

To: Representative Warren Patryk, Chair, Committee on Workforce Development

From: Disability Rights Wisconsin

Date: June 4, 2019

Re: Testimony in Support of 2019 AB 250

Thank you Representative Patryk and members of the Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Assembly Bill 250 relating to regulation of sign language interpretation services. Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) is the designated Protection and Advocacy system for Wisconsinites with disabilities. DRW is charged with protecting the legal rights of individuals with disabilities, investigating systemic abuse and neglect and ensuring access to supports and services so that all Wisconsin residents can learn, work, and live full lives in our communities free of abuse, neglect and discrimination.

We are pleased to support AB 250 because, by supporting access to qualified interpreters and providing more effective oversight, it has the potential to benefit Wisconsinites who are deaf and hard of hearing. The proposal is based on significant community input coordinated by a Sign Language Interpreter Task Force convened by the Wisconsin Association for the Deaf (WAD) and the Wisconsin Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (WisRID). The Task Force used multiple approaches to solicit stakeholder input, including online surveys, community meetings, and meetings with partners. This is a very complex and specialized issue, and we commend the significant effort that has been put forth to be responsive to community needs.

Some of the positive aspects of the bill include the following:

- American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters are required to perform very specialized and highly skilled work in their role of accurately conveying information that may be very sensitive and complex. This includes legal, mental health, and medical settings. The proposed legislation will protect consumers by requiring an advanced level of skill for those who work in these specialized settings to ensure they have the training needed to accurately convey very sensitive and technical information.
- Proposed changes will streamline the standards, creating a single set of criteria for certification. Using national standards for interpreters, the proposed licensure model places the interpreters in categories based on education, training, and skill level. The changes will create standards for different settings, which will protect people who are deaf or hard of hearing and the people who are communicating with them. Interpreters' skills will be matched to the settings within which the interpreters have the ability to work.

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- The proposed advisory council will provide a framework for ongoing stakeholder input, identification of concerns and advisement. The advisory council will benefit from participation by consumers and professionals.
- DRW has heard significant concerns from deaf individuals about access to mental health services and the challenges that can result when a practitioner uses unlicensed interpreters or those without specialized training. The new requirement for advanced training for those who interpret in a mental health setting has the potential to improve the quality of communication and support better outcomes for the individual.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments supporting this proposal. The effort on this certification has been “in the works” for years and it is something that will make a significant impact. Information exchange in the many arenas of one’s life can be complex and difficult to understand. DRW has heard from many deaf Wisconsinites about the difficulties they experience in accessing services. It is essential that people who are deaf or hard of hearing can have confidence in their interpreters, just as it is essential that people communicating with them can have confidence that the information they are sharing is accurately interpreted.

AB250 is a positive effort to begin to address these needs. We look forward to working with policy makers on additional opportunities to increase access, including increasing the number of mental health services providers who have the ability to communicate directly with the deaf and individuals who are hard of hearing, and who are familiar with deaf culture.