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MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CIVIL RIGHTS

DIVISION ON DEAF, DEAFBLIND AND HARD OF HEARING

DATE: Wednesday October 25, 2017

TO: House Health Policy Committee

FROM: Annie Urasky
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Michigan Department of Civil Rights

SUBJECT: House Bills 5158 and 5159

Chair Vaupel and Members of the House Health Policy Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. As Director of the Division on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing, our mission and my role here today is to affirm the indisputable right to equal and effective communication for Michiganders who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing.

The two bills which are before you directly impact the lives of students who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing and their families. The bills come from a group of Michigan legislators on the bipartisan Michigan Legislative Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Caucus, devoted solely to examining the issues which impact these communities. I would be remiss if I did not thank them for their efforts.

There has been much debate about when a child begins to learn about the world around them. Does it begin in the womb or after birth? The reasoning is that since a fetus reacts to sound, it must also be learning from the perceptions of it. This learning is very limited, but it is the beginning of a foundation for the child to develop communication and social skills.

For a child who is born deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing, the debate is a different one. The child does not begin learning from sounds heard in the womb, nor to begin developing oral communication skills immediately after birth. The fundamental building blocks for learning to communicate and interact with others must instead be built on visual perceptions. The debate here today is about how long that child must wait before being provided with the building blocks for visual communication?

These bills are therefore intended to assure early detection.

I want to stress that I am not here today to talk about whether it is better or worse for an infant to learn from visual or oral perceptions, but only to stress that neither a deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing infant nor that infant's parents have the luxury of choice. An infant who does not hear will not learn from sound. The only choice is determining when the infant will be exposed to visual language specifically directed at the development of communication skills. These skills are both developmentally critical and cumulative, thus, it is imperative to provide an infant with the appropriate tools as early as possible because lost time will never be fully reclaimed. The communication skills learned visually as an infant will establish the core foundation on which additional skills can be built.

These bills are therefore intended to provide early intervention and to enhance a full spectrum for language acquisition, development and resources.

This is not about how a child who is born deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing should ultimately be raised; whether the parents choose to use American Sign Language as their child's primary language, or if they choose to solely focus on oral English skills. How to raise a child who is born deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing is a question on which I could offer my opinion and personal experience, but it is a fundamental decision which each parent must answer for their own child. However, simply providing parents with the ability to choose is not enough. Parental choice is meaningless if they are not aware of or if they do not fully understand the full options and resources available to them.

I thought about multiple instances where many parents shared "*if I had only known then what I know now*" frustrations with me. It is easy for me to think about the common frustration of hearing parents where, after learning their infant has hearing loss, there is an immediate shift in perspective when they are told there is a problem to be fixed and that there is only one solution or resource to use.

As with almost any decision a parent must make, there are both positives and negatives in decisions about education and language options. These bills are not intended to dictate how parents must decide questions like these, but only to ensure they fully understand what those decisions involve.

Preserving the right of students who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing to fully experience the same opportunities as any other child in their pursuits for success in both education and in life is a core principle.

These bills are therefore intended to provide information and education to parents. They emphasize that every deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing child has the right to experience the same opportunities as any other child in the state of Michigan in order to achieve their full potential for educational success.

BEFORE asking parents to make crucial decisions which profoundly affects the rest of their child's life, it is critical to ensure they have been provided with the ability to make well informed choices.

These bills EMPOWER parents to make informed decisions.

These bills EMPOWER infants and students to reach their full potential.

These bills should be enacted into law.