

Testimony to Joint Interim Committee for Government Affairs

February 15, 2022

Eli Schwartz, Member, Nevada Commission for People who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Good morning, Chair Dondero-Loop and members of the joint committee. My name is Eli Schwartz. I am an individual who is hard of hearing and uses cochlear implants. I reside in Las Vegas, Nevada, and I am a Member and former chair of the Nevada Commission for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. On behalf of the Nevada Deaf and Hard of Hearing Commission I would like to inform the members of this committee that we have recently updated the [State Plan for the Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, Speech Impaired, Deaf-Blind and Deaf Plus](#) for the period 2021 to 2027 and briefly highlight areas of concern related to accessibility of Government in Nevada.

The Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Speech-Impaired communities face a multitude of barriers related to access, awareness, and support in Nevada. The impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic further exacerbated these barriers, specifically the lack of access to effective communication. The community is consistently excluded from access to vital information and being able to easily access services in Nevada. Not being provided access to effective communication, especially during a worldwide pandemic, has caused further mistrust with state partners/agencies. More importantly, it has impacted their ability to make informed decisions regarding their health.

The Legislature, along with state agencies have a leadership role in ensuring equal access for all populations. The Commission applauds the Legislature's efforts in the 81<sup>st</sup> Session under AB421 to use more respectful language in Nevada Revised Statutes to refer to people who are deaf and hard of hearing, including the elimination of the term "deaf and dumb" within NRS.

The Commission urges further action to ensure that all state services are accessible to all populations, which includes:

- Effective communication access for all state agencies, including the Legislative and Judicial branches of government.
- Inclusion of appropriate accommodations during emergency situations and public meetings such as the Legislative session.
- Continuous engagement with the target populations to improve efforts.
- Increase awareness of target population and effective communication strategies among state partners.

The Commission urges the Legislature and state agencies to consider the following:

- Policies and procedures throughout programs and services need to consider the needs of the target population as well as the needs of people with disabilities. This can include but is not limited to plain language, visual communication and assistive technology. These needs span across all areas of government.
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals need to receive information about public meetings, including the Legislative session, that is in an accessible format. Often the community is precluded from exercising their rights in a participatory government simply because the information available about the meetings is not accessible to them.
- Additionally, press conferences hosted by state agencies, as well as Legislative meetings need to be inclusive and accommodating for the target population. Accessibility can include but not be limited to information provided in various languages including American Sign Language or Braille as well as having captioning, plain language text, and other accommodations as requested.
- Finally, state agencies often identify resource shortages for a reason for not having accommodations. ADA accommodations should be included in the Legislatively approved budgets for the state.
- Accessibility and access need to be at the forefront of all aspects of government for all individuals in our state. Communication Access is a barrier we can remove for the citizens of Nevada, but it starts with the leadership of the Legislature and other state agencies.

Thank you.