



HB0535 – Maryland Sign Language Interpreter Act
Presented to the Hon. Shane Pendergrass and
Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee
February 24, 2021 1:30 p.m.

POSITION: SUPPORT

NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland urges members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee to issue **a favorable report on HB0535 - Maryland Sign Language Interpreter Act**, sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero.

Our organization is an advocate for reproductive health, rights, and justice. As part of our efforts to protect reproductive freedom for all Marylanders, we work to ensure every individual has the right to decide if, when, and how to form their families, and to parent in good health, in safety, and with dignity. Access to sign language interpretation is a reproductive justice issue. Nationally, disabled parents are assumed to have “lower competence” when making decisions about their bodies, unjustly judged for their parenting abilities, and have less access to reproductive care.ⁱ We support ensuring accessible resources for those who are deaf and hard of hearing to increase access to care and advocate for bodily autonomy for disabled communities.

There are over 1.2 million deaf and hard of hearing individuals in Maryland.ⁱⁱ Approximately 13% of Marylanders have significant hearing loss in both ears, which means at least 1 in 10 individuals will potentially be in need of ASL interpretation services across our state. The largest deaf community in Maryland is in Frederick County alone with around 8,000 people.ⁱⁱⁱ There are also more than 75 deaf-owned business in Maryland.^{iv} Despite the Maryland School of Deaf and other resources in Frederick County, this is not the case in other Maryland counties. Therefore, there is a clear need to develop a statewide intervention to ensure that all Maryland citizens have access to interpretation services.

There are substantial barriers for the deaf and hard of hearing community. The Governor’s office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing reported that more than 80% of this population are either underemployed or unemployed.^v Additionally, deaf patients also find it difficult to receive healthcare services due to a lack of interpretation services.^{vi} Even though federal disability law requires hospitals to have interpretation services deaf and hard of hearing individuals, many Maryland advocates state these services are inadequate.^{vi}

HB0535 can help to reduce the barriers of inaccessibility for the deaf and hard of hearing residents of Maryland. This bill helps to establish a state board of Sign Language Interpreters in the Maryland Department of Labor, which will regulate who is allowed to provide sign language interpretation services. This bill recognizes the importance of providing and supporting quality interpretation services by drafting and implementing licensing requirements for interpreters and establishing a Sign Language Interpreters Fund. For these reasons, NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland **urges a favorable committee report on HB0535**. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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- ⁱ Silvers, Anita, Leslie Francis, and Brittany Badesch. "Reproductive Rights and Access to Reproductive Services for Women with Disabilities." *Journal of Ethics* | American Medical Association. American Medical Association, April 1, 2016. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/reproductive-rights-and-access-reproductive-services-women-disabilities/2016-04>.
- ⁱⁱ "Over 1.2 Million Deaf and Hard of Hearing Marylanders," Governor's Office of The Deaf and Hard of Hearing, n.d., <https://odhh.maryland.gov/featured-story/over-1-2-million-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-marylanders/>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gaines, Danielle E. "Deaf Couple Bring Pizazz, Personalization with Embroidery Business." *The Fredrick News-Post*, February 17, 2015. https://www.fredericknewspost.com/places/local/frederick_county/frederick/deaf-couple-bring-pizazz-personalization-with-embroidery-business/article_c9367c86-ae6b-577f-bd60-3ab877825111.html.
- ^{iv} Morris, Amanda. "Deaf And Unemployed: Taking Matters Into Their Own Hands." NPR. NPR, January 13, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/13/673250200/The%20number%20of%20Deaf%20businesses%20on%20our%20list%20has%20grown%20significantly%20in%20the%20past%20couple%20of%20years>.
- ^v "Deaf Ecosystem." Governor's Office of The Deaf and Hard of Hearing, n.d. <https://odhh.maryland.gov/deaf-ecosystem/>.
- ^{vi} McDaniels, Andrea K. "Deaf Patients Say It Can Be Difficult to Communicate at Hospitals." *baltimoresun.com*. Baltimore Sun, August 19, 2019. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-hs-sign-language-hospital-20150913-story.html>.