



April 13, 2023

Senator Mark Lawrence, Chair
Representative Stanley Paige Zeigler, Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology
Cross Office Building, Room 211
Augusta, Maine 04333

Re: **LD 1065, An Act to Improve the Telecommunications Relay Services Council by Reducing Its Membership and Allowing for the Hiring of an Executive Director**

Dear Senator Lawrence, Representative Zeigler, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology:

My name is Riley Albair, and I am the Deaf Services Co-Director at Disability Rights Maine. I write in support of LD 1065, An Act to Improve Telecommunications Relay Services Council by Reducing its Membership and Allowing for the Hiring of an Executive Director.

DRM is Maine's federally funded Protection and Advocacy agency. Our mission is to advance justice and equality by enforcing rights and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities in Maine. DRM's Deaf Services division was formed in 2015, when the programs and staff of the former Maine Center on Deafness (MCD) joined the agency. DRM has historically served on the Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) Council in the seat for a disability rights organization in Maine; I currently act as a pending member in this role. DRM also provides outreach and training services to Maine citizens and businesses about relay services and how to use them.

LD 1065 would allow the Telecommunications Relay Services Council to hire a part-time Executive Director using existing funds. It would also reduce the number of Governor-appointed members on the Council from 8 to 6. DRM believes these changes are critically necessary to ensure that the TRS Council can continue to function effectively and to administer high-quality TRS services for Mainers who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing or have speech disabilities.

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TRS services and captioned telephone service (CapTel or CTS) are telecommunications services that allow people who are deaf, hard-of-hearing, or speech-disabled to communicate via the telecommunications system, and thus have telephone access comparable to other citizens. These are essential services for many, enabling people to work, live, and stay connected to family and community.

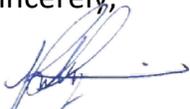
In 2018, the Maine Legislature established the Maine TRS Council as the entity that is responsible for ensuring that these services are continuously and reliably provided throughout the state, in compliance with state and federal laws and regulations. In so doing, it changed the Council's role from primarily advisory in evaluating services, to one of developing and executing programs and policies. This was a significant change.

Although the Council is now tasked with directly administering the Telecommunication Relay Services (TRS) program within the state, the Council has no staff. Most other states have between one and three paid staff involved in administering their state relay programs. However, Maine continues to rely on volunteer Council members, who cannot be compensated for their time or duties. This now includes developing budgets, evaluating services, entering into contracts for services in coordination and accordance with state purchasing laws and rules, and developing pilot programs, among others. This work is sophisticated and complex, and requires a very significant time commitment to learn and carry out. Unfortunately, the Council has limited ability to train new members and officers in this work due to its lack of staff. When officers resign or terms expire, they take their knowledge with them. These challenges are having serious impacts on the Council. Changes are necessary.

We believe a part-time Executive Director, directed by the Council, is necessary to enable the Council to more effectively administer relay services and carry out its work. It would also allow officer and members roles and tasks to be streamlined and supported, removing barriers that are preventing community members from volunteering for these important positions. The Council has the funds to hire an Executive Director within its existing budget limits. These changes would strengthen both the Council and the administration and oversight of relay services in Maine.

For these reasons, we urge you to vote ought to pass on LD 1065.

Sincerely,



Riley Albair
Program Director
Disability Rights Maine

