

Chairs Comment

At a recent meeting we approved a letter that was sent to the Nevada Department of Employment Training and Rehabilitation. The letter advocated for the reinstatement of the statewide coordinator for employment services for Deaf individuals, similar to the role that was implemented effectively during the COVID emergency. This is something we have advocated for repeatedly in the past. The letter also advocated for less resource intensive supports for Deaf individuals and employers struggling to improve employment outcomes for Deaf individuals. The letter ended with an invitation for further dialog.

Instead of viewing this letter as a message from community advocates seeking to address concerns, we continue to hear from the community at our town hall events, the letter was viewed as an arm of the Aging and Disability Services Division publicly shaming the Department of Employment. Rather than respond to the Commission, or to me, the chair directly, whose name was on the letter, this was viewed as an interagency squabble requiring disciplinary action.

Our fellow commissioner, Laura Fussel was told by her employer, the department of employment, that she must quit the commission. All other department of employment staff working with us were told not to have anything to do with us anymore. In the letter her bosses delivered to her, Laura was told that her duty to the Commission was to represent the interests of the Department of Employment and that they would pick a new representative from the Department to take her place. Obviously, this is a gross misunderstanding of the nature of our Commission and the spirit under which it was created following the advocacy for the establishment of a commission by leaders in the deaf community, who I presume cared little for the interests of bureaucrats in the Department of Employment.

Our Executive Director has been reprimanded by the Aging and Disability Services Division for not properly handling us. To date, not a single person from the Department of Employment has reached out to me as the one who signed the letter to discuss the content of the letter. Only Cheyenne Pasquale from the Aging and Disability Services Division has met with me to discuss the fallout from this letter, and probably only because I insisted.

What are we to learn from this debacle:

1. If you are a state employee and are serving on this commission, as several of us are, the unmistakable message is be warned: you may be held personally responsible for collective messages approved and sent by a vote of the majority of the Commission. That is what has happened in this case.
2. While the letter had the desired effect of getting someone's attention (which is frankly pretty rare for letters from this Commission), it did not have the desired effect of furthering dialog and potential action to improve employment outcomes for Deaf people. So, in that sense it was a strategic failure on our part.
3. However, the reason for this outcome is that we are simply viewed by state agencies as part of the Aging and Disabilities Services Division. When we publicly elevate the complaints we receive from the community, evidently the state views this as a failure of their bureaucracy to smooth our rough edges. According to the leadership, our Executive Director, as an employee of the Division, is there to make sure we don't embarrass the Division or another state agency, not to follow our lead and help us advocate as we choose for the community. So, our publicly elevating issues raised by our constituency is an inconvenience to be managed internally by reprimanding or punishing rank-and-file state employees. This reinforces the notion that we have talked about in the past, that perhaps we should seek a legislative fix that places our Commission elsewhere in the state structure, rather than within an agency that might be embarrassed by the complaints from the community that we seek to elevate. This is something that I would encourage our legislative subcommittee to consider further.

Allow me to finish with a personal note that I think gets to the essence of the disconnect between the way we on the Commissioners view this body (or at least the way I do) and the way agencies like the Aging and Disability Services Division or the Department of Employment view this body:

I have been doing this work for about 10 years now. My daughter, who was born Deaf, just turned 12 years old last week. I believe that the state of affairs for Deaf folks in Nevada is worse now than it was 5 or 10 years ago. Many of the families that I got to know with Deaf children when I first joined NV Hands & Voices no longer live in the state. Even the father who used to

occupy my seat on the Commission left the state because of the poor educational opportunities for Deaf kids in this state. Many of the most knowledgeable people that worked with my daughter in elementary school are no longer working in that space because of the toxic work culture in the school districts. Many of the highly knowledgeable Deaf individuals that served their community working at the Deaf Centers of Nevada are no longer here because there hasn't been an opportunity to do that work in Nevada for several years now. We are going backward in Nevada, not forward. I'm about as patient a guy as you will find and I'm losing my patience with this state. As an all-volunteer board with almost no budget and only one full-time employee, who isn't really free to do the job that needs to be done, we have almost no power to affect any change at all. A public letter that puts a little pressure on a bureaucrat is one of the very few tools we have to effectively wield. That the fragile bureaucracies of Nevada state agencies choose to punish rank-and-file workers rather than face constructive criticism in good faith is NOT the fault of this Commission or any of its members. It is a symptom of the broken culture of Nevada's government, and probably a leading reason why we are going backward not forward when it comes to supporting the Deaf community in Nevada. As a parent of a Deaf kid, that's terrifying. So, despite all of this, as long as I'm chair, we will not shy away from amplifying the complaints we hear repeatedly from our community.