
Testimony of

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House Bill 1596 PN 2037

House Professional Licensure Committee
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Thank you Chairman Sturla and Chairman Adolph for the opportunity to appear before the committee this morning to discuss House Bill 1596 and the proposed amendments to the bill.

My name is William Gannon and I am the Executive Director of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) in the Department of Labor and Industry. With me today is Sharon Behun, Director of the Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Catherine Wojciechowski, Legal Counsel for OVR.

The mission of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation is to assist Pennsylvanians with disabilities to secure and maintain employment and independence. The Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing is one of the many programs that helps us accomplish that mission.

The ODHH provides advocacy, information, and referral to Pennsylvania's citizens with hearing loss and those without hearing.

The ODHH can advocate for people with hearing loss who are not receiving proper services from government or private agencies. The ODHH stands ready to serve as liaison, provide information and assist in opening doors to those in need of such services.

Additionally, after a decade long series of collaborative efforts and activities among the different stakeholder groups, the Sign Language Interpreter and Transliterator State Registration Act -- Act 57 of 2004 -- was passed to establish quality standards in PA..

The law specified that ODHH be responsible for establishing and implementing the registration program, monitoring registrations and enforcing the Act.

ODHH is committed to ensure that the spirit of the law and the ideology of the interpreting profession are practiced and upheld in order to support the ongoing development and growth of a quality sign language interpreter program in Pennsylvania.

With that commitment in mind, the Department and ODHH has worked closely with Representative Eachus and his staff on various changes to House Bill 1596 which would amend The Sign Language Interpreter and Transliterator State Registration Act.

The proposed amendment being discussed today reflects those efforts.

The Sign Language Interpreter and Transliterator State Registration Act established a quality standard in the Commonwealth for individuals who provide sign language interpreting and transliterating services. The Act prohibits individuals from providing such services unless they are registered with the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) or meet certain exceptions to registration.

In order to register, an applicant must provide proof of passing an examination testing their knowledge and proficiency in interpreting & transliteration. Applicants must also pay a \$100 biennial registration fee. Per the Act, ODHH administers the Act.

The Act provides 8 exceptions that allow non-registered interpreters to work in the Commonwealth. The Act further ensures consumer choice in using the services of a registered or a non-registered interpreter.

However, as currently enacted , Act 57 does not address the needs of recent graduates of Interpreter Education Programs (IEPs). Recent graduates of IEPs possess many skills, however most do not have the requisite experience to take and pass the examination approved by ODHH for registration.

Consequently , as it stands now, recent graduates:

- Cannot register with ODHH
- Cannot work in the community, unless they meet one of the exceptions.
- Have limited opportunities to gain the necessary work experience needed to prepare for the national certification exam, which is the Commonwealth minimum standard.
- May be “forced” to move out-of-state to pursue their career.

House Bill 1596, and the accompanying proposed amendments, would alleviate some of the restrictions -- which some consider to be too burdensome – that are currently placed on recent IEP graduates. If passed, it would allow recent graduates to:

- Apply for a provisional registration.
- Renew their provisional registration twice, consecutively, if they meet the educational criteria
- Have expanded opportunities to work in the community; therefore gaining the necessary experience to prepare for the national certification exam.
- Pursue a career in the Commonwealth
- Experience interpreting work in a medical setting.
- Work in a mental health setting accompanied by a state registered interpreter.

Deaf consumers, non-deaf consumers, family members, and other relevant individuals may be concerned about the quality of service that a newly graduated interpreter can provide. This is a valid concern.

However, the bill and its amendment have the following assurances in place to protect the consumer:

- Individuals must pass a knowledge test approved by the Office, prior to being provisionally registered. The knowledge test is the first part of a 2-part certification exam approved by the Office.
- In order to renew a provisional registration, interpreters must participate in professional development courses and provide proof to ODHH. This demonstrates their commitment to the field.
- In certain settings they are required to work with a state registered interpreter.
- Deaf consumers are empowered to request a registered interpreter
- The amendment expands the complaint procedure to allow for complaints against individuals holding provisional registration. and
- ODHH has the power to maintain records, revoke provisional registrations, refuse renewal of provisional registrations, and investigate filed complaints .

The Department supports the amendments to House Bill 1596 because it will increase the pool of qualified interpreters in the Commonwealth. In the long-term, it's a positive outcome for new graduates, the deaf consumers and the Commonwealth.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my comments on House Bill 1596 and the proposed amendments to the bill.