

Testimony for House Judiciary Committee re: HB 1090

1/29/09

Good afternoon, madam chair. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the committee in strong support of House Bill 1090 to provide Title Protection to Sign Language Interpreters in Colorado. I have worked as a Sign Language Interpreter in the state of Colorado for eight years, seven of those as a certified member of RID. I would like to start off by relaying to the committee an experience I had that vividly conveys the need for statewide consumer protection when it comes to Sign Language Interpreters.

After rigorous preparation and testing I received my RID certification in 2002. Some time later I was called by a physician's office in Denver to interpret for the annual physical exam of a Deaf patient. Shortly into the appointment the doctor mentioned with some concern that the patient was experiencing symptoms of untreated HIV, which surprised the doctor since he had informed the patient himself of the patient's HIV positive status several months earlier. The patient went pale and became hysterical. Not only had he not known of his HIV positive status until this moment, but he had remained ignorant of the treatment plan laid out by the doctor at the previous appointment. After some interpreted discussion, it became clear that the sign language student, whom the doctor had hired to interpret the last appointment, had misinterpreted the conversation so poorly that the patient was unaware of his contraction of the infectious disease, while the doctor was assured not only that the patient knew, but that he was likewise on the road to treatment and recovery. The doctor explained that the person who had been hired for the previous appointment was a friend of a friend who had taken some sign language courses at a local community college, yet this person advertised herself to the doctor as a professional Sign Language Interpreter. In the end, not only was this patient's health put at risk, but the public health was unwittingly endangered by the misrepresentation of this sign language student as a qualified interpreter. The doctor likewise openly expressed his concern of making himself vulnerable to malpractice at the hands of a novice, untrained student who cloaked herself in false professionalism.

Committee members, while this narrative is unique in its details, this occurrence is clearly far too common for both hearing and Deaf consumers of interpreting throughout the state. To make matters worse, because the hired sign language student was neither certified nor a member of RID, neither the patient nor the doctor could seek any recompense or file any grievance against her actions. In essence, because the interpreting field in Colorado currently welcomes any practitioner and allows them to refer to themselves as qualified regardless of qualification, lives have been literally put at risk and the hands of consumers, Deaf and hearing alike, are quite literally tied.

Providing title protection to the field of sign language interpreting in Colorado will, if nothing else, provide a compelling incentive for pre-certified interpreters to legitimize their work by undertaking the training, experience, and testing necessary to become certified through the RID. Not only will this enhance the qualifications of the statewide pool of interpreters, it will provide to consumers an already established venue within which to have their grievances adjudicated. All of this at no expense to the state of Colorado. My testimony of harm has shown that the stakes of not doing so at this time are dire, not only for Deaf and Hard of Hearing citizens, but potentially for the health and well being of all Colorado residents. Thank you for hearing my story.