



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health
and Human Services

600 Washington Street
Boston, MA 02111

Charles D. Baker
Governor
Karyn E. Polito
Lieutenant Governor
Marylou Sudders
Secretary
Dr. Opeoluwa S. Sotonwa
Commissioner

Massachusetts Commission
for the
Deaf and Hard of Hearing

(617) 740-1600 Voice
(617) 326-7546 VP
(617) 740-1700 TTY
(800) 882-1155 Voice
(800) 530-7570 TTY
(617) 740-1810 Fax

<http://www.mass.gov/mcdhh>

Testimony of Opeoluwa Sotonwa, Commissioner
Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
February 15, 2022

Good morning, Vice Chair Donato, Vice Chair Friedman, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

My name is Dr. Opeoluwa Sotonwa, and I am the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MCDHH). It is an honor to be here with you today. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today and respond to questions about the Governor's FY23 Budget. I want to thank Governor Baker, 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.

MCDHH is responsible for providing communication access throughout the Commonwealth. MCDHH provides American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreter and Computer Assisted Real-time Transcription (CART) referral services – including 24/7 standby referral for press conferences, referral for court and legal proceedings, and referral for emergencies, as well as ASL/English interpreter training, mentorship and quality assurance, communication access training, and technical assistance. Additionally, MCDHH provides case management and independent living services. MCDHH partners with sister agencies and community entities to increase accessibility and improve the quality of existing and new services throughout the Commonwealth to individuals who are Deaf and hard of hearing. MCDHH was established by Chapter 716 of the Acts of 1985, which amended Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 6 § 191-97. Last year, we started the celebration of 35 years of service throughout the Commonwealth – our hardworking staff provides the Commonwealth with the resources it needs to serve Deaf, hard of hearing, and late-deafened individuals in an extensive range of human services, healthcare, safety, legal, education, and economic settings, and to provide the accommodations that are required under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

The Fiscal Year 2023 Outlook

H.2 proposes:

- \$8.6 million for MCDHH operations (in line item 4125-0100). The H.2 budget recommendation is \$1.4 million or 19% above MCDHH's FY22 General Appropriations Act. We are grateful for this increase because in addition to maintaining MCDHH's programs and services at the FY22 level, the FY23

recommendation will continue to fund the implementation of our new interpreter referral software and other IT needs.

- Included in this budget recommendation is a new chargeback account (ceiling set at \$6 million per fiscal year) to centralize billing for freelance ASL interpreting services and CART services across EOHHS agencies. This will help facilitate timely payments for our valued, independent contracted communication access providers to provide additional incentive to resolve the dwindling pool of available interpreters in the Commonwealth and lead to increased service provision.
- The Governor's recommendation will also provide 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.
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing Independent Living Services (DHILS) will be funded with \$2.2 million. This figure is the result of the implementation of the Ch. 257 rate.

Critical Priorities for FY23

For FY23, MCDHH is focused on the following:

- Leveraging the celebration of MCDHH's 35th anniversary to take stock of where MCDHH has been, where it is now, and where it needs to go to meet the current needs of the diverse communities we serve through collaborations and strategic engagements.
- Continuing our close working relationship with Konica Minolta Business Solutions (KMBS) to create a fully modernized Interpreter and CART Referral System, and to shepherd that project to a successful conclusion.
- Using the Referral Modernization Project as a jumping-off point to review and analyze the Referral Department's workflow, reorganizing that department as needed, and partnering with EHS and others to come up with innovative solutions to meet the critical need for After Hours Emergency Services and staffing of Governor's and Mayors' vital Press Conference requests.
- Making inroads into our Communication Access Service Division's Workforce Development programs to lay the groundwork for building a pipeline of communication access providers, with the goal of developing a stable communication access workforce, significantly increased in both size and diversity, that is reflective of the communities we serve.
- Continuing to provide critical communication access services for our constituents for their vaccination appointments at clinics, vaccination sites, pharmacies, and health care providers' offices across the Commonwealth.
- Continuing to pursue collaborations and partnerships with sister agencies, some of which have led to an increase in both hours of service provision for our DeafBlind constituents, as well as an increase in linguistically and culturally competent services. Our colleagues at MCB now have sign-fluent case managers who can communicate directly with DeafBlind people via videophone, as well as ensuring that DeafBlind constituents have access to in-person interpreting services.

- Continuing to address the need across the Commonwealth, via our Department of Case Management, for linguistically and culturally competent directly provided, mental health, social and educational services, as well as critical services that intersect with the court and legal system.
- Partnering with MRC and community partners to increase visibility, accessibility, and opportunities for Deaf, hard of hearing, DeafBlind, late-deafened, and oral Deaf people in vocational settings.
- Providing support to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Independent Living Services (DHILS) from an allocation of \$2.2 million with disbursement paid monthly based on rates set by Chapter 257 according to contracts signed with each provider as listed by region. DHILS services are provided in eight geographic regions to a total of 4,568 clients including information, referral, advocacy, skills training, emergency intervention, peer mentoring, and community-based assistance.
- Providing services to children and adults through our Social Services and Case Management (SS/CM) Department, 70% of whom are on MassHealth. We also separately provide Substance Use Disorder (SUD) services via our partnership with DPH and the Bureau of Substance Addiction Services.
- Expansion of trainings provided to law enforcement officers, fire departments, and emergency responders by our Communication Access Training & Technology Services (CATTS) Department, which serves over 5,000 people annually.

Chargeback Funds

MCDHH will continue to collect revenue from communication access services provided by our Staff Interpreters. These funds are reinvested to protect and stabilize communication access in situations where there is no other responsible entity. Our line item 4125-0122 records chargeback revenue with a ceiling of \$450,000. Revenue collected has been lower in the past 2 years. We attribute the decrease in revenue to a sustained pandemic-caused change in the market dynamic for interpreter services resulting in a shift to remote services and an overall drop in requests for outreach and trainings by our Communication Access, Technology & Training Services Department, and advocacy services by our Case Managers.

Additional revenue charged as fees to other public and private entities for interpreter services are collected under our Expendable Trust 4125-0104. All revenue is generated and is reinvested 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 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.

Conclusion

The Governor's FY23 budget ensures MCDHH will remain fully committed to our priorities: accessible communication, education, and advocacy to consumers and private and 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 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 behalf of the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing FY23 budget. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.