



March 4, 2024

Senator Joe Baldacci, Chair
Representative Michele Meyer, Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Cross Office Building, Room 209
Augusta, Maine 04333

Re: **LD 2237, An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health and Well-being
by Expanding Services and Coordinating Violence Prevention
Resources**

Dear Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health & Human Services:

My name is Thomas Minch, and I am an Advocate at Disability Rights Maine (DRM). 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. This addition carried forward a 30-year legacy of history, knowledge, and advocacy for people who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Late-Deafened, or Deaf-Blind in the State of Maine.

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MAINE'S PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY AGENCY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

I am here in support of LD 2237, An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health and Well-being by Expanding Services and Coordinating Violence Prevention Resources. Part F of this bill seeks to develop and implement procedures to notify the public of active shooter situations. The procedures must include procedures for notifying the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

I am here to tell you that these procedures are deeply needed.

On October 25, 2023, a mass shooting took place in Lewiston that killed 18 Mainers, including four Deaf men. Another five Deaf men were included in the survivors.

On that night, Deaf and Hard of hearing Mainers, myself included, began to learn that some of our Deaf friends and family were missing, possibly dead. But unlike hearing Mainers, we found ourselves shut out from public information about the shooting. We turned on the news, but those first press conferences did not include American Sign Language interpreters. Captions were sometimes available, sometimes not. When interpreters were added to later briefings, media crews cut them out of the frame. During a terrifying public emergency, many Deaf and Hard of Hearing Mainers were stuck relying on person-to-person information sharing. Had the shooter been caught? Were we supposed to shelter in place? Why hadn't we received any public alerts on our cell phones? Were we safe? Had our friends died?

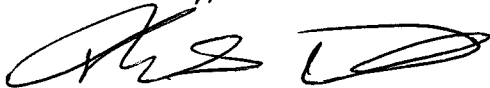
Deaf and Hard of Hearing people rely on clear and purposeful public notifications to alert us to emergencies, when we need to seek out more information. On October 25th, public communications about the shooting failed to include or consider us. This failure was terrifying.

Communication procedures must be put in place now to make sure deaf and hard of hearing people know about active shooter situations and how to respond. It is clear that our current procedures have weaknesses and gaps. Procedures must address accessibility, captioning, and interpreters during emergency press briefings, and improve access to emergency information online. There is no "one" system that is best for alerting citizens in an emergency. Instead, emergency communication systems should be "redundant" – the message should be sent out to as many people and in as many formats as possible (by television, radio, phone/TTY, computer, cell phone, text messaging, pager, and other means).

System-wide efforts must be explored and supported for all individuals to have equal access to information in active shooter situations. We can and must do better.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Minch', followed by a large, stylized circular flourish.

Thomas Minch
Advocate
Disability Rights Maine