

February 13, 2015

The Hon. Sara Gelsler,
Chairwoman before the Senate Committee
on Health Care and Early Childhood
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Senate Bill 449

Dear Ms. Gelsler:

Sorenson Communications, Inc. (Sorenson) strongly supports Senate Bill 449, which seeks to create a permanent Office for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing Services (ODDBHHS). This bill asks the Department of Human Services (DHS) to require that social services be provided for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing Oregonians statewide. This agency will serve and benefit over 186,000 Oregonians with hearing loss who are in need of services.

Sorenson, as the largest provider of Video Relay Services (VRS) in the nation and a leader in both VRS and IP Captioned Telephone Service (IP CTS), has had the opportunity to work with multiple state telecommunications relay service programs. Oregon's program is among the very best, evidencing the strong leadership found in your great state. Oregon has been and can continue to be the birthplace of progressive ideas that will be followed by other states.

As you may know, Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing citizens face significant challenges in education and the work force. Many Deaf individuals learn American Sign Language (ASL) as their first language. With English as their second language, they face extraordinary difficulty communicating with the majority of the population in our country. ASL and English use different syntax and grammatical structures, in addition to a completely different vocabulary and "nuances." This presents a struggle similar to those learning any foreign language that must be spoken to survive in a society – but with the added difficulty of the absence of their sense of hearing. This often results in low education assessment levels for the Deaf population, despite a high innate intelligence characterizing many of these marginalized individuals. Additionally, the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing population has a much higher unemployment level than the hearing population, despite a remarkable work ethic and willingness to learn and perform above-and-beyond in the workplace evidenced by countless individuals with hearing difficulties.

The Hon. Sara Gelsler
February 13, 2015
Page 2

As a guardian of the public interest, the Oregon State Legislature can make a positive impact. It can act to improve awareness of and access to vital social services that will support the efforts of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing population to rise above the difficulties they face in educational and employment environments. Senate Bill 449 will be an admirable step in the right direction, helping to eliminate barriers to access to communications and services. Under current state law (410.740), the DHS is not required to provide these services, even if their advisory committee recommends the implementation of such programs for those who may need assistance. Senate Bill 449 would help by establishing an office whose very mission is to serve the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing population, thereby improving their quality of life – as well as their ability to be productive taxpayers.

Sorenson therefore urges the Oregon State Legislature to enact Senate Bill 449, taking a commendable leadership role on this most important issue. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or wish to discuss this topic further.

Sincerely,



Michael D. Maddix
Director of Government and Regulatory Affairs



Paul Kershisnik
Chief Marketing Officer



Dave Johnson
Vice President of Outreach