

Testimony to Joint Interim Committee on Education

January 20, 2022

Eric Wilcox, Chair Nevada Commission for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Good morning, Chair Denis and members of the joint committee. My name is Eric Wilcox. I am a parent of a deaf child. I reside in Reno, Nevada, and I am Chair of the Nevada Commission for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. On behalf of the Nevada Deaf Commission I would like to inform the members of this committee that we have recently updated the [State Plan for the Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, Speech Impaired, Deaf-Blind and Deaf Plus](#) for the period 2021 to 2027 and briefly highlight three areas of concern in the state plan that are relevant to the education of children in our target population in Nevada.

The first concern is the inadequate number of qualified interpreters available for those who communicate using American Sign Language. You may have heard recently about the complaint filed by the American Civil Liberties Union with the US Department of Justice on behalf of deaf inmates in the Clark County Detention Center, accusing the Detention Center of not providing adequate access to sign language interpreters, which was reported two days ago in the Nevada Independent. This is just one example of a consistent complain that the Commission has heard from the deaf community, that the availability of qualified interpreters in Nevada is limited. More commonly, we hear about an inadequate number of interpreters in education settings, health care and when receiving government services.

The second concern expressed in the State Plan for the Deaf that is relevant to this committee is the need to improve the language development outcomes of deaf and hard-of-hearing children in the state. Within school districts, there is a lack of expertise in serving our target population. Currently there are open positions for teachers of the deaf in multiple school districts that are going unfilled for a lack of qualified applicants. There are few speech pathologists and other professionals in the state with expertise serving deaf and hard-of-hearing children. And school districts struggle to meet their obligations under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to provide language support for families to learn to better communicate with their children or to provide language models in different modes of communication for children in our target population.

The final concern expressed in the State Plan for the Deaf that is relevant to this committee is the need to improve post-secondary education transition outcomes for deaf and hard-of-hearing children exiting high schools into the workforce or post-secondary education or training. Rates of employment or attainment of a college degree are significantly lower for the deaf population than their hearing peers. This is an outcome resulting from limited access to language and communication, reduced social opportunities, negative attitudes and bias in the community, and a lack of qualified professionals ([NDC 2018](#)). In particular, a lack of professionals available in the high school environment with expertise in mitigating these discriminatory factors, which can be achieved with equitable access to social opportunities and internships or work experiences that are critical to development and opportunities for success.

One common thread through each of these concerns is a lack of the necessary workforce to provide adequate services, obligated under the law, to provide equitable access to education for deaf and hard-of-hearing children in Nevada. This would be an excellent time perhaps to consider leveraging our institutions of higher education to strengthen the pipeline of workers in our state to provide these necessary services. The Nevada Commission for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing thanks you for your consideration.