

Testimony for Mental Health & Disability Terminology Act

Ohio House Bill 281

Sponsored by Ohio House Representative Dontavius Jarrells, D-25

Wednesday, November 17, 2021

I would like to thank Tristina Allen for contacting me to give my written testimony on House Bill 281 on Derogatory Language found under the 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 am a product of a hearing home and my hearing loss occurred at the age of three from double dosage of antibiotics to combat whooping cough and high fever. My education began in the Oral Program in Youngstown, Ohio. After graduating from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1966, I enrolled at Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C. I was introduced to the American Sign Language, the main communication method used by deaf students at Gallaudet. It took me two years to master my signing skills. After receiving my Bachelor's degree from Gallaudet in 1970, I was accepted in the Teacher Training Program at Kent State University and received my Master's in Deaf Education in 1972.

My application for a full time teaching position was rejected by four Ohio school districts due to school administrators' perspective that deaf educators' teaching capabilities do not match with those whose brains have the capability to encode information. In addition to this, American Sign Language was not recognized as a legitimate language at that time. My full time teaching position with the Youngstown City Schools was put on a trial basis for a year. Skeptical school administrators focused whether I had the skills and knowledge to enhance deaf students' learning skills in the classroom. My academic achievements and experiences brought not only creativity to the classroom but also enabled deaf students to make academic goals for themselves.

My teaching career almost came to an end in 1991 and Ms. Irene Ward, former Pupil Personnel Director with the Youngstown Board of Education saved me from leaving the teaching profession. At that time I was traumatized by bullying issues and name-calling by two teachers. They made an untrained sign language interpreter to spy for them in my classroom by going through my desk drawers during lunch recess in hopes of finding illegal items or tools to get me out of the Deaf Program.

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I underwent psychological counseling for a few months in 1991 and the weekly sessions helped me develop thick skin. Why my colleagues acted as “bullies” was because I refused to share with them deaf students’ personal issues to protect their reputation. I also found it hard to believe that some hearing educators made deaf children’s school life miserable by taunting them in the classroom. When these traumatized deaf students became adults, they chose to stay in the Deaf World to avoid harassment by hearing individuals.

Negative uses of disability words have no place in an education setting or in a social setting. 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 unforeseen 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 the able-bodied and disabled beings.

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