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State Government and Tribal Relations
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AN ACT Relating to establishing a work group to address the
1 shortage of qualified and certified American Sign Language
2 interpreters and ProTactile interpreters in the state of Washington;

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

4
5 NEW SECTION. **Sec.**

6 (1) The legislature finds that:

7 (a) The state lacks qualified and certified American Sign
8 Language "ASL" interpreters and ProTactile interpreters, including
9 both hearing interpreters and deaf interpreters, to adequately fill
accommodations and requests for interpreting services for:

10 (i) State services;

1 (ii) Medical services, including mental health services, and
2 medical emergencies;

3 (iii) Legal services;

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

6 (v) Employment accommodations;

7 (vi) Community and cultural events;

8 (vii) Other interpreting requests made by Deaf, DeafBlind, and
9 hard of hearing residents; and

10 (viii) Other interpreting requests made by agencies, businesses,
11 and organizations on behalf of their Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of
12 hearing constituents.

13 (b) The quality of ASL interpreters and ProTactile interpreters
14 in the state is inconsistent, depriving Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of
15 hearing residents access to equitable communication.

16 (c) The shortage of qualified ASL interpreters and ProTactile
17 interpreters includes both hearing and Deaf sign language
18 interpreters.

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

(e) It is best practice for Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing
users of sign language to have access to interpreters that match
their cultural identities. The shortage of sign language

1 interpreters deprives diverse Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing
2 residents of access to equitable communication, especially those who
3 are: black, indigenous, and other people of color; immigrants and
4 refugees; transgender and nonbinary individuals; and members of the
5 LGBTQIA community.

6 (f) As of January 1, 2024, there are approximately only 410 sign
7 language interpreters in the state who are certified by the Registry
8 of Interpreters for the Deaf. Less than half of those interpreters
9 are contracted to provide work for the Department of Enterprise
10 Services and the Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, who have
11 expressed the need for more qualified sign language interpreters.

12 (g) As of January 1, 2024, there is no postsecondary institution
13 in the state that provides professional education at the
14 baccalaureate level in sign language interpreting, and the most
15 recent program closed in 2013.

16 (h) At the only college in the state that offers classes in sign
17 language interpretation, the classes are limited to education
18 interpreting, an important but small portion of the overall
19 interpreting needs. The two-year program culminates in an associate
20 of the arts degree. Interpreters must have a baccalaureate degree
21 to become nationally certified by the Registry of Interpreters for
22 the Deaf and be able to provide the kinds of interpretation services
23 the state needs.

24 (i) The decline of qualified ASL interpreters and ProTactile
interpreters in the state has created an immense burden on the
remaining interpreters, who are more at risk of physical injury and
burnout, accelerating the rate of attrition. In addition,
interpreter wages have not increased in proportion to the cost of
living in some regions. These factors have caused many interpreters

1 to move away from cities, move out of the state, or leave the
2 interpreting field altogether.

3 (j) Due to these systemic circumstances, residents and
4 organizations statewide have seen a decline in sign language
5 interpreter fill rates over the last ten years. With few new
6 interpreters entering the sign language interpreter workforce in the
7 state, this problem will continue if a proactive solution is not
8 implemented immediately.

9 (2) It is the intent of the legislature to establish a work group
10 to identify a permanent solution to the shortage of qualified and
11 certified ASL interpreters and ProTactile interpreters to ensure
12 that Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing residents have access to
13 all aspects of a healthy, safe, and fulfilling life.

14 NEW SECTION. Sec.

15 (1) Subject to the availability of funds appropriated for this
16 specific purpose, the Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing within
17 the Department of Social and Health Services is directed to
18 establish a work group dedicated to finding solutions for the
19 shortage of qualified and certified ASL interpreters and ProTactile
20 interpreters in the state.

21 (2) The Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing shall appoint the
22 following members to the work group:

23 (a) At least two Deaf or hard of hearing users of ASL from King,
24 Pierce, or Snohomish counties, with lived experience using sign
25 language interpreters;

26 (b) At least one Deaf or hard of hearing user of ASL from
27 Southwest Washington, with lived experience using sign language
28 interpreters;

1 (c) At least one Deaf or hard of hearing user ASL from Central
2 Washington, with lived experience using sign language interpreters;

3 (d) At least one Deaf or hard of hearing user of ASL from Eastern
4 Washington, with lived experience using sign language interpreters;

5 (e) At least two DeafBlind user of ProTactile Sign language who
6 are state residents, with lived experience using sign language
7 interpreters;

8 (f) Two representatives from community-based organizations in the
9 state that represent Deaf and hard of hearing users of ASL;

10 (g) One representative from a community-based organization in the
11 state that represents the DeafBlind community;

12 (h) One representative from a business or organization in the
13 state that provides ASL or ProTactile interpreters to organizations;

14 (i) At least one ASL interpreter certified by the Registry of
15 Interpreters for the Deaf, who is a state resident with at least ten
16 years of experience as a professional certified interpreter;

17 (j) At least one ASL or ProTactile interpreter who is Deaf or
18 hard of hearing, a state resident, and has at least ten years of
19 experience as a deaf interpreter and a history of high-quality
20 interpreting; and

21 (k) One teacher of ASL interpreting or ProTactile interpreting
22 who is Deaf or hard of hearing.

23 (3) The composition of the work group must be majority Deaf,
24 DeafBlind, and hard of hearing residents who use ASL or ProTactile
sign language. Recruitment of work group members from the community
must prioritize residents who have a history of leadership and
advocacy on behalf of Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing people.
To better understand the needs of interpreter users belonging to
populations that have been historically marginalized, recruitment

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

(4) The goals of the work group are that:

3 (a) Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing residents in the state
4 who use ASL and ProTactile sign language have access to qualified
5 and certified interpreters whenever needed;

6 (b) Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing residents in the state
7 who use ASL and ProTactile sign language have access to sign
8 language interpreters that match their cultural and linguistic
9 preferences, especially those residents from historically
marginalized populations;

10 (c) ASL interpreters and ProTactile interpreters in the state
11 must meet a satisfactory standard of quality interpreting, so that
12 Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing residents can be assured of
equitable access to communication from all interpreters;

13 (d) At least one high-quality postsecondary interpreter training
14 program for ASL interpreters and ProTactile interpreters is
15 established that prepares interpreters to meet the standards of the
16 Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and is accredited by the
Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education or an equivalent
interpreter accreditation program;

17 (e) ASL interpreters and ProTactile interpreters in the state
18 have access to more job opportunities and continuing education
19 opportunities;

20 (f) ASL interpreters and ProTactile interpreters in the state
have access to equitable wages;

21 (g) ASL interpreters and ProTactile interpreters are incentivized
22 to live and work in the state;

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

1 (i) Barriers are eliminated that prevent Deaf, DeafBlind, and
2 hard of hearing residents from using and accessing interpreters when
3 they desire.

4 (5) The work group shall:

5 (a) Collect qualitative and quantitative data on the causes of
6 the sign language interpreter shortage in the state and the impact
7 of the shortage on Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing residents;

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

13 (c) Establish criteria or testing, as determined by Deaf,
14 DeafBlind, and hard of hearing sign language stakeholders, which
15 demonstrates that sign language interpreters have the needed skills
16 to ensure quality and accurate services;

17 (d) Identify investments needed to increase the training and
18 credentialing necessary to prepare interpreters to meet criteria and
19 testing in subsection (5)(c) of this section;

20 (e) Recommend legal standards for ASL interpreters and ProTactile
21 interpreters in the state to ensure the quality of professional
22 interpreters, while ensuring those standards are accessible to all
23 aspiring interpreters regardless of disability, income, geographic
24 location, and other potential limiting factors.

(f) Determine the strategies and resources needed to:

(i) Increase the availability of ASL interpreters and ProTactile
interpreters in all communities, including rural communities;

(ii) Increase the number of interpreters from historically
marginalized populations, such as: black, indigenous, and other
people of color, immigrants and refugees, transgender and nonbinary

1 communities; the LGBTQIA community; individuals with multiple
2 disabilities; and other populations that have been underserved and
3 excluded from access to equitable communication;

4 (iii) Increase the availability of quality continuing education
5 and professional development of ASL interpreters and ProTactile
6 interpreters, including professional mentorship opportunities for
7 new and emerging interpreters; and

8 (iv) Ensure that ASL interpreters and ProTactile interpreters can
9 afford to live and work in the state;

10 (g) Identify methods for:

11 (i) Establishing at least one high quality postsecondary
12 interpreter training program for ASL interpreters and ProTactile
13 interpreters;

14 (ii) Providing financial incentives for agencies that provide ASL
15 interpreters and ProTactile interpreters to implement mentorship and
16 internship programs for emerging interpreters;

17 (iii) Providing financial incentives from the state to encourage
18 sign language interpreters to live and work in the state, such as
19 grants, homebuying support, and other incentives;

20 (iv) Providing financial support for organizations to provide
21 sign language interpreters to their Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of
22 hearing constituents; and

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

(6) The work group must center the voices of Deaf, DeafBlind,
deaf and disabled, hard of hearing, and late-deafened individuals
who use ASL or ProTactile sign language. The work group shall also
center the needs of other populations that have been historically
marginalized, including black, indigenous, other communities of
color, immigrants and refugees, transgender and nonbinary

1 communities, the LGBTQIA community; individuals with multiple
2 disabilities, and other populations that have been underserved and
3 excluded from access to equitable communication.

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

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

10 (b) Department of enterprise services;

11 (c) Office of the superintendent of public instruction;

12 (d) Four-year universities and colleges;

13 (e) Community colleges;

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

15 (g) State board of community and technical colleges.

16 (8) The work group shall provide recommendations in alignment
17 with subsection (5) of this section to the governor and legislature
18 in a final report, in compliance with RCW 43.01.036, on or before
19 June 30, 2025. The report must include an implementation plan for
20 the recommendations in the final report. The report must also
21 identify any barriers that would be created by implementation of the
22 recommendations, including reluctance to provide interpreters
23 because of increased interpreter wages, lack of quality interpreting
24 providers, and lack of quality interpreters in a certain region.

(9) The department of social and health services must actively
advertise the final report and make the final report available to
deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing stakeholders. In addition to a
written report, the department of social and health services shall
make the final report available through videos using ASL on publicly
available websites on or before August 30, 2025.

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

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

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