

Hello Chairman Ruby and Members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Pam Smith, and it is my pleasure to write this letter in support of House Bill 1097, which seeks to provide for a study regarding the accessibility of government services for individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have hearing differences.

I would like to take a few moments to touch on my own experience which qualifies me to speak to the unmet needs experienced by those with hearing loss in our rural state of North Dakota.

I first earned a secondary education teaching degree in social studies from UND. My first teaching position included teaching high school psychology, which I loved. In 1992, I decided to explore my interest in Deaf Education in depth and enrolled in a four-year Bachelor of Education program in Deaf Education at Minot State University, from which I graduated in 1996. Following that, I was employed by Wilmac Special Education Unit in Williston as an itinerant teacher of the deaf. I traveled daily from Williston to Alexander to Watford City, providing services to students who were deaf. Children who are deaf do not learn incidentally from those around them, as hearing students do- they learn through DIRECT teaching, using specific techniques which are not exactly the same for each student.

In the fall of 1998, a position at the North Dakota School for the Deaf became available, and I was thrilled to accept the offer to teach high school social studies there for the next eleven years until the high school at NDSB was closed. I earned a master's degree in Educational Leadership in 2010. In 2009, the state legislature mandated that NDSB serve those with hearing loss from birth to death, rather than only ages 3 to 21. It became apparent that there was a need for a department dedicated to serving the needs of adults with hearing loss, and I was happy to be chosen to start the first Adult Outreach department. I earned a second master's degree in Gerontology to better prepare me to work with aging adults with hearing loss. I worked as the coordinator of this department until my retirement in June of 2022.

Through my varied experiences working with individuals with hearing loss and the agencies who work with said individuals across the state of North Dakota, I am quite familiar with the issues that cause frustrations, confusion, or cause individuals to refuse to accept needed help from agencies and individuals that they may need to work with to be successful in their lives and professional endeavors.

What are these barriers to successful communication? There are so many, and that is why this study is a perfect way to bring attention to the variety of situations that are being encountered by North Dakotans.

There are so many barriers, and the causes do not apply to every person with a hearing loss, for example, not all individuals who are deaf use American Sign Language, but some do. In North Dakota we have a serious shortage of certified interpreters who can interpret for signing students in the classroom, or for agency meetings. So, then what? Do people/agencies know that interpreters are available virtually? It is not acceptable, or legal to simply say, "sorry, there are no interpreters for you", yet it happens far too often.

I worked with a young man who was born with a severe hearing loss. His mother did not want to send him to the School for the Deaf, so he remained in his home school, sitting in the classroom- most often with others- sometimes alone in a separate room, sometimes in a room with an aide with great intentions but with no training in deafness at all- for twelve years. When we met, he had very little language of any kind- spoken- written- signed- but he wanted to learn. He had very limited social skills.

His family meant well, but keeping him isolated had not done him any favors-he ended up getting in some legal trouble, as he did not understand, and no one had ever conveyed to him that it was not appropriate for 17-year-old boys to approach 13 year old girls. He was simply looking for friends, but no 17-year-old girls were interested in him due to his lack of age-appropriate social skills. That was a clear lack of educational experience. Low language can lead to some serious mistakes for innocent individuals.

Some individuals who are deaf use cochlear implants. However, as opposed to popular belief, these devices do not “fix” a person’s hearing. They are merely a tool that works well for some, not for others, and this device involves a surgery to implant the device in the skull. The surgery is the first and easiest step- there must be follow-up training, known as aural rehabilitation, to make the most of the individual’s hearing potential. Those services are very limited and not accessible in rural areas.

Many people say that hearing loss is such a low incidence disability population in North Dakota, but when you consider the number of **older adults** with hearing loss, the numbers are tremendous, as nearly every older adult has some degree of hearing loss. In addition to knowing about hearing aids, older adults need to become aware that there are many forms of assistive technology that are available and can aid and assist them as they age-in-place in their homes. People are not aware of what is available to them! It is education and awareness. Anything that can be done to support and encourage this educational dissemination is so important.

In conclusion, this study is so important! It will make clear the dire needs in North Dakota for all individuals with hearing loss, not only students, but adults/older adults as well. I give my full support to this proposal by Representative Frelich. Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

Pam Smith