

To: Education Interim Budget Committee

From: Eliza Kragh

Date: June 20, 2024

Subject: Interpreter Programs & Funding Sources

I come before you today as both an individual and a representative of the rich, but often unseen, history of our society—a history alive with the culture, intellect, and potential of the Deaf community. As a proponent of Deafhood, I offer an innovative narrative that broadens our collective appreciation for its contribution.

For too long, the Deaf community in Montana and beyond has faced a maze of language and cultural barriers. Beyond mere obstacles, these systemic issues have curtailed the potential of many to flourish and materially contribute to our society. Deaf leaders have worked diligently for recognition and respect for their experiences.

Since the inception of audiology in 1825, non-Deaf individuals have aimed to 'cure' deafness, sidelining sign languages and causing widespread language deprivation among Deaf children—hindering access to education and societal involvement, and stifling success in various fields. Today, this still continues in some places, including Montana.

The Deaf President Now movement in 1988 at Gallaudet University, the bastion of Deaf higher education in America, was a milestone for our community and a wake-up call for our allies. It showcased the importance of Deaf leadership and perspectives.

Now, we must focus on the future of Deaf Montanans and ensure the Deaf community is at the forefront of discussions, crafting solutions to our unique challenges. Collaboration is crucial, and we must direct our efforts toward actionable solutions. It's also vital to address the involvement of non-Deaf individuals who might unknowingly promote policies detrimental to our community. Their disproportionate influence on decisions affecting us can thwart our progress.

The recent Supreme Court decision (*Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools*) highlights the urgency for schools to provide effective communication to Deaf students, as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. While Montana mandates that sign language interpreters meet certain standards, this alone does not guarantee effective communication. We must ensure interpreters are skilled in facilitating Deaf students' full understanding and participation in their education.

Enhanced educational access for Deaf children enables not only their success but benefits the wider Deaf community. Investing in interpreter resources in schools supports Deaf adults in

reaching their potential, thereby bolstering the economy and reducing healthcare costs. Mental health, too, will improve with effective communication and culturally appropriate services.

To authentically address the needs of the Deaf community, it is crucial that local Deaf organizations, including the Montana Association of the Deaf, Missoula Club of the Deaf, and Deaf Gain, LLC, take the lead in enhancing our interpreter services. A K-12 educational institution, despite its essential role in our education system, should not spearhead these efforts. While their perspective is undoubtedly valuable, it does not fully capture the intricacies and specific requirements of Deaf interpreting. Instead, reliance should be placed on the expertise of leading Deaf Montanans, who possess in-depth familiarity with the interpreting profession's landscape. These individuals, who hold direct relationships with external Deaf leaders, offer invaluable insights rooted in lived experiences and a profound understanding of our community's distinctive needs. This approach ensures that the development and implementation of interpreting solutions are deeply embedded in the real-life experiences and requirements of the Deaf community, fostering more effective and authentic communication channels.

The journey toward a more inclusive Montana for the Deaf community is not a solitary path but a shared voyage. It is with profound gratitude that I thank all of you for allowing this dialogue, and for securing the services of two top-caliber interpreters from Kansas, demonstrating your commitment to full language access. This gesture not only ensures that you, our legislators who may not know sign language, can fully grasp the insights the Deaf community wishes to convey but also embodies our dream. We aspire to develop and utilize interpreters of similar high caliber throughout Montana, ensuring that every Deaf Montanan has the same level of access and opportunity to engage in our society. Together, we can forge a future where language and cultural barriers are dismantled, and everyone can contribute to the vibrant kaleidoscope that is Montana.

Thank you.