

Public statement from Eric Wilcox

February 8 2023 meeting of the NV Commission for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

It's a new year and the state is heading into a new cycle of proposals and grant selections later this year for the Communication Access Services program. This is the program that issues telecommunication surcharge funds to Nevada non-profits to establish a Deaf center, distribute telecommunications and other accessibility technology, and assist deaf, hard-of-hearing and speech impaired individuals gain better access to educational, health, employment and social services. It is a good time to reflect on how we have done since 2016 when the first grant was issued to the Deaf Centers of Nevada (DCN) under the expanded scope of social services funding through this program. The following comments are entirely my own and are simply a reflection of my observations having been engaged with the Deaf Commission since that time.

Unfortunately, the progress in recent years has been dismal. In 2018, after two years of funding to DCN, we had fully functioning Deaf centers in both Northern and Southern Nevada. Those centers were staffed by mostly Deaf professionals, many of them Nevada natives who had been trained at Gallaudet University and other fine institutions of higher learning, who were deeply committed to serving their own community in Nevada. At the September 2020 meeting of this Commission, the CAS program reported that the Deaf Centers were serving deaf individuals at a rate of hundreds per month, a number which had grown from about 150 per month in 2017 to greater than 350 per month in 2020.

Today, there are no Deaf centers. Many of the committed employees that worked there have left the state. The number of full-time equivalent Deaf individuals employed to serve the community with these funds has declined precipitously. Many of the individuals employed to serve the community with these funds have no prior experience serving Deaf individuals and no understanding of Deaf culture or Deaf modes of communication. At the last meeting of this Commission, Nevada Care Connections reported serving only a few dozen individuals monthly.

How did we get here?

The CAS program has placed highly restrictive guidelines on which administrative tasks grant funds may be used. This has been coupled with very low limits on the amount of "overhead" (or indirect) costs which grantees may charge the grant, and a requirement that grantees find matching funds from other sources for a portion of their program expenditures. These are policies that unnecessarily hamper the leaders of our grantees given the amount of resources available and not currently being used effectively.

Onerous reporting requirements that not only dictate what data the nonprofit service providers need to be reported to the state, which may be appropriate, but also dictates the procedures, methods, and manner of reporting that data, even when a grantee may have a more efficient means of achieving the same reporting.

A dogmatic obsession with the notion of “direct service” that says that a nonprofit service provider helping a single individual successfully achieve a goal is worthy of support with grant funding, but time spent working with an agency to improve a process, such that dozens of individuals might better access a service is worthless and not a suitable use of these funds.

Obligations that CAS program grantees partner with inefficient, bureaucratic and ineffective programs that reside within the Aging and Disability Services Division, but do not, as noted above, allow grantees to use funds for time spent building partnerships with other agencies and non-profits because that is not “direct service”.

The effect of all of these unnecessary restrictions on CAS program grantees is a stifling of innovation and creativity in how these grantees serve the community. These policies prevent grantee leaders from focusing attention on improving their service delivery, inhibits networking and collaborative problem solving between grantees and state/local agencies, or among grantees. And they bog down grantee staff in bureaucratic processes when they could be out in the community networking, innovating, and delivering services.

A similar dynamic is happening in the school districts. In the years I have been engaged in this work, I have come across a number of highly knowledgeable and committed educators working at the classroom level in the two major metropolitan school districts: Clark and Washoe. Many of them are no longer working in Nevada. They are demoralized from a stifling bureaucratic culture that does not allow the freedom to apply their knowledge, try new approaches, and innovate.

Why do our systems insist on perpetuating failed mechanisms? There no expertise in Deaf education at the Nevada Department of Education. There are only a handful of experts in Deaf services in the Aging and Disability Services Division, and none in seniormost levels of leadership. Much of the funding for adult services is going to a service provider with no expertise in Deaf culture and no track record serving the deaf community. Nearly all of the expertise in this state lies at the ground level where teachers, employment counselors and non-profit service providers are engaging with the community and trying to engage with the systems. However, we’re not empowering those individuals to apply their expertise. We tell them what to do and insist on applying tools and techniques that were developed to serve other populations, instead of letting them show us what can work and improve outcomes in education, employment and social services for the deaf and hard-of-hearing in Nevada. Until we break down these institutional failures at the leadership level, I fear we will continue to move backward, as we have been in the past few years.