

Written Testimony of Dawn Watts
Co-Founder, Citizens of Deaf Cultures
Before Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee

February 28, 2017 Ohio SB 27 Hearing

Thank you Ohio Senator Bill Beagle and his committee for sponsoring Ohio Senate Bill 27 on Ohio Deaf History Month. My testimony will be read by one of the members of our Citizens for Deaf Cultures in my absence due to prior commitment made on the same day.

My name is Dawn Watts and I was born deaf to deaf parents, and, as an only child in a deaf family, American Sign Language was used in our home. We joined the Lutheran Church for the Deaf in Cleveland because all sermons were done in American Sign Language.

I attended the Alexander Graham Bell Oral Day School in Cleveland where my grandmother founded . Oralism is not a popular communication method by the Deaf Community as it takes years and years to master lip-reading skills. In my young adult life I was married to Larry Bostelman, a well-known basketball player at the Ohio School for the Deaf where he attended. We raised a family in Napoleon, Ohio.

I taught American Sign Language in the Adult Education Program coordinated by Wauseon Board of Education. At that time, I was hired to work with deaf students who struggled to understand book stories through oral reading. These students were not allowed to use American Sign Language, and this was a difficult process for me. The students I worked with functioned poorly in reading and writing because of their inability to produce complete

sentences in oral communication. Deaf students' parents allowed me to serve as a teacher-aide during the off school hours and American Sign Language was used in learning activities. The children benefitted from Deaf stories not taught in the Oral Deaf Program.

My work experience with deaf students enabled me to become a teacher of the deaf. I enrolled at Bowling Green State University, but I had a serious setback; Ohio Public Schools would not accept teachers who are deaf. Therefore, I changed my major to Psychology but I barely got through the program without an interpreter. Dr. Hoemann, professor of Psychology at BGSU, recommended Gallaudet University, world's first liberal arts college for the Deaf in Washington, D.C. My journey at Gallaudet University was an eye-opening experience because of the Deaf President Protest in 1988. Since Gallaudet University's inception in 1864, I was unaware that its founder was the son of the first deaf school founder named Thomas Gallaudet who, with Laurent Clerc, his French deaf assistant, started the first deaf school in Connecticut in 1817.

During my undergraduate days at Gallaudet, I had no idea where Deaf Education had originated because none of the public libraries in Ohio carried books on Deaf History. In 1993, on my graduation day at Gallaudet, I marched with my two precious sons, 10 and 7, who pushed me to finish college with a degree in Psychology.

Former deaf students I worked with, shared with me that I helped them understand they had a future. They learned more about the Deaf President Protest Movement in March of 1988 through deaf publications. This motivated students to seek a college education.

During my term as Educational Interpreter in the Outreach Program at the Ohio School for the Deaf, I traveled extensively and visited mainstream schools. Deaf students struggled with their identity because they had no deaf role models to look up to and the school libraries had no books about deaf people. I visited several libraries and was dismayed to see no books on famous deaf persons such as: Bernard Bragg who studied under Marcel Marceau, famous French Pantomimist, and Laurent Clerc, deaf Frenchman who, along with Reverend Thomas Gallaudet, started the first deaf school in 1817.

Thank you for allowing a member of my team read my testimony in support of Ohio Senate Bill 27 on Ohio Deaf History Month which runs from March 13 to April 15. If passed, we would like to see Ohio Public Libraries showcase Deaf Culture resources during this history month.

Therefore, I urge the committee to support Ohio Senate Bill 27. Thank you.