**MCDHH Statewide Advisory Council Meeting Agenda**

**Zoom - Remote**

**March 20, 2025**

**5:30 – 7:30 PM**

**SAC Members present:**

**Michelle Motta Dardeno (MMD)**

**Dottie Griffith (DG)**

**Brock Cordeiro (BC)**

**Jessica Rich (JR)**

**Jonathan Ozek (JO)**

**Attendees from the community:**

**Mee Eng (ME)**

**Lee Nettles (LN)**

**Bobby Jackson II (BJ)**

**James West (JW)**

**Sue Philip (SPhilip)**

**Shannon Pollock (SPollock)**

**Anthony Russo (AR)**

**Nini Silver (NS)**

**MCDHH Staff:**

**Commissioner Opeoluwa Sotonwa (OS)**

**Heather Daley (HD)**

**Sharon Harrison (SH)**

**Sehin Mekuria (SM)**

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| **Agenda Topic** | **Discussion** | **Action Item** |
| **Welcome** | Established Quorum |  |
| **Review of Minutes from January 16, 2025, and February 20, 2025** | MMD led the review of the minutes from the previous meetings. The minutes from the January meeting were reviewed, and no corrections were proposed. A motion to accept the January minutes was made by JR and seconded by BC. The motion passed unanimously.  The February meeting minutes were then reviewed, with no corrections or comments. A motion to accept the February minutes was made by BC and seconded by JR. The motion passed unanimously. |  |
| **Chairperson’s Report** | MMD provided the Chairperson's report, noting several announcements. She highlighted two upcoming events from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Programs at Boston Children's Hospital.  The first was the Annual Parent Forum, organized by the Massachusetts Universal Newborn Hearing Screening Program, taking place at Framingham State University on March 22nd. The second was a program focusing on the social-emotional challenges and transitions faced by deaf and hard of hearing children, specifically related to the shift from elementary to middle school.  MMD also mentioned the potential for a student intern to assist with legislative work, expected to join the team in May as part of a senior Capstone internship program. The intern will work alongside MMD and BC on advocacy efforts, including building talking points for relevant bills.  With no questions raised following the Chair’s Report, MMD transitioned the floor to BC for the Legislative Subcommittee Report. |  |
| **Legislative Task Force Report -**Tracking Bills for 2025 – 2026 | BC provided a legislative update, noting that approximately 60 bills are currently under review and now have official bill numbers, replacing previous docket numbers. These bills have been assigned to their respective committees. For example, Senate Bill 991 and House Bill 5111 are now included on the updated list.  BC emphasized that each bill will undergo a public hearing in its assigned committee, where testimony can be submitted in writing, orally, or both. Oral testimony is typically limited to two to three minutes. BC encouraged members of the public to participate in these hearings, noting that testimony—particularly personal stories—can play a significant role in shaping legislative outcomes.  On the topic of co-sponsorships, BC reported that some bills have garnered strong support. One bill currently has 71 cosponsors. He explained that co-sponsorship remains open until a bill is reported out of committee, and that legislative timelines can extend over many months or even years.  A key highlight was the update on the ASL Inclusion Act (House Bill 558 / Senate Bill 425). Though the bill’s original House sponsor, Representative Carol Doherty, recently passed away, BC confirmed the legislation remains active. Several existing cosponsors have expressed interest in assuming the role of lead sponsor. The bill has been referred to the Joint Committee on Education, and the House Clerk’s Office is allowing flexibility in transitioning the sponsorship.  **Questions and Discussion**   * MMD asked about the lead sponsorship status of the ASL Inclusion Act. BC reiterated that while Representative Doherty had passed, discussions are underway for another cosponsor to become the new lead sponsor, and the House Clerk is being accommodating during this process. * JO asked how community members can provide testimony on proposed legislation. BC confirmed that public testimony is welcomed and strongly encouraged, especially personal narratives that can illustrate the real-life impact of legislation. Oral testimony is limited to three minutes, and additional written testimony can also be submitted. * OS suggested that individuals testifying in support of the ASL Inclusion Act consider acknowledging Representative Doherty’s contributions and recommend naming the bill in her honor. OS noted this could help strengthen public and legislative support.   **Additional Legislative Discussion**   * NS provided an update on the Hearing Aid Bill, which is nearing completion. This bill seeks to reclassify hearing aids from “cosmetic” devices to durable medical equipment (DME**)**—a shift that could significantly improve affordability and insurance coverage. The proposed legislation includes a $200 copay structure and coverage for one hearing aid per ear, with the option for replacement based on changes in hearing loss. Several senators have already expressed interest in co-sponsoring. * MMD asked how this proposed legislation connects with the earlier Pediatric Hearing Aid Bill. NS clarified that the new bill is focused on adult coverage and is intended to complement the existing pediatric legislation. MMD expressed interest in collaboration, citing experience and success with previous advocacy efforts around pediatric hearing aid access. |  |
| **Commissioner’s Report** | **MCDHH Updates from the Commissioner**  *(PowerPoint presentation attached)*  Following the Commissioner’s presentation, MMD opened the floor for questions from SAC members and the public.  ME inquired about public attendance at the upcoming March 25th hearing. OS confirmed that the hearing is open to the public; however, only appointed individuals will be permitted to testify.  With no further questions, OS concluded his report, and MMD thanked him for the informative and thorough update. |  |
| **SAC Members** | **Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) Constituents' Annual Day**  MMD opened the discussion by providing an update on the planning for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Constituents' Day. She noted that the Commission was unable to secure a spring date for 2025. Additional dates for fall and winter of 2025–2026 will become available after April 1st, and the Commission will submit targeted requests for dates in September, which also aligns with Deaf Awareness Month.  However, MMD acknowledged that the SAC’s typical summer break may present challenges, as detailed planning for previous March events typically began months in advance. Should the event take place in September, additional SAC or subcommittee meetings—potentially during the summer—may be required to ensure adequate preparation.  **Discussion:**  NS suggested that in addition to organizing the formal September event, the SAC could consider hosting a more informal legislative visit day in the spring. This would allow members of the Deaf community to meet individually with their legislators to share personal stories and advocate for priority bills.  NS emphasized that since the state budget is usually finalized before September, a spring legislative day would provide a more opportunity for advocacy. She also shared insights from past events, where buses were arranged to transport Western Mass participants, clarifying that the costs were covered by the participants and not the Commission.  MMD proposed the creation of an ad hoc committee to organize the September Constituents' Day and to further explore the feasibility of a spring legislative advocacy day. This committee would operate separately from the formal SAC schedule and ensure that both events are thoughtfully planned.  BC clarified that the legislature remains in session during September, countering earlier concerns that it might be a less effective time for advocacy. He added that while the full SAC may not meet over the summer, ad hoc subcommittees are permitted to convene as needed.  OS supported the formation of an ad hoc committee to manage the logistics for Constituents' Day and encouraged SAC members to volunteer. MMD will follow up with members via email.  JR recommended that the email invitation include clear details about the responsibilities and expectations of the ad hoc committee to ensure that volunteers are well-informed.  NS reiterated the importance of holding a spring advocacy day, stressing that the legislative schedule and state budget timeline make it the most impactful window for constituent engagement. | **ACTION: Submission of Constituents' Day Date -** SAC members will confirm preferred dates in September 2025, and HD will submit the request through the State House scheduling portal when it opens on April 1st.  **ACTION: Ad Hoc Planning Committee Formation:** SAC members will volunteer to join an ad hoc planning committee to coordinate and support planning for the Constituents’ Day event.  **ACTION: Summer Meeting Coordination -** If needed, MMD will collaborate with HD to schedule a summer SAC or subcommittee meeting to ensure timely planning and decision-making for the fall event.  **ACTION: Development of Legislative Priorities-** SAC members will identify and finalize key legislative priorities (e.g., HB3015, the ASL Bill) and create talking points to support community engagement and advocacy efforts. |
| **SAC Announcements, Next Meeting** | **Announcements**  MMD opened the floor to SAC members to share updates or upcoming activities from their respective communities.  JO shared the following upcoming events:   * Worcester Red Sox Deaf and Hard of Hearing Awareness Game: Scheduled for Friday, May 23rd. More details and ticket information will be shared once available. * Disability Pride Celebration at Fenway Park: Hosted by the Boston Red Sox on June 3rd. Details pending. * Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) New England Conference: The first annual regional conference will be held next weekend. Although tickets are sold out, plans are in progress to host it again next year. Jonathan will be speaking at the event.   MMD noted her family’s positive experiences attending Red Sox events through deaf and hard of hearing organizations and encouraged others to attend.  LN highlighted an important advocacy initiative in Western Massachusetts related to captioning in bars and restaurants, acknowledging the level of effort required but sharing optimism about community support.  LN also shared sad news about the passing of George Balsley, a respected Deaf leader and former President of Willie Ross University. George was known for his architectural work in Boston and leadership in the Western Mass Deaf community. Fundraising efforts are underway, and more information will be posted on the MSAD website.  OS informed the group about a recent tragedy involving carbon monoxide poisoning that claimed the lives of two community members. He emphasized the importance of accessible carbon monoxide alarms and noted that the Red Cross provides free installation of these alarms. MCDHH will share this resource through social media to raise awareness.  JO added that he would help amplify this safety message on social media. He also promoted the upcoming HLAA National Convention in Indianapolis, taking place June 11–14, and encouraged anyone interested to reach out for more information.  NS added that the Boston HLAA regional convention will take place from March 28–30 in Marlborough, with full details on the HLAA Boston website.  MMD thanked everyone for their active participation and shared updates. She also expressed appreciation for the interpreters, the CART provider, and the efforts of Heather, for her continuous support in ensuring the smooth execution of meetings.  OS thanked the SAC members for their time and volunteerism. He acknowledged the hard work of all involved and wished everyone a happy first day of spring.  The meeting was adjourned at 7:30 PM. The next SAC meeting will be held on Thursday, April 17, 2025at **5:30 PM.**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | ~~1~~ | ~~September 19, 2024~~ | | ~~2~~ | ~~October 17, 2024~~ | | ~~3~~ | ~~November 14, 2024~~ | | ~~4~~ | ~~December 19, 2024~~ | | 5 | ~~January 16, 2025~~ | | 6 | ~~February 20, 2025~~ | | 7 | March 20, 2025 | | 8 | April 17, 2025 | | 9 | May 15, 2025 | | 10 | June 12, 2025 | |  |