

The Hon. Sara Gelser, Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Health Care and Early Childhood

Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Senator Gelser,

My name is Steven M. Brown, and I am Chair of the Oregon Association of the Deaf (OAD) legislative subcommittee, but I am here to give my testimony as a community member. I would like to take a moment to share what we are doing, and impress upon you both its importance and what an honor it is to both participate in and observe in its effects.

OAD and I are currently working with Senator Laurie Monnes Anderson on Senate Bill (SB) 449. This bill asks the Department of Human Services (DHS) to require that social services be provided for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Oregonians statewide. At this time, law states DHS does not require the provision of services even if the advisory committee recommends the implementation of such programs for those who may need assistance.

Governor Robert W. Straub formed the Governor's Disability Services Task Force in 1976 (fomenting the eventual formation of the Oregon State Commission for the Handicapped/ OSCH, seven years later, in 1983.) The Straub administration was also compliant with former President Jimmy Carter's executive order to examine disability services, particularly in the 1977 order concerning employment.

Until 1985, the Department of Human Resources (now the Department of Human Services, or DHS) worked with the Vocational Rehabilitation Division to create specific programs for the Hearing-Impaired. The programs were inserted into DHR budget-notes that eventually led to the creation of the Deaf and Hearing Impaired Access Program (DHIAP) on the basis of the Governor's Disability Services Task Force recommendations.

The program was implemented to provide accessibility services for those who were eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation services on the basis of some form of hearing impairment. In 1987, DHR decided to write a bill asking the Legislature to transfer DHIAP to the OSCH because of budget cuts. Two years later, the Legislature finally agreed that it would be in the best interest of all for DHIAP to be staffed by an independent commission so that the program could be available to other state agencies; not just DHR clients, but potentially anyone who needed accessibility services.

The executive order on the Disability Services Task force was in effect until it was disbanded in 1987 by former Governor Victor G. Atiyeh. In 1989, OSCH's name was changed to the Oregon Disability Commission (ODC). DHIAP was administrated by ODC independently until the end of 2004.

ODC had a staff of between four to twelve full-time personnel handling, at minimum, sixteen state agencies' contracts to provide accessibility services for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Oregonians. (DHIAP was renamed by its personnel, though not the Legislature, to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Access Program/ DHHAP in the early 1990's.) In 1991, the Legislature further decided to require ODC to establish a state certification system for any interpreter employed by a state agency.

While this was a good start, ODC's budget faced drastic cuts for the next ten years. Many positions, as well as state agency contracts, were slashed and left few personnel and other resources available for the program's operation. ODC and DHHAP's mission statements were evidently arbitrary.

As result, the Legislature declared in an emergency session on January first, 2005 that DHHAP be transferred to DHS. The program is now called the Oregon Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Program (ODHHSP.) It was administrated by the Senior Citizens and People with Disabilities division (SPD, which in turn is now called the Aging and People with Disabilities division/APD,) to preserve such programs.

The transfer was intended so that the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing community could receive social services provided by DHS, not just accessibility services. For nearly ten years after the law was passed in 2005, ODHHSP had not implemented, yet provided, the very same method of what DHHAP formerly did.

The purpose of the new law was to create an advisory committee to liaise with the DHS director and determine the appropriateness and level of need for services. Unfortunately, existing statutes did not require the DHS administration to accept any advisory committee's recommendations. At this present time, we do have SB 449 in effect with the Senator Laurie Monnes Anderson, but we have a long way to go to update and broaden accessibility for services among our community the way that they potentially could be.

This bill asks the Department of Human Services (DHS) to require that social services be provided for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Oregonians statewide. This seemingly obvious approach has been far too long in coming (since the Carter Era, in fact,) and in our opinion everyone involved will be remembered by a huge bloc of very happy voters as the people who caused this to be.

Thank you for listening my testimony, and please vote "yes!" on SB 449.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SMB', written in a cursive style.

Steven M. Brown, MPA, MA