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March 26, 2015

Testimony in support of Senate Bill 449

To: Senator Sara Gelser, Chair

Senate Committee on Human Services and Early Childhood

Dear Senator Gelser and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon. My name is Fred Renter and I am the Executive Director of Independent Environments, Inc. (IEI), a non-profit organization in Eugene which supports adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in 24-Hour Comprehensive Residential services as well as in day and path-to-employment services. IEI has been in operation since 1982 and I have been the Executive Director since 1989.

I am here today to support the passage of SB 449, including the creation of a new department of Deaf Services within the Department of Human Services (DHS). I am supporting the establishment of this department because over the last twelve years we at IEI have become increasingly acquainted with the needs of the Oregon deaf community, especially concerning those people who are intellectually and developmentally disabled, and deaf. My primary message to you today is to express how urgent it is that this new department work alongside the Oregon Department of Developmental Disability Services (ODDS) to include I/DD deaf people in all service opportunities and, most notably, to increase the department's efforts to ensure that the caregivers who support them (who we now refer to as Direct Support Professionals or DSPs) become fully proficient in American Sign Language (ASL).

Nearly twelve years ago IEI began supporting its first deaf person with I/DD. For years thereafter, while providing a safe and secure home environment, we found that we were not doing justice to the support needs of this person because we were almost completely devoid of skills in ASL, which was, of course, the person's primary language. As the years passed, this deficit on our part became more and more apparent. We were making little to no progress with helping this person to direct his own life. In fact, we were finding that he was becoming ever more frustrated with his life, in large part because no one understood his speech or could adequately communicate with him. This condition turned out to be reflective of a complicated, life-long problem that was only getting worse as the years passed. And then we had a breakthrough. We hired our first deaf caregiver, DSP, to provide residential and day supports to

our client and a means of communication to all of us. In time more people who were similarly skilled were hired. The results have been exciting, empowering and promising for the future.

To make a long story short, last year IEI purchased and remodeled a 3-person home, exclusively to meet the needs of people who are deaf and developmentally disabled. All eight staff and the manager of the home are fluent in ASL. Indeed, several of the direct support professionals are deaf themselves, while others are licensed ASL interpreters. The progress that is now being made by that first person towards a more self-directed, adult life is strikingly significant. It illustrates the need for such models to be replicated all over the state, and confirms the long standing and obvious truth that no one can be reasonably supported by people who don't speak their language. Last month IEI took a second deaf person into this home and we hope that by fall of this year we will have three deaf people living there.

Along the way, we also learned that IEI was not alone in its ASL deficiency. Indeed, our deaf home is likely the only home in the system for deaf adults with I/DD that is designed specifically to meet their needs. In virtually all other scenarios around the state, deaf people live in homes where few, if any, of their support professionals are fluent in ASL. It is, unfortunately, far more common that most DSPs have only rudimentary ASL skills with just "a few signs" to get by with. This is a condition that simply must be remedied and funded. I also feel strongly that it is important that all legislators come to realize that the discrepancy between hourly pay levels for interpreters and Direct Care Professionals is a huge barrier to realizing this pursuit. Interpreters are normally paid over \$30/hr., DSPs just over \$10/hr. There is a movement in our field this year to adjust DSP wages to at least a \$15/hr. starting wage which I profoundly hope the committee, and the legislature, will endorse.

It is our hope that this committee will understand these urgent needs and fund the creation of a department of Deaf Services in DHS. It is our further hope that in so doing the committee and those at DHS who are involved, see to it that "cross department services" are integrated and fully functioning in every facet of the department's services from the first day forward.

I wish to thank the committee for the time it has given me for this testimony. My remarks have also been e-mailed to each of you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frederick W. Renter". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Frederick W. Renter  
Executive Director  
Independent Environments, Inc.