

Elaine Williams
Scarborough
LD 2087

Representative Mathieson and members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services, my name is Elaine Williams and I have been a licensed sign language interpreter in the state of Maine since October of 2013. I am writing in support of LD2087, An Act to Amend the Laws Governing the Licensure of American Sign Language Interpreters, and would encourage the committee to consider adding language to include an alternative pathway to licensure.

The majority of interpreting work in the state of Maine is done on a freelance basis. Because of this, there aren't entry-level opportunities for new interpreters to gain hands-on experience and grow as professionals. Oftentimes, interpreters start by slowly accepting jobs that match their budding skills while working other jobs to maintain a steady income. I did this myself, working a full time job to secure health insurance and a regular paycheck, while interpreting nights and weekends for the first couple of years. Entering the field in this way means that skills are built slowly, over time. In 2013 I had a limited license, a credential governed by the law previous to the current statute. This license did not have a time limit by which an interpreter must pass the national certification exam, as the current conditional licence does. Under the limited license I was able to increase the number of hours that I was interpreting until I felt my skills met national standards for certification, passing my exam six years after I first got my license. In that time I was lucky enough to work as a staff interpreter at an agency that offered me regular interpreting assignments as well as supervision and feedback on my work. That agency no longer employs staff interpreters, an additional barrier to regular practice and skill growth in the field. The amendments proposed in LD2087 would extend the conditional license to five years, with an additional sixth year to be "granted in cases of extreme hardship." This aligns with national certification testing standards; after passing the initial written exam, an interpreter has five years to pass a performance exam to become nationally certified. If the interpreter does not pass the certification exam in that amount of time, they can retake their written exam and begin the cycle again. A conditional license period of five years is on par with this national certification testing cycle.

As an individual who was not born Deaf or to a Deaf family, I grew up speaking English. I did not learn American Sign Language until my early twenties, when I was fortunate enough to be enrolled in the interpreting training program at the University of Southern Maine. I completed a four year degree, which was necessary to learn foundational language skills in ASL, and also the theories and skills of interpreting. Since entering the field, I have worked with countless Deaf professionals and hearing folks who grew up in Deaf families. These people are integral to the success of my work. Their native signing skills outweigh anything I could hope to learn as an adult. These people have lived experience, not only of the language, but of the culture. They have command of ASL in ways that I could study for decades and never master. Think about your use of your native language as compared to your use of the foreign language you studied in high school- most of us can remember a few key phrases at best, but you carry your native language with you every day! I might be able to say something in French (the language I studied in middle and high school) in one way. If you don't understand me, I would be stuck. Whereas if we were both using English, I could come up with endless ways of describing or rephrasing something until we have a mutual understanding. In fact, that's something we see as interpreters all the time. My interpretation may be followed by clarifications in ASL between Deaf participants - in their native language!- to ensure everyone has a clear understanding. An interpretation of my interpretation! This is a community of people that has immeasurable skill in interpreting everything happening around them on a daily basis. The National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) recognizes this skill and experience as equivalent to post- secondary education, and offers an alternative pathway to certification exam eligibility. This system considers interpreting

experience, professional development and coursework toward Experience Credits, whether or not the applicant has a degree from a post-secondary institution. In this way, lived experience and accrued continuing education can be counted toward eligibility. More details can be found here:

<https://rid.org/certification/alternative-pathway-program/> I would encourage the committee to consider adding an alternative pathway to this amendment, so that we can benefit from the expertise of those within our community already supporting effective communication, but who do not meet the current degree requirements proposed. This would also align with findings of the Transforming Interpreting in Maine (TIME) report that was prepared for the Department of Health and Human services, which can be found here:

<https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/2024.07.30%20-%20Transforming%20Interpreting%20Maine%20%28TIME%29%20Report%20-%20COMPRESSED.pdf> This report highlights the scarcity of interpreters in our state, leaving your Deaf constituents without critical and legally mandated communication access. The TIME report also recommends the creation of an apprenticeship program to promote growth in the field. Anyone participating in that program could potentially be eligible for licensure through an alternative pathway, increasing the number of practitioners in the field and communication access for all. Adding this option to the amendment is a step toward growing the number of interpreters in the state and creating more sustainable access for Maine's Deaf community.

Thank you for your time and consideration on LD2087. Your decisions have the potential to impact on the field of interpreting in incredible ways, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness and support on this matter.

With gratitude,
Elaine A. Williams