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*and Human Services*

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**Testimony of Opeoluwa Sotonwa, Commissioner**  
**Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing**  
**Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means**  
**March 30, 2021**

Good afternoon Representative Vargas, Senator Rush and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Dr. Opeoluwa Sotonwa, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MCDHH), and it is an honor to be here with you today. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to questions about the Governor's FY2022 Budget. I want to thank Governor Baker, Lt. Governor Polito, Secretary Sudders, and each of you for your support of MCDHH. The new funding included in the Governor's budget represents an important investment for our community.

My passion for advocacy started when I was young in Nigeria. I lost my hearing when I was 16 years old as a result of contracting spinal meningitis. At the time, there were superstitious misconceptions about deafness in Nigeria. Being deafened was considered a curse and a sign that I was not fit for success; however, I was personally motivated and aspired to become a lawyer. The first time I applied to law school, my application was rejected. On my second application I did not disclose my deafness and I was accepted, to my delight. Upon personal appearance at the school, the Dean's Office de-registered me because of my hearing loss. My progress was monitored, and I had to prove myself within the first two semesters. I achieved academic success through hard work; I earned my law degree and became a Barrister-at-Law. My initial work with a group of lawyers was to draft the first major laws protecting Nigerians with disabilities. I later moved to the United States and continued my education at the Howard University School of Law and I earned my L.L.M. degree. I then relocated to Kentucky and worked for the Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. After a five-year tenure, I moved to Missouri and led the Missouri Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. We transformed the Missouri interpreter certification system. Our team advocated for legislation that established the Missouri Support Service Provider Program that provided for increased independence for Deaf Blind Missourians. We supported the creation of a 911 service board and ensured that people with disabilities had a seat at the table when emergency communication policies are formulated. Our office instituted new programs to

facilitate accessible interactions with law enforcement. We established a distribution program to provide hearing aids to low-income Missourians. Throughout it all, we continued to provide daily advocacy and resources to Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals as well as to interpreters and other professionals that support the community. My family and I are thrilled to call Massachusetts our new home. We fell in love with Boston as I travelled many times to Northeastern University where I earned my Doctor of Law and Policy degree. I am thrilled to bring this proactive experience and passion to the Commonwealth and to work with you.

MCDHH is responsible for providing case management and independent living services, interpreter and Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) referral services, communication access training and technical assistance, substance use disorder and victim services resources and advocating for improving accessibility and quality of existing and new services to address unmet needs. MCDHH provides the Commonwealth with progressive, protective, and innovative resources to serve Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Late-Deafened individuals in an extensive range of human services, healthcare, safety, legal, education, and economic settings with accommodations required under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

In March 2021, Governor Baker required all state employees to work remotely during the pandemic. MCDHH was able to pivot quickly and began to successfully work remotely. We provided technology and accessories to staff, created a Best Practice Document for staff and freelance interpreters, assisted our sister agencies in how to best use technology with interpreters/CART and at the same time we continued to provide quality services within all departments, including the 8 Deaf/Hard of Hearing Independent Living Services programs.

### **Fiscal Year 2022 Outlook**

H.1 allocates \$7.2M for MCDHH. This figure is a \$337K (5%) increase over the FY21 GAA.

#### **H.1 highlights:**

- Adds \$300K to expand the production of video blogs more commonly called vlogs in American Sign Language (ASL) and increase communication access to public services for individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing; An additional \$700K in funding was included at the Executive Office of Health and Human Services
- Maintains \$530K for the American Sign Language initiative, which aims to strengthen and expand the state's ASL interpreter/CART workforce
- Maintains funding for core human services in Interpreter and CART Referral, Bilingual Case Management and Children's Services, Communication Access Technology and Training Services, and Special Projects Coordination.
- Our Deaf and Hard of Hearing Independent Living (DHILS) program will increase by 20.36% (\$373,944) per Ch. 257 rate review during FY22. Current FY21 total funding is \$1,836,975. The contract covers eight regions to improve statewide coverage.

Despite a 25% decline in revenue collection during the pandemic, MCDHH continues to collect revenue from interpreter service fees, which are reinvested to protect and stabilize communication access in situations where there is no other responsible entity.

- Line item 4125-0122 records chargeback revenue from Interpreter services provided to state agencies with a ceiling of \$450,000
- Our Expendable Trust 4125-0104, records revenue estimated at \$350,000 from other public and private entities and is generated from fees for interpreter services.

All revenue is re-invested as follows:

- Contracted interpreters to increase availability to meet interpreting demands from state agencies, courts, and consumers.
- Workforce development training to increase existing interpreters' skills for work in medical, state government and legal settings.
- Interpreter/CART services to constituents in situations where there is no funding and or no other responsible entity.
- Interpreters/CART for inter-agency meetings or collaborations where communication access is not otherwise funded.

### **Critical Priorities for FY22**

MCDHH is focused on four urgent service needs in FY22 as summarized below.

#### **Workforce Initiative for Interpreters and CART service providers**

Expanding the pool of CART providers and qualified sign language interpreters in the Commonwealth requires scalable and sustainable solutions to address the talent pipeline, including:

- Promotion of a Bilingual-Bicultural approach to competence in American Sign Language/ English.
- Collaboration with and review of post-secondary interpreter preparation and CART provider training programs.
- Interpreter Referrals Modernization: This project will replace the ineffective software used to manage scheduling of interpreter services with a modern, comprehensive web-based solution that meets the needs of the program.
- Outreach and public education on CART/Interpreter employment opportunities.
- Opportunities to partner with stakeholders: This includes creating pathways to mentorship, professional development, and maintenance of professional credentials, as well as increasing the number of interpreters in current MCDHH mentorship programs and training interpreters for employment in state government agencies.
- Employment support and training in specialized settings: Legal, medical, mental health, and substance use disorder (SUD).

#### **Innovative Technology for Communication Access**

Since March, MCDHH has developed over 20 videos (vlogs) to better support messaging in American Sign Language, the preferred language for many Deaf/Hard of Hearing

constituents. Recent vlogs include a video in support of the Governor's Get Back Mass campaign:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xThiwS1LrE&list=PL54kn1BH64ABfj6tJ4c9nnv1LcvXZwAEB&index=4&t=1s>

Stop Covid19: <https://www.facebook.com/238774842960180/videos/434334580929189>

Trust the Facts, Get the Vax:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U24\\_CAPtUhE&feature=emb\\_imp\\_woyt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U24_CAPtUhE&feature=emb_imp_woyt)

In March 2020, MCDHH introduced the COVID-19 Card, a visual tool to assist Medical Professionals and Deaf and Hard of hearing individuals to communicate better during medical appointments. Since the launch the card is now available in 10 languages, has been viewed over 75,000 times online, and has been shared nationally and internationally:

MCDHH continues to partner with the Executive Office of the Trial Courts and the Office of the Jury Commissioner to use remote technology for communication access. This is a strategic initiative to increase access by using courtroom telecommunications technology to enable a legal interpreter or CART services to be streamed into a courthouse from another location.

### **Early Childhood Education/Early Language Acquisition**

Established at the request of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), MCDHH hosts an interagency/interdisciplinary Task Force with DESE, Early Education and Care, Department of Public Health (DPH) Early Intervention, DPH Newborn Screening, and other community stakeholders to address the devastating consequences of delayed language acquisition and address the critical need for early childhood education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing youth. The Task Force focuses on how Deaf and Hard of Hearing students participate in the MA State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP), which measures successful social/emotional outcomes for children.

### **Recovery Coaching as a Component of SUD Services**

In June 2020, MCDHH hired a Coordinator of Statewide Substance Use Disorder and Recovery Services in partnership with DPH BSAS (Bureau of Substance Abuse Services) to best support individuals who need peer support and substance use disorder services. This position supervises 14 Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals who have now all been certified as recovery coaches. This funding also covers detox, in/and outpatient services, and other pathways to sobriety. MCDHH continues to provide interpreting and CART services at AA/NA meetings and seminars.

### **Fiscal Year 2021 Advancements:**

#### **Social Services**

MCDHH's Case Management staff serves 2532 clients of all ages who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Late-deafened (930 Adults, 1593 children). All Case Managers and Children's

Specialists are fluent in American Sign Language and 4 of them are either Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Case managers also share their expertise in over 30 workgroups across the Commonwealth as cultural mediators to agencies working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing clients, and began a partnership with the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind to better serve Deaf-Blind constituents.

Our Deaf and Hard of Hearing Independent Living Services (DHILS) Programs community partners provided 23,000 hours of independent living services to 2000 consumers in eight programmatic regions across Massachusetts during FY20, quickly pivoting from on-site to remote service delivery in the third quarter when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. Despite the ongoing challenges Providers continue to face, the full DHILS network has provided 6153 hours of direct service and served 2448 consumers for the first half of FY21. It is essential to remember that behind each number and each statistic we present is a human being whose life is affected by the care we give.

### **Communication Access Training & Technology Services (CATTS)**

The CATTS Department continues to provide remote trainings to groups of 50 people or more, including hospitals, support groups, libraries, State Police, educational facilities, and elder organizations. CATTS has also established an ongoing connection with the Red Cross to coordinate with local Fire Departments to install smoke detectors and bed shakers supplied by the Red Cross upon consumer request.

A significant accomplishment was the launch of visor cards, providing a safe and culturally competent way to communicate with law enforcement. To date, MCDHH has printed and distributed 21,000 cards; 7,000 were distributed to law enforcement entities and 5,500 were distributed to consumers.

### **Communication Access**

In FY21, the MCDHH Interpreter & CART Referral Department quickly shifted to providing remote services for interpreters and CART providers, fulfilling 27,170 communication requests with an 86% fill rate. The department has also continuously staffed press conferences for Governor Baker, the City of Boston, and the City of Springfield for Covid-19 updates. We have more often been able to have CDIs for press conferences.

MCDHH will continue collaborating with the Department of Children and Families, focusing on best practices in cultural competence and language access, cross-training, foster care and adoption enhancements.

MCDHH continues support of domestic violence and victims of crime through our Victim Service Program and collaborations with Our Deaf Survivor Center (ODSC) and Pathways on DV and Sexual Assault.

### **Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

MCDHH partners with DESE to implement regulations for teachers and interpreters who work in K-12 settings. MCDHH administers the Sign Language Proficiency Interview

(SLPI), a licensure requirement for teachers (one of two states to require language proficiency as a condition of licensure), and the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA) for educational interpreters. MCDHH also participates in the Early Education Task Force, which identifies strategies for ensuring early language acquisition for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children, birth through age five, and leverages the expertise of the agency's Children Specialists to support public schools.

### **Inter-Departmental Service Agreements (ISAs)**

Through ISAs with MCDHH, state agencies purchase specific assistance to make their programs and services accessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals. These agreements pay for purchase of direct services, but do not reimburse MCDHH for administration and coordination. MCDHH provides the following state agencies with services:

- DPH/BSAS: Interpreters and CART for inpatient, outpatient, detox centers, residential treatment, and preventive support groups. In FY21, this included funding for a new Deaf Statewide SUD coordinator (1 FTE).
- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: K-12 Sign Language Proficiency Interviews, Educational Interpreter Quality Assurance Registry, training and mentoring, and referral services for substitute/temporary interpreters for schools who have vacancies/hiring delays.
- Executive Office of Public Safety/911 Commission: Certification for Specialized Equipment Distribution and processing applications for individuals who request specialized equipment in order to access the 911 emergency telecommunications system.
- Bureau of the State House: ASL Interpreting and CART services.

### **Conclusion**

The proposed FY2022 budget allows MCDHH to maintain its full commitment to our priorities: accessible communication, education, and advocacy to consumers and private/public entities so that programs, services, and opportunities for healthcare, independence, and resilience are fully accessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing adults and children in Massachusetts. We at MCDHH appreciate this investment and look forward to continued collaboration and partnerships with the Legislature and our constituents. Thank you for your continued support, and for this opportunity to testify on the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing FY22 budget. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.