

Before I speak, I would like to thank Representative Dontavaius Jarrells, Tristina Allen, and all other organizations and individuals who have been working hard on this bill. Thank you for allowing me to be here today to share my voice in supporting House Bill 281. My name is Rose Larson, and I am the Executive Director with Deaf World Against Violence Everywhere (DWAVE). Since 2000, DWAVE has been a statewide agency providing services to Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, and Hard-of-Hearing survivors of violence, henceforth will be denoted as Deaf*. I am in favor of House Bill 281, Mental Health and Disability Terminology Act. DWAVE has been providing service to Deaf* survivors for 21 years. Myself being DeafDisabled and a survivor of sexual violence, I have experienced the direct impact of stigma's stemming from derogatory labels. In my experience, I have received poor treatment from professionals as labeling me "Deaf Mute" and subsequently treating me as if I am incapable of making my own decisions and living a normal life. Throughout my work with DWAVE I have witnessed clients encounter numerous barriers to accessing quality services all due to the stigma of language that is used to describe them. It is inhumane and dehumanizing to continue to use outdated language and maintain an antiquated mindset against a community who persist on having it changed.

I read an article, from Bath University in the United Kingdom, that explains an individual receiving services from a professional influenced by stigma, due to improper labels, will receive less effective treatment. The article, in short, performed an experiment with two groups of patients. The first group was labeled with appropriate, community accepted language and the second group labeled with inappropriate, non-community accepted language. Results of the research found that the second group had received less effective treatment than the first group. Receiving less effective treatment often triggers layers of trauma that Deaf* individuals may experience growing up (Deaf* persons are 2-3 times as likely to experience violence as non-Deaf* persons). The trauma can lead to severe depression, increased mental health issues, perpetual cycle of violence, suicide, drug use, and more. As well, use of improper language labels can lead to litigation of professionals who do not follow ADA laws due to their mindset, attitudes, and bias.

To make our society more accessible for all, it is imperative that we update our language. The language we use for labels should be equitable and honoring all identities and how communities want to be identified/labeled. To be the change, we first must change. By using the language communities want, we are acknowledging that an individual's disability is just one part of their life, and we can begin to eliminate misconceptions to create a more inclusive society.