
HOUSE BILL 2221

State of Washington

68th Legislature

2024 Regular Session

By Representatives Orwall, Santos, Reeves, Donaghy, and Davis

Read first time 01/09/24. Referred to Committee on Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning.

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; providing an expiration date; and declaring an
6 emergency.

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

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

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

14 (i) State services;

15 (ii) Medical services, including mental health services and
16 medical emergencies;

17 (iii) Legal services;

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

20 (v) Employment accommodations;

21 (vi) Community and cultural events;

1 (vii) Other interpreting requests made by deaf, deaf and blind,
2 and hard of hearing residents; and

3 (viii) Other interpreting requests made by agencies, businesses,
4 and organizations on behalf of their deaf, deaf and blind, and hard
5 of hearing constituents;

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 (h) At the only college in the state that offers classes in sign
2 language interpretation, the classes are limited to education
3 interpreting, an important but small portion of the overall
4 interpreting needs. The two-year program culminates in an associate
5 of the arts degree. Interpreters must have a baccalaureate degree to
6 become nationally certified by the registry of interpreters for the
7 deaf and be able to provide the kinds of interpretation services the
8 state needs;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

13 (e) At least two deaf and blind users of protactile sign language
14 who are state residents with lived experience using sign language
15 interpreters;

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

19 (g) One representative from a community-based organization in the
20 state that represents the deaf and blind community;

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

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

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

32 (k) One teacher of American sign language interpreting or
33 protactile sign language interpreting who is deaf or hard of hearing.

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

1 historically marginalized, recruitment must prioritize qualified
2 individuals from such populations, including black, indigenous, and
3 other people of color.

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

5 (a) Deaf, deaf and blind, and hard of hearing residents in the
6 state who use American sign language and protactile sign language
7 have access to qualified and certified interpreters whenever needed;

8 (b) Deaf, deaf and blind, and hard of hearing residents in the
9 state who use American sign language and protactile sign language
10 have access to sign language interpreters that match their cultural
11 and linguistic preferences, especially those residents from
12 historically marginalized populations;

13 (c) American sign language interpreters and protactile sign
14 language interpreters in the state meet a satisfactory standard of
15 quality interpreting, so that deaf, deaf and blind, and hard of
16 hearing residents can be assured of equitable access to communication
17 from all interpreters;

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

24 (e) American sign language interpreters and protactile sign
25 language interpreters in the state have access to more job
26 opportunities and continuing education opportunities;

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

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

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

33 (i) Barriers are eliminated that prevent deaf, deaf and blind,
34 and hard of hearing residents from using and accessing interpreters
35 when they desire.

36 (5) The work group shall:

37 (a) Collect qualitative and quantitative data on the causes of
38 the sign language interpreter shortage in the state and the impact of
39 the shortage on deaf, deaf and blind, and hard of hearing residents;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

29 (iii) Increase the availability of quality continuing education
30 and professional development of American sign language interpreters
31 and protactile sign language interpreters, including professional
32 mentorship opportunities for new and emerging interpreters; and

33 (iv) Ensure that American sign language interpreters and
34 protactile sign language interpreters can afford to live and work in
35 the state;

36 (g) Identify methods for:

37 (i) Establishing at least one high quality postsecondary
38 interpreter training program for American sign language interpreters
39 and protactile sign language interpreters;

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

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

8 (iv) Providing financial support for organizations to provide
9 sign language interpreters to their deaf, deaf and blind, and hard of
10 hearing constituents; and

11 (v) Increasing the pay rate of sign language interpreters hired
12 and contracted by agencies and agency contractors.

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

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

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

29 (b) The department of enterprise services;

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

31 (d) Four-year universities and colleges;

32 (e) Community colleges;

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

34 (g) The Washington state board for community and technical
35 colleges.

36 (8) The work group shall provide recommendations in alignment
37 with subsection (5) of this section to the governor and relevant
38 committees of the legislature in a final report, in compliance with
39 RCW 43.01.036, on or before June 30, 2025. The report must include an
40 implementation plan for the recommendations in the final report. The

1 report must also identify any barriers that would be created by
2 implementation of the recommendations, including reluctance to
3 provide interpreters because of increased interpreter wages, lack of
4 quality interpreting providers, and lack of quality interpreters in a
5 certain region.

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

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

14 NEW SECTION. **Sec. 3.** This act is necessary for the immediate
15 preservation of the public peace, health, or safety, or support of
16 the state government and its existing public institutions, and takes
17 effect immediately.

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