

Testimony of:

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Testimony in support of:

House Bill 2253 – Disability Hiring Preference

Chair Tarwater and Members of House Committee on Commerce, Labor and Economic Development:

I am Robert Cooper, Executive Director of the Kansas Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (KCDHH). KCDHH is a state agency housed administratively within the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF). Based in Topeka, KCDHH works with agencies and organizations throughout Kansas to assure availability and coordination of services for people who are deaf and hard of hearing, including communication access. KCDHH also maintains a registry of qualified sign language interpreters and other communication access services in order to track each provider's credentials, areas of expertise and geographic areas of practice working in the State of Kansas.

The positions taken and expressed by the Commission do not necessarily represent the views or position of DCF.

KCDHH has always supported efforts to date that promote increased employment opportunities for all individuals with disabilities for positions they are also qualified to apply for and be considered for hire. HB 2253 will achieve this goal after years of advocating for more concrete and meaningful steps, where the State's current Employment First initiative was not able to maximize the leverage to increase opportunities for interviews that would lead to more hiring considerations for many qualified job applicants who also have a disability.

The provisions from within HB 2253 as it now reads is good, but not without a concern. I am not sure if the documentation requirement is flexible enough or is not restrictive for many Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals since most generally don't use any of these 3 service avenues as listed in the bill. I am cognizant of some organizations from within the Deaf Community that would want to possibly float an amendment to make it more inclusive, for example, allowing other documents from appropriate state agencies verifying certain individuals with disabilities. The question remains how to determine whether such documentation would be appropriate without further complicating the intent of this bill.

In closing, I want to share a story. The State of Kansas was once known as the most proactive employer in Kansas during the 1950s and through the 1980s with many Deaf and Hard of Hearing

state employees in Topeka and elsewhere, aside from those working in Olathe at the Kansas School for the Deaf, and all of them were among the most productive and loyal employees. I have become acquainted with a retired Deaf state employee who worked for state payroll for 44 years after she was hired in 1957 along with 9 other Deaf employees starting that same year when they were at the Docking State Office Building. She shared a lot of anecdotes, some probably are tall tales, but one story stood out – that the SOK had some kind of preferred hiring with an emphasis on hiring qualified individuals with disabilities long before the Americans with Disabilities Act came into the picture. There were already hundreds of employees with disabilities, often visible enough that you would easily notice several walking if not on wheels around downtown Topeka daily. It is something that I have not seen during the past 8 years I have worked here. I strongly believe that this bill will reverse this sad trend from the past 20-30 years to a more positive outlook for everyone in Kansas. Let's make this HB2253's dream a reality!

Thank you.