

# Testimony for Mental Health & Disability Terminology Act

## Ohio House Bill 281

Sponsored by Ohio House Representative Dontavius Jarrells, D-25  
Tuesday, May 25, 2021

I would like to thank Ohio House Representative Jarrells for introducing House Bill 281 on Derogatory Language and his aide, Tristina Allen, for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 281 on Derogatory Language.

Most of all, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Katherine Yoder, Director of Adult Advocacy Centers, for bringing to our attention, derogatory language, labeling disabled individuals as found in many Ohio revised codes.

My name is Irene Tunanidas and I am a retired teacher of Deaf Students in the state of Ohio, and currently, president of the Ohio Association of the Deaf. I grew up in a hearing home and my hearing loss at the age of three was caused by a medicine administration Error in the 1950s. My education began in the Oral Deaf Program in Youngstown, Ohio and my honors diploma was from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1966. After graduating from Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., the world's only liberal arts college for the Deaf in 1970, I enrolled in the Teaching Program at Kent State University and graduated with a teaching degree in 1972.

During my days in graduate school at Kent State, Professor Katherine Miner, my advisor and mentor, took many trips to Columbus to testify at the Ohio Department of Special Education on my behalf, in hopes of convincing the officials to grant me a 4-year provisional teaching certificate. She had faith that I would make an effective teacher based on my speaking and writing skills, and her persistence paid off. The former state director of Special Education was heard telling his colleagues, "If a school district hires a "deaf mute" teacher, then they would have to hire a "mentally retarded teacher,"also ...and so on. His remarks evoked mixed reactions from colleagues in his department.

My application for a full time teaching position was rejected by four Ohio School districts after graduation from Kent State, due to school district administrators' perspective that deaf educators' teaching capabilities do not match with those who have the ability to hear. American Sign Language was not embraced in the education profession until 1990 when Americans with Disabilities Act was signed by the first Bush administration.

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My full-time teaching position with the Youngstown City Schools was put on a trial basis for a year. Skeptical school administrators focused on whether I had the skills and knowledge to enhance deaf students' learning skills in the classroom. My personal academic achievements, skills and experiences brought not only creativity to the classroom but also motivated and enabled deaf students to make academic goals for themselves. However; my teaching career had almost come to an end in 1991. I was traumatized by bullying issues and name-calling by two teachers and an interpreter who spewed lies to our department's supervisor about my "incompetency skills", in hopes of getting me out for good. They were bothered by high school deaf students' ability to process information in communication activities in my classroom. I was under the care of Dr. F. Jane Salkind, hospital psychologist for six months. I learned to muster up the courage to fight back lies about my work with deaf students. Ms. Irene Ward, former Pupil Personnel Director with the Youngstown Board of Education, saved me from leaving the teaching profession.

In 1991, I taught Deaf History at the high school. This gave deaf students in our unit the opportunity to advocate for themselves if they have an issue or wish to make academic choices. One student signed up for an elective course in the Regular Program. He stayed put with his decision during the IEP Conference. When this was over, one teacher pulled me out of the classroom and asked in the hallway if I coaxed the student into making a decision. No was the answer. She said, "Irene, go to hell!" and left. Teachers have no business being in the Deaf Program if they work only for a paycheck and not helping deaf children expand effective learning skills to become successful adults in life.

TV sitcoms and U.S. newspapers are littered with derogatory language targeting the disability population. This infiltrates able-bodied individuals' minds with the notion that individuals with disabilities are worthless beings. Negative uses of disability words can devalue disabled people and this may lead to depression and suicidal thoughts.

"Deaf and dumb" is often mentioned in literature and in social conversations. In Webster's Dictionary, the definition of "dumb" is "lacking intelligence". "Mute" means "unable to speak". Historical usage of the term, "deaf mute" originated in the United Kingdom in the 19th century. It was coined as a medical term for an inability to speak as a consequence of deafness.

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“Hearing impaired” was coined by hearing professionals in the education system in the early 1970s. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) considers this an offensive term because it disrespects their image as capable individuals with many talents. According to the NAD, the lower case, (deaf) refers to deaf people who are not members of the deaf community. It is used by audiologists and medical professionals as not having the ability to hear. The upper case (Deaf) refers to a particular group of deaf people who share a language which is American Sign Language (ASL) and a culture.

During the first Bush administration, President George H.W. Bush nominated a Deaf educator named Robert Davila to be the Assistant Secretary of Education. His nomination precipitated an uproar of messages inside the Education Department. Some government officials scoffed at the President’s decision to choose a “second-class” deaf administrator for this high-level government position. Davila became the first person in a Spanish-speaking hearing family to earn a college degree and he became the ninth president of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. in 2006.

Negative uses of disability words in daily interactions should be discouraged. It is a bad habit that reflects a negative or judgmental mindset. Deaf and disabled individuals want respect and acceptance in society. Able-bodied individuals who do not have a disability may have one in their unforeseeable future.

In closing, organizations and government-subsidized agencies should adopt a “zero tolerance” policy on derogatory terms targeting the deaf and the disabled, and positive expressions will produce a healthier environment for able bodied and disabled beings.

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