
SUBSTITUTE HOUSE BILL 2221

State of Washington

68th Legislature

2024 Regular Session

By House Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning (originally sponsored by Representatives Orwall, Santos, Reeves, Donaghy, and Davis)

1 AN ACT Relating to establishing a work group to address the
2 shortage of qualified and certified American sign language
3 interpreters and protactile sign language interpreters in the state
4 of Washington; adding a new section to chapter 43.20A RCW; creating a
5 new section; and providing an expiration date.

6 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

7 NEW SECTION. **Sec. 1.** (1) The legislature finds that:

8 (a) The state lacks qualified and certified American sign
9 language interpreters and protactile interpreters, including both
10 hearing interpreters and deaf interpreters, to adequately fill
11 accommodations and requests for interpreting services for:

12 (i) State services;

13 (ii) Medical services, including mental health services and
14 medical emergencies;

15 (iii) Legal services;

16 (iv) Academic accommodations for students in grade school, high
17 school, postsecondary education, and vocational school;

18 (v) Employment accommodations;

19 (vi) Community and cultural events;

20 (vii) Other interpreting requests made by deaf, deafblind, and
21 hard of hearing residents; and

1 (viii) Other interpreting requests made by agencies, businesses,
2 and organizations on behalf of their deaf, deafblind, and hard of
3 hearing constituents;

4 (b) The quality of American sign language interpreters and
5 protactile interpreters in the state is inconsistent, depriving deaf,
6 deafblind, and hard of hearing residents access to equitable
7 communication;

8 (c) The shortage of qualified American sign language interpreters
9 and protactile interpreters includes both hearing and deaf
10 interpreters;

11 (d) It is best practice for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing
12 users of sign language interpreters to have access to interpreters
13 that match their linguistic identities. Many users require not only
14 hearing sign language interpreters, but qualified deaf interpreters,
15 who are best able to incorporate the linguistic and cultural norms of
16 the deaf and deafblind communities into their interpretation. The
17 shortage of interpreters deprives deaf, deafblind, and hard of
18 hearing residents who need qualified deaf interpreters access to
19 equitable communication;

20 (e) It is best practice for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing
21 users of sign language to have access to interpreters that match
22 their cultural identities. The shortage of interpreters deprives
23 diverse deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing residents access to
24 equitable communication, especially those who are: Black, indigenous,
25 and other people of color; immigrants and refugees; transgender and
26 nonbinary individuals; and members of the LGBTQIA community;

27 (f) As of January 1, 2024, there are approximately only 410 sign
28 language interpreters in the state who are certified by the registry
29 of interpreters for the deaf. Less than half of those interpreters
30 are contracted to provide work for the department of enterprise
31 services and the office of the deaf and hard of hearing, who have
32 expressed the need for more qualified sign language interpreters;

33 (g) As of January 1, 2024, there is no postsecondary institution
34 in the state that provides professional education at the
35 baccalaureate level in sign language interpreting, and the most
36 recent program closed in 2013;

37 (h) At the only college in the state that offers classes in sign
38 language interpretation, the classes are limited to education
39 interpreting, an important but small portion of the overall
40 interpreting needs. The two-year program culminates in an associate

1 of the arts degree. Interpreters must have a baccalaureate degree to
2 become nationally certified by the registry of interpreters for the
3 deaf and be able to provide the kinds of interpretation services the
4 state needs;

5 (i) The decline of qualified American sign language interpreters
6 and protactile interpreters in the state has created an immense
7 burden on the remaining interpreters, who are more at risk of
8 physical injury and burnout, accelerating the rate of attrition. In
9 addition, interpreter wages have not increased in proportion to the
10 cost of living in some regions. These factors have caused many
11 interpreters to move away from cities, move out of the state, or
12 leave the interpreting field altogether; and

13 (j) Due to these systemic circumstances, residents and
14 organizations statewide have seen a decline in sign language
15 interpreter fill rates over the last 10 years. With few new
16 interpreters entering the sign language interpreter workforce in the
17 state, this problem will continue if a proactive solution is not
18 implemented immediately.

19 (2) It is the intent of the legislature to establish a work group
20 to identify a permanent solution to the shortage of qualified and
21 certified American sign language interpreters and protactile
22 interpreters to ensure that deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing
23 residents have access to all aspects of a healthy, safe, and
24 fulfilling life.

25 NEW SECTION. **Sec. 2.** A new section is added to chapter 43.20A
26 RCW to read as follows:

27 (1) Subject to the availability of funds appropriated for this
28 specific purpose, the office of the deaf and hard of hearing within
29 the department is directed to establish a work group dedicated to
30 finding solutions for the shortage of qualified and certified
31 American sign language interpreters and protactile interpreters in
32 the state.

33 (2) The office of the deaf and hard of hearing shall appoint the
34 following members to the work group:

35 (a) At least two deaf or hard of hearing users of American sign
36 language from King, Pierce, or Snohomish counties with lived
37 experience using sign language interpreters;

1 (b) At least one deaf or hard of hearing user of American sign
2 language from southwest Washington with lived experience using sign
3 language interpreters;

4 (c) At least one deaf or hard of hearing user of American sign
5 language from central Washington with lived experience using sign
6 language interpreters;

7 (d) At least one deaf or hard of hearing user of American sign
8 language from eastern Washington with lived experience using sign
9 language interpreters;

10 (e) At least two deafblind users of protactile who are state
11 residents with lived experience using sign language interpreters;

12 (f) Two representatives from community-based organizations in the
13 state that represent deaf and hard of hearing users of American sign
14 language;

15 (g) Two representatives from community-based organizations in the
16 state that represent the deafblind community, at least one of which
17 must be from an organization that serves a culturally diverse
18 population;

19 (h) One representative from a business or organization in the
20 state that provides American sign language or protactile interpreters
21 to organizations;

22 (i) At least one American sign language interpreter certified by
23 the registry of interpreters for the deaf who is a state resident
24 with at least 10 years of experience as a professional certified
25 interpreter;

26 (j) At least one American sign language or protactile interpreter
27 who is deaf or hard of hearing, a state resident, and has at least 10
28 years of experience as a deaf interpreter and a history of high
29 quality interpreting;

30 (k) One teacher of American sign language interpreting or
31 protactile interpreting who is deaf or hard of hearing; and

32 (l) Two representatives of higher education institutions, one
33 from a four-year state university and one from a community or
34 technical college.

35 (3) The composition of the work group must be majority deaf,
36 deafblind, and hard of hearing residents who use American sign
37 language or protactile. Recruitment of work group members from the
38 community must prioritize residents who have a history of leadership
39 and advocacy on behalf of deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing
40 people. To better understand the needs of interpreter users belonging

1 to populations that have been historically marginalized, recruitment
2 must prioritize qualified individuals from such populations,
3 including black, indigenous, and other people of color, immigrants
4 and refugees, transgender and nonbinary individuals, members of the
5 LGBTQIA community, individuals with multiple disabilities, and other
6 populations that have been underserved and excluded from access to
7 equitable communication.

8 (4) The goals of the work group shall be that:

9 (a) Deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing residents in the state
10 who use American sign language and protactile have access to
11 qualified and certified interpreters whenever needed;

12 (b) Deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing residents in the state
13 who use American sign language and protactile have access to sign
14 language interpreters that match their cultural and linguistic
15 preferences, especially those residents from historically
16 marginalized populations;

17 (c) American sign language interpreters and protactile
18 interpreters in the state meet a satisfactory standard of quality
19 interpreting, so that deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing residents
20 can be assured of equitable access to communication from all
21 interpreters;

22 (d) At least one high quality postsecondary interpreter training
23 program for American sign language interpreters and protactile
24 interpreters is established that prepares interpreters to meet the
25 standards of the registry of interpreters for the deaf and is
26 accredited by the commission on collegiate interpreter education or
27 an equivalent interpreter accreditation program;

28 (e) American sign language interpreters and protactile
29 interpreters in the state have access to more job opportunities and
30 continuing education opportunities;

31 (f) American sign language interpreters and protactile
32 interpreters in the state have access to equitable wages;

33 (g) American sign language interpreters and protactile
34 interpreters are incentivized to live and work in the state;

35 (h) Postsecondary students in the state are incentivized to join
36 interpreter training programs; and

37 (i) Barriers are eliminated that prevent deaf, deafblind, and
38 hard of hearing residents from using and accessing interpreters when
39 they desire.

40 (5) The work group shall:

1 (a) Collect qualitative and quantitative data on the causes of
2 the sign language interpreter shortage in the state and the impact of
3 the shortage on deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing residents;

4 (b) Identify community-based solutions that can be undertaken by
5 residents and organizations to increase the number of interpreters
6 who live and work in their home regions, retain interpreters, and
7 provide continuing education, mentorship, and training opportunities
8 for their local interpreters;

9 (c) Establish criteria or testing, as determined by deaf,
10 deafblind, and hard of hearing sign language stakeholders, which
11 demonstrates that sign language interpreters have the needed skills
12 to ensure quality and accurate services;

13 (d) Identify investments needed to increase the training and
14 credentialing necessary to prepare interpreters to meet criteria and
15 testing in (c) of this subsection;

16 (e) Recommend legal standards for American sign language
17 interpreters and protactile interpreters in the state to ensure the
18 quality of professional interpreters, while ensuring those standards
19 are accessible to all aspiring interpreters regardless of disability,
20 income, geographic location, and other potential limiting factors;

21 (f) Determine the strategies and resources needed to:

22 (i) Increase the availability of American sign language
23 interpreters and protactile interpreters in all communities,
24 including rural communities;

25 (ii) Increase the number of interpreters from historically
26 marginalized populations, such as: Black, indigenous, and other
27 people of color, immigrants and refugees, transgender and nonbinary
28 communities; the LGBTQIA community; individuals with multiple
29 disabilities; and other populations that have been underserved and
30 excluded from access to equitable communication;

31 (iii) Increase the availability of trilingual interpreters who
32 are proficient in American sign language, English, and another
33 language;

34 (iv) Increase the availability of quality continuing education
35 and professional development of American sign language interpreters
36 and protactile interpreters, including professional mentorship
37 opportunities for new and emerging interpreters; and

38 (v) Ensure that American sign language interpreters and
39 protactile interpreters can afford to live and work in the state;

40 (g) Identify methods for:

1 (i) Establishing at least one high quality postsecondary
2 interpreter training program for American sign language interpreters
3 and protactile interpreters;

4 (ii) Providing financial incentives for agencies that provide
5 American sign language interpreters and protactile interpreters to
6 implement mentorship and internship programs for emerging
7 interpreters;

8 (iii) Providing financial incentives from the state to encourage
9 sign language interpreters to live and work in the state, such as
10 grants, home-buying support, and other incentives;

11 (iv) Providing financial support for organizations to provide
12 sign language interpreters to their deaf, deafblind, and hard of
13 hearing constituents; and

14 (v) Increasing the pay rate of sign language interpreters hired
15 and contracted by state agencies and agency contractors.

16 (6) The work group shall prioritize the voices of deaf,
17 deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, and late-deafened
18 individuals who use American sign language or protactile. The work
19 group shall also prioritize the needs of other populations that have
20 been historically marginalized, including: Black, indigenous, and
21 other communities of color; immigrants and refugees; transgender and
22 nonbinary communities; the LGBTQIA community; individuals with
23 multiple disabilities; and other populations that have been
24 underserved and excluded from access to equitable communication.

25 (7) All state agencies, offices, institutions, and contractors
26 impacted by the interpreter shortage shall comply with requests for
27 data from the work group within two months of the request. State
28 agencies, offices, institutions, and contractors include but are not
29 limited to:

30 (a) The Washington center for deaf and hard of hearing youth;

31 (b) The department of enterprise services;

32 (c) The office of the superintendent of public instruction;

33 (d) Four-year universities and colleges;

34 (e) Community colleges;

35 (f) Technical colleges or relevant trade schools; and

36 (g) The Washington state board for community and technical
37 colleges.

38 (8) The work group shall provide recommendations in alignment
39 with subsection (5) of this section to the governor and relevant
40 committees of the legislature in a final report, in compliance with

1 RCW 43.01.036, on or before June 30, 2025. The report must include an
2 implementation plan for the recommendations in the final report. The
3 report must also identify any barriers that would be created by
4 implementation of the recommendations, including reluctance to
5 provide interpreters because of increased interpreter wages, lack of
6 quality interpreting providers, and lack of quality interpreters in a
7 certain region.

8 (9) The department of social and health services shall actively
9 advertise the final report and make the final report available to
10 deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing stakeholders. In addition to a
11 written report, the department of social and health services shall
12 make the final report available through videos using American sign
13 language on publicly available websites on or before August 30, 2025.

14 (10) This section expires January 1, 2027.

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