

Janet T. Mills
Governor

Jeanne M. Lambrew, Ph.D.
Commissioner



Maine Department of Health and Human Services
Aging and Disability Services
11 State House Station
41 Anthony Avenue
Augusta, Maine 04333-0011
Tel; (207) 287-9200; Toll Free: (800) 262-2232
Fax (Disability) (207) 287-9915; Fax (Aging) (207)287-9229
TTY: Dial 711 (Maine Relay)

March 13, 2024

Senator Joseph Baldacci, Chair
Representative Michele Meyer, Chair
Members, Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0100

Re: LD 2255, *Resolve, to Reestablish the Task Force on Accessibility to Appropriate Communication Methods for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Patients.*

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information in support of LD 2255, *Resolve, to Reestablish the Task Force on Accessibility to Appropriate Communication Methods for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Patients.*

This resolve is the result of two task force meetings held late last fall/early winter. The task force got a late start in part due to the ability to assign participants from the Deaf community who were severely impacted by the tragic shooting in Lewiston on October 25. The event highlighted many of the barriers the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community face daily when accessing health care services. The task force, which aimed to address issues and concerns related to health care service accessibility, included active representation from the Departments of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Labor (DOL). Ultimately, the task force voted to continue the work outlined in this bill over the next session as there was not enough time to fully address and make recommendations on many of the important areas covered in this bill, some of which were exacerbated in the wake of the shooting.

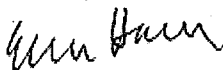
Specifically, we believe there is further work and data collection needed to inform and develop long-term solutions related to growing the sign language interpreter workforce. Additionally, recommendations are needed for how best to engage with all healthcare providers, including hospitals, regarding the development of statewide guidelines for the appropriate use of Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) in these health care settings. Therefore, the DOL and DHHS support the intent and continuation of this task force as outlined in this resolve.

Both DOL and DHHS serve Deaf and hard-of-hearing clients across their programs and have members of the community on staff. These clients and staff, as well as members of the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community across Maine, will benefit from the discussion, work, and ultimate recommendations that will come out of this task force.

The task force's ultimate goal is to consider barriers to and make recommendations for improving overall access to health care (communication, education, training, etc.) for Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in Maine. The tragedy in Lewiston underscored many of the access barriers the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community faces daily when accessing all areas of their lives, and the work and resulting recommendations of this task force, if implemented correctly, could help improve access and equity across many areas, including health care.

Please feel free to contact us if you have further questions.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Hopkins
Associate Director
Maine Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Aging and Disability Services



Libby Stone-Stirling
Director
Maine Department of Labor
Bureau of Rehabilitation Services