensuring Deaf consumer input in decisions prevents systemic bias.
4. Real-World Impact – Hearing administrators may only theoretically understand the challenges of poor interpreting services, while Deaf individuals live these experiences daily. Their perspective is essential in maintaining high standards.
5. Preserving Community Autonomy – The Deaf community has long fought for communication access. Transferring oversight to a hearing-led organization undermines this progress and weakens the enforcement of interpreter standards.

Protect Access for New Hampshire's Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community

For these reasons, I urge you to vote against HB 525.

Protect the rights and access of New Hampshire's Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind residents by keeping oversight within the current system, where it belongs. Only those with lived experience can truly understand and uphold the standards necessary for fair and effective communication access.

Thank you for your time and consideration.