

**House Finance Committee  
House Bill 96  
Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center  
Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing  
Jennell Vick, Ph.D., President & CEO  
Timothy Skaggs, Director, Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing  
March 13, 2025**

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Dr. Jennell Vick, and I am the President & CEO of Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center, home of Cleveland's Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. With me is my colleague, Timothy Skaggs, who directs our Community Center for the Deaf. We are here today representing Ohio's seven Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of hearing and the thousands of deaf individuals we serve every year. Other Community Centers for the Deaf are in Dayton, Columbus, Cincinnati, Youngstown, Canton, and Akron.

My background is as a professor and scientist and I spent my career, prior to this role, studying deaf adults at institutions that included MIT, University of Washington, and University of Texas. What I can tell you after 30 years working with this vibrant group is that the deaf community is full of potential. Like you, they have much to offer their communities, families, and this world.

Today, I work shoulder to shoulder with deaf professionals who seek to improve the lives of members of the deaf community who live in the districts you represent. This work is not easy. Those born deaf in the State of Ohio face innumerable challenges from the start. This is perhaps best exemplified by the educational attainment and employment statistics for deaf people in Ohio. According to the American Community Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, Ohio ranks 41<sup>st</sup> of all the states for Bachelor's degree completion for deaf adults and only 54% of deaf adults in Ohio are employed. The employment rate for those who are deaf who have other disabilities is even lower: only a third of these adults are employed in our state. These statistics reveal an untapped talent pool in our state: Half of deaf adults and 2/3 of adults who are deaf with another disability have so much to offer our communities and State.

**With access to education, training, and communication tools, deaf professionals can thrive in any industry—Investing in this group is a powerful way to build a dynamic workforce in Ohio.**

Ohio's seven Community Centers for the Deaf serve all 88 counties with very meager resources. In Cleveland, we are proud to have just established our Community Center for the Deaf in a freestanding location in Parma Heights last summer, which our data show is near where most deaf people in Northeast Ohio reside. Like any cultural community, members of the deaf community settle near each other, to support each other. Our Community Center for the Deaf is part of that network, and we are incredibly proud that we were able to establish this new space.

**Accreditations:**

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

Limited state funding is available for this work through Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD), which administers \$527,000 in GRF each fiscal year through the “Services for the Deaf” line item. These funds are disbursed between the Community Centers for the Deaf to, in part, fund one full time equivalent employee at each site.

An additional \$772,420 in funding has been provided to Ohio’s Community Centers for the Deaf because of OOD’s participation in the Social Security Vocational Rehabilitation Cost Reimbursement program. Leadership from Ohio’s Community Centers for the Deaf learned, last week, that OOD has had a devastating reduction in Social Security Cost Reimbursements in Fiscal Year 2025. Worse, the Agency has been unable to get clarification on these reductions from Social Security Administration (SSA), nor has OOD received any explanation of a revised criteria for reimbursement. This reduction has created a negative impact on OOD cash balances, and we were notified that our funding would, therefore, be significantly reduced.

The impact of any cut to the small allocation that each Community Center for the Deaf receives will be devastating. We will be unable to retain our staff members, who are specially trained to provide services for those who are deaf using American Sign Language as the primary communication method. Our deaf and hard of hearing support staff, who are charged with traveling to the remote counties of our state to provide services, will likely be unable to continue these services. Deaf residents of rural counties will lose access to these life-sustaining services. These residents of your districts who are working, today, on the skills necessary to enter the workforce, will no longer have hope of fulfilling their potential and supporting their communities. This impact will be felt immediately.

**We are here today to respectfully request your support for a \$1.4 million appropriation each fiscal year for Community Centers for the Deaf so that we can continue our work with deaf individuals and their families across the State of Ohio.**

I’m proud to introduce you to my colleague, Tim, to provide his perspective as the Director of our Community Center for the Deaf and as a deaf community member.

Chair Stewart, and members of the committee, my name is Timothy Skaggs, I am the Director of the Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (CCD) at the Cleveland Hearing & Speech Center. With Dr. Vick, I am here to respectfully request your support of increasing funding for Ohio’s Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

As someone who has experienced the challenges and barriers imposed on deaf individuals, I know firsthand the importance of having access to quality services, training and resources. Whether it's having an interpreter at a job interview, receiving case management services, or learning independent living skills, these services are essential to our ability to communicate effectively, engage with the world around us, and live full and productive life.

Over 90 percent of Deaf children are born to Hearing parents. Many families never learn ASL. This means that the deaf child never learns ANY language and we refer to them as having language deprivation. This is very common in deaf individuals in Ohio. It means that these individuals cannot access basic services in our everyday life, and it really hinders the ability of anyone to grow. Flowers can’t grow without sunshine or rain. Think of those two as communication/ basic access, without those two what happens to the flower, is

also what happens to the Deaf child. This can lead to a feeling of isolation, identity loss, exclusion, and a lack of cultural identity. Our Deaf Community has been greatly impacted by this and many of our Deaf Clients have the reading ability of 2-3 grade.

Navigating the world with a second-grade reading level is extremely tough, and on top of that, most community resources do not have American Sign Language access for deaf people to know what is going on. This is why our CCD center is so important to these Deaf communities. We help them to achieve the information they need to grow.

It is not only the Deaf Community that is struggling but it is also our Community Centers for the Deaf that provide these services. It is frustrating for the deaf professionals who work at the CCDs. While I can't speak for all deaf professionals on their personal frustration, I will personally explain my experience to help you understand why it is critical to support this funding.

I am the director of the Cleveland Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Cleveland, leading a team of 5 professionals, 3 who are deaf. I am part of a team of 8 directors—all of the other directors are hearing professionals. It has been hard to do my job as effectively as any hearing director is able to function. I require a lot of support to make things happen. I would like to share one of my MANY stories that hinder my ability to be effective as a leader in the Deaf Community, and I know other CCDs can resonate with my story. Imagine you have a big meeting coming up to advocate for a big company to hire a deaf worker, and you did everything in your power to make sure the meeting will be running effectively. You ask for an interpreter, but the company decides to say no. I explain that it is an accommodation need, and they need to provide it. However, I feel bad if I miss this important meeting. I show up to the meeting with all these hearing companies excited to pitch the idea of partnership. However, there is no interpreter. It makes me feel inadequate as a professional that I am not able to express myself to the company to achieve what I wanted to present. This would likely lead to a reschedule, and sometimes companies don't even bother to reschedule. This is an experience that none of you have to ever go through. This is an extra step, that none of you have to experience. And the Deaf Community, including myself, has missed a lot of meetings because of our needs are not being met. This doesn't just include only my meeting with the partnership. This includes many meetings such as Doctors, Laws, Police, Companies, and many more.

Increasing state funding will give the Deaf a greater chance to achieve more independence in their life. Increasing the funding will help to get more interpreters to their appointment. Increasing the funding will help us to look for more jobs. The increase in funding will help the Deaf quality of life to grow. With this support, let the flower in the Deaf Community grow.

We urge you to consider this issue 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 your consideration of this request. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.





