

Human Services Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6932

AN ACT CONCERNING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A STATE INTERPRETING

Title: STANDARDS BOARD.

Vote Date: 3/19/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 2/20/2025

File No.: 460

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Human Services Committee

CO-SPONSORS OF BILL:

Sen. Julie Kushner, 24th Dist.

Rep. Christopher Poulos, 81st Dist.

Rep. Robin E. Comey, 102nd Dist.

Rep. Mitch Bolinsky, 106th Dist.

Sen. Saud Anwar, 3rd Dist.

Rep. Jane M. Garibay, 60th Dist.

Rep. Jillian Gilcrest, 18th Dist.

Rep. Josh Elliott, 88th Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

As a result of organizational changes made in 2011 and in 2016, the Commission for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing was disbanded resulting in a decentralization of services and care for the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing community. Connecticut was the first state in the nation to establish this Commission and is now one of the only states without a state agency dedicated to serving deaf or hard of hearing people. In 2024, PA 24-81 established a Bureau within the Department of Aging and Disability Services to serve as a centralized resource for the deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing individuals within the state, however it only has one staff member funded by reallocated ARPA funds. The establishment of an Interpreting Standards Board within ADS would further address communication needs for the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing with comprehensive standards for interpreters and operational standards for interpreting agencies across CT.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

Sections 1(a), 1(b) and 1(d) were redrafted for clarity; in Section 1(a)(4)(D) and Section 1(b)(2), "of" was changed to "for" for accuracy; in Section 1(d), "executive director" was changed to "director" for accuracy; in Section 1(e), "such" was added before "other officers", "they deem fit" was changed to "the board deems advisable" and "established under section 17a-836 of the general statutes, as amended by this act" was inserted, for clarity; in Section 1(f), "not to exceed three years" was inserted for internal consistency; in Section 1(g), "being" was inserted before "investigated" and "open session" was changed to "a setting that is open to the public", for clarity; and throughout Sections 1 and 2, "at the Department of Aging and Substitute Bill No. 6932 LCO 16 of 16 Disability Services was changed to "within the Department of Aging and Disability Services", for consistency.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services, Amy Porter, Commissioner: opposes the bill as it is written but supports the concept of expansion of services for the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing community, however concerns remain about lack of inclusion of funding in the Governor's budget proposal. Full support was expressed for the following elements of the bill, which are already underway: (1) providing information and referral services, an accessible website; (2) registering qualified interpreters and issuing state ID cards; and (3) responding to various consumer concerns and requests. Appreciation was expressed for the provisions that would allow interpreters who hold different certificates or credentials would be able to apply to the Board for an approved credential or a waiver up to three years. As conceived in the bill, the Board would handle all complaints concerning noncompliance, hold hearings under the Uniform Administrative Procedure Act (UAPA), and recommend sanctions to the director of the Bureau of Services for Persons Who are Deaf, Deafblind or Hard of Hearing and the ADS Commissioner. Concern was expressed, as the agency's current portfolio does not include handling complaints, holding hearings of this type, or issuing sanctions or penalties. It was requested that the new Director of the Bureau be given time to understand the challenges and potential solutions, and work with the Advisory Board to set a course that meets the needs of the community. It was stated, the new Director has been actively engaged with the community to see how these three existing activities can be improved to better meet the needs of the community.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

CT State Representative Chris Poulos, 81st District: supports requiring annual registration and categorization of interpreters based on their qualifications, increasing accountability, and ensuring that consumers can trust the professionals facilitating their communication. The board's ability to review complaints and recommend sanctions will enhance the quality of services while protecting the rights of consumers. For far too long, individuals who are deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing have faced inconsistencies and barriers in accessing qualified interpreting services. Communication access is a fundamental right. Yet, without clear, enforceable standards for interpreter qualifications and agency operations, many in our state experience unnecessary obstacles in medical, legal, educational, and community settings.

Task Force on Establishing a State Interpreting Standards Board under the Bureau of Services for Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Persons in the State Department of Aging and Disability Services, Assistant Chair; and Chair, Connecticut Association of the Deaf Education & Legislative Committee, Dr. Harvey Corson: strongly supports this legislation as it is addressing an urgent need of reduced availability of sign language interpreters in CT, to broaden the definition of recognized state credentials, and to move toward regulatory solutions rather than legislative ones. By creating a State Interpreting Standards Board, the state will be addressing communication access needs of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing communities with comprehensive standards for interpreters and operational standards for interpreting agencies across Connecticut. This will ensure the state's interpreting workforce remains competent and well-equipped to serve diverse communication needs. The legislation incorporates oversight and enforcement to uphold professional standards, strengthens public trust in interpreting services through complaint and grievance procedures that hold individuals and entities accountable for noncompliance. The hearing processes will protect the rights of accused parties while safeguarding the public, and sanctions will promote adherence to standards and deter noncompliance. The collaboration with the public will foster transparency, ensure community buy-in, and allow the Board to draw on diverse expertise to inform regulatory and policy decisions. It was stated, this would be done at a minimal cost to the state with the participation of the knowledgeable volunteer citizens willing to serve on the State Interpreting Standards Board.

Task Force on Establishing a State Interpreting Standards Board under the Bureau of Services for Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Persons in the State Department of Aging and Disability Services, Member; and Governor's Advisory Board for Persons Who are Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing, CoChair Barbara Cassin: supports the creation of the Standards Board to focus on the critical need for increasing the number of qualified interpreters available in CT, with volunteer members working directly with the Director of the ADS' Bureau for Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing to provide training and other resources. This would assure that interpreters are qualified by verifying that they are registered here in Connecticut and have the appropriate qualifications. It was stated "while we realize recreating the previous commission is not feasible, we do recognize the many issues and concerns raised by our community and the agencies and businesses with whom we interact urgently need to be addressed."

Governor's Advisory Board for Persons Who are Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing, CoChair; and Connecticut Association of the Deaf, Inc., President, Luisa Gasco-Soboleski: supports this legislation as it seeks to address complaints of consumers, the shortage of interpreters and the shortcomings of Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). It is stated, many complaints are received each year regarding issues with interpreters in medical settings and many members of the deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing community have experienced frustrations with getting information or sharing their grievances, and there is no designated place where complaints can be filed. The total number of interpreters in the state of CT is 74: 66 hearing interpreters, 8 certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI); an additional 392 registered interpreters are mostly out of state providing remote interpreting services. This number is insufficient to meet the needs and we lack an accurate tracking system to determine interpreters' locations within the state, qualifications, and specialties (e.g., community, educational, legal & medical settings). In addition, there are issues with VRI which poses risks to service quality for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing consumers, and can impede the streamlined delivery of information compared to an in-person interpreter. It

does not and cannot provide deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing consumers with access to the full 360 degrees of visual and spatial information available with an in-person interpreter, depriving them of a quality and equitable experience. Strategies to address the need to increase and monitor ASL interpreters in the state would be possible with the establishment of the Board.

Advisory Board, ASL/English Interpreter Training Program of the Connecticut State Community College, Chairperson, Paul Atkinson: supports establishment of a board to set and enforce standards for individuals who wish to provide interpreting and transliterating services in Connecticut. While organizations on the national level such as the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and the National Association of the Deaf have established competency and professional conduct standards in certifying ASL/English interpreters, they lack the ability to effectively enforce such standards on the state level. Using the authority proposed in this bill, the Board would exercise a much-needed quality control over the services provided to our Deaf, DeafBlind and hard-of-hearing citizens.

Connecticut Council of Organization Serving the Deaf, Liza Alers, President: supports this bill and the effort to increase the availability of qualified interpreters. Even as a person well-prepared to advocate on behalf of the deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing, they recount personal stories for themselves and other family members in which they lacked access to appropriate interpreter services and the lack thereof was detrimental to education attainment and adequate healthcare.

Connecticut Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (CRID), President & Certified Interpreter, Nicholas Dionne: supports this effort as a member of the volunteer Board of RID. It is stated, the state-wide and nation-wide shortage of interpreters has many of us working overtime - including nights and weekends, sometimes through the overnight hours too. Many of these ideas are in response to the overuse and default reliance on Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). VRI services continue to be a first response for many medical settings, even after the request for in person interpreters has been made by Deaf, DB & HoH patients in high risk, high stress situations in which the person may be experiencing pain or effects of medications. It is said, the Board, as proposed in this legislation, would work directly with the new Bureau Director and to support their work with little or no cost to the state. Establishing this Interpreting Standards Board will help to draw in a different demographic of working interpreters to our state by providing them with an additional pathway to obtaining qualifications to work in CT.

Connecticut State Commission on Deaf and Hearing Impaired, Keith Vinci, Former Commissioner (retired): supports the establishment of a State Interpreting Standards Board to restore some of the supports and services lost when the CDHI was discontinued. It is stated the Board, within the Bureau of the Deaf, would unlock RIDs grip on CT's restrictive certification process, and would examine and expand the credentialing process to include qualified interpreters from outside of the state.

CoSignCT, Leslie Warren, Founder and CEO: supports the creation of a State Interpreting Standards Board. It is said, other states have disengaged from the National Registry of interpreters for the Deaf organization and developed their own to enlarge the pool of working interpreters. This company had developed a screening mechanism as part of a onboarding

process and had designed a mentorship program for those who are new to the field or those seeking a second career as an interpreter.

Connecticut Hospital Association, Anonymous: supports the concepts of this bill but has concerns about the potential to exacerbate the shortage of interpreters. It is stated, we continue to experience a shortage of interpreting services due to a limited interpreter pool in Connecticut and across the nation. Even a smaller proportion are willing to serve healthcare organizations due to the unpredictable hours and demands that come with serving in these types of settings. Many in healthcare, including hospitals, must supplement this limited pool with interpreters who can service Connecticut remotely. The suggestion is made for additional language in the bill in line 95, insert subsection (j). The Commissioner of Aging and Disability Services shall adopt regulations, in accordance with chapter 54 of the general statutes, to implement the provisions of this section. Such regulations shall include measures to ensure there are no decreases in the pool of available, qualified interpreters.

The following individuals provided testimony in support of the bill, and many include professional expertise or a personal story of lack of access to effective interpreter services, or the challenge of self-advocacy.

Cheri Byrnes, DeafBlind self-advocate

Alexandra McGee, Treasurer, CT Association of the Deaf

Milmaglyn Morales, Certified Deaf Interpreter, and Principal, Early Childhood Center at Learning Center for the Deaf

Ed Peltier, Retired ED of ASD, and Board Chair for Communication Advocacy Network

Kim Silva, self-advocate

Dr. Julia Silvestri, Coord. ASL Program Yale University and Advocate; personal experience of lack of access to interpreter during birthing experience.

Mary Silvestri, Retired Teacher of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing in CT public schools

Christina Stevens, Region 1 Representative, Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID)

Lisa Vaughn, self-identifies as DeafBlind individual with low vision; discussion of Pro Tactile (PT) and Tactile American Sign Language (TASL).

Marsha L. Wetzel, Certified Deaf Interpreter, VP of CT Registry for the Deaf

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

AFSCME Council 4, Local 2663, Sue Shatney, Member; and Department of Aging and Disability Services, Counselor of the Deaf: opposes this bill as it is stated, it does nothing to improve interpreting services but instead creates unnecessary bureaucracy, imposes vague and restrictive regulations, and threatens the sustainability of the profession. As an employee of the agency who would have jurisdiction of this “board” I can speak directly to the fact that the Bureau lacks capacity to enforce or even participate efficiently and effectively. It is stated, the proposal is focused on unnecessary bureaucracy and redundant oversight. CT interpreters are already governed by rigorous national standards established by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) per state statute (PA 22-31). RID already has a formal process to investigate and address ethical violations and a clear path to report concerns. Rather than improving services, this overregulation restricts professional autonomy which is in direct opposition to the Code of Professional Conduct established by RID. Also, there

appears to be a lack of professional representation on the Board, when the purpose is to set standards of professional practice not advocacy. This goal would be better served by working with those in the field to develop effective, sustainable solution that actually enhance access to interpreting services.

Reported by: Rebecca McClanahan

Date: April 7, 2025