

February 28, 2023

Good morning, Chairperson Caruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer proponent testimony on House Bill 33, the state's main operating budget. In particular, I am here to support the strategic investment in the "Services for the Deaf" line item (GRF 415508).

My name is Dr. Jennell Vick. I am executive director of Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center. With over a century of service to the community, we are the nation's oldest nonprofit speech, hearing, and deaf services center. Prior to accepting this role in 2015, I was a professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Case Western Reserve University, in the Communication Sciences program. I have been a research scientist at institutions that include the University of Washington in Seattle, the University of Texas at Dallas, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The majority of my research career was spent studying communication in adults who were profoundly deaf. Among my close collaborators was Dr. Harlan Lane, the world's foremost scholar of and advocate for the deaf community and recipient of the MacArthur Genius Award for his work with the Deaf. Today, I work shoulder to shoulder with deaf professionals who seek to improve the lives of members of the deaf community. At Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center, we are the proud home of one of the eight Community Centers for the Deaf across the State of Ohio. In addition to the crucial services that our CCD provides, we are a leading provider of services focused on a vision of a community where everyone can communicate effectively, including speech-language pathology, audiology, and early intervention services. Throughout our history, CHSC has been committed to providing high-quality, affordable services to individuals and families in need. Our mission is focused on helping individuals achieve their full communication potential and ensuring that no one is denied services due to financial limitations.

If you could take away one idea from my remarks today, it is that your constituents who are deaf or hard of hearing face seemingly insurmountable challenges to achieve independent living and join the workforce in Ohio. Increasing funding for "services for the deaf" will enable the 8 CCDs around the state to remove some of the barriers to independence and employment that our deaf neighbors face. In particular, the funding will enable our CCDs to develop deaf professionals to work directly with deaf adults in their quest for independence and employment, to mentor and provide role models for deaf youth, to build an increased supply of highly competent American Sign Language Interpreters across the state, and to allow Ohio to expand its workforce by tapping in to this community that holds great potential for our economic future.

My colleague, Timothy Skaggs, director of the Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing at my agency, provided compelling written testimony about the breadth of services that our statewide CCDs provide and about some of the challenges that deaf professionals face in Ohio. Briefly, many children who are born with permanent hearing loss lack access to early language stimulation and development. This deprivation creates many downstream impacts, including low literacy, poor academic and vocational outcomes, and a higher susceptibility to disorders of mental health and addiction.

**Affiliations:**

Case Western Reserve University  
United Way of Greater Cleveland

**Accreditations:**

CARF  
Certified Medicare & Medicaid Provider  
National Association of Speech and Hearing Centers  
Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf

Increased funding for services for the deaf will increase access to competent, skilled American Sign Language interpreters and will improve access to services for our deaf and hard of hearing community. Let me explain more.

The most accessible language for a person who is deaf is a signed language. American Sign Language is a rich language that is unique to our country. It is not a signed version of the spoken English that I'm using today. In fact, it most closely mirrors French in the word order and syntax that it uses. It often surprises people to learn that American Sign Language and British Sign Language are quite different, in fact!

Sign language interpreting, then, is an amazing process where the interpreter listens to the spoken English and produces a signed interpretation of this message while listening to the next ideas spoken. The interpreter also must watch and understand the signed message from the deaf conversant, generating a voiced English version of the message. This profession is one that requires incredible skill, language knowledge, cognitive ability, and professionalism. It takes years, if not decades, to develop true competency.

We have a critical shortage of ASL interpreters in Ohio. This is one of the most fundamental barriers to independence, academic, and vocational success for deaf and hard of hearing children and adults in our state. Ohio is one of only three states in the country that does not require licensure or certification for its sign language interpreters. This means that interpreters of every level, even low-level, are providing services for our deaf neighbors. For deaf children, this can limit the language and knowledge they acquire in school. For a deaf professional, this can impair how they are perceived in corporate environments. Imagine, for you as a highly accomplished public servant, if you were assigned an interpreter who was not skilled at a level that matched you. What would be the result? It is possible that your intended message would not be communicated. Even worse, you may be perceived as incompetent or uneducated.

With increased funding as proposed, our CCDs will improve access to highly competent American Sign Language interpreters across the state. We will mentor pre-certified ASL interpreters to enhance their skill level to achieve a set of CCD-established quality standards and national certification. This, in turn, will create an environment state-wide with fewer barriers to independence and employment. How? It will start at the earliest ages, when children will have greater access to education and language, improving literacy outcomes. It will enhance accommodation for deaf professionals in pre-employment and employment settings. As the language skills of our deaf community increase, it will enable more deaf citizens to enter the workforce.

Another area that will be improved with increased funding for deaf services is increased access to CCD services for deaf people, allowing us to serve more deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals statewide through our vocational rehabilitation programs and pre-employment transition services. Serving more deaf and hard-of-hearing people with these programs means more Ohioans emerging from the Ohio Benefits program, more Ohioans supporting industry through the workforce, and more Ohioans achieving their potential. First, though, we have to provide improved access to basic services, including case management, advocacy, information and referral, an training on independent living skills.

Our deaf community is struggling. They come to us with food insecurity, unstable housing and homelessness, very low literacy (the average deaf adult in our region has reading levels below 3rd

grade), nonexistent health equity (it's not uncommon for a deaf client to show up at our doorstep with diabetes supplies and no idea what to do with them or why), and a likely history of trauma from domestic or sexual violence (our work indicates over 80% of our deaf community is affected)."

At the current level of funding, \$27,500, our ability to provide full-time services at the CCDs is quite limited. We fundraise to make up the difference but, largely, we operate our CCDs at a major loss to our overall agencies. Sustained availability of services is precarious, at best. Services, like case management, independent living skills training, advocacy, and referral are key to helping deaf and hard of hearing citizens work toward achieving independence. Without these basic services, there is no progress toward entering the pre-employment or vocational services programs. Increasing funding for services for the deaf will ensure expanded and sustained services for the deaf and hard of hearing community.

Finally, increasing funding for services for the deaf will allow our CCDs to enhance professional development for future deaf professional leaders. This will be key to fostering not just career entry for deaf adults, but long careers with promotions along a career ladder. With limited work experiences, it is difficult for us to find deaf leaders and mentors. Increased state funding will allow us to empower deaf professionals to lead long, upwardly mobile careers. These leaders will mentor and inspire those just entering pre-employment and vocational programs.

If you scrutinize the requested budget increase, you'll see it's quite high. OOD requested a 1,800% increase in annual funding for services for the deaf, from \$27,500 to \$527,500. This is a dramatic increase, I agree, but it is nothing short of imperative. The future of our state, our economy, our workforce relies on recognizing the unique and valuable contributions that diverse populations have to offer. Our deaf and hard of hearing communities are no exception. When you consider the challenge of expanding Ohio's workforce and better serving the needs of the employers who call Ohio home, our deaf and hard of hearing community offers untapped potential.

By increasing funding for services for the deaf, you have the opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of thousands of Ohioans. You can help to break down barriers, promote inclusion and diversity, and ensure that all members of our community have the support and resources they need to thrive.

I urge you to consider these issues carefully as you make decisions about the upcoming budget, and to support the increased funding for services for the deaf. Your support will have a profound impact on our community, and will help to ensure that we can all participate fully in the rich and diverse culture of Ohio.

Thank you for consideration. I'm happy to take your questions.