

**Testimony of Chriz Dally, Chair of the Kansas Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
before the House Education Committee on Bill HB 2621
February 16, 2022**

Good afternoon, Chair Huebert and Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Chriz Dally and I am the Chair of the Kansas Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Alongside our Executive Director, I am here to offer brief thoughts in regard to HB 2621. I ask you to make careful considerations on the ongoing needs and unmet needs of all Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) people in Kansas.

The staff and members of the Commission has served thousands within the DHH community in various professional capacities since 1982. We have worked with, of, by, for DHH people from all walks of life and of all ages from birth to senior-ship. We have integral knowledge about the issues and needs that DHH people face daily including their fight for a right to language in order to gain an education, their constant struggles to receive equitable access across all sectors of our society, and, as importantly, their desires to make contributions, big or small, within the great fabric of life as equally as anyone else. This knowledge serves KCDHH well, working alongside each other to meet the Kansas statutory mandate to advise and address various information that revolves around meeting needs and unmet needs of DHH Kansans.

KCDHH, which includes several ex officio members and various representatives of various stakeholders, continue to be deeply appreciative of the support that we are receiving from members of the Kansas Legislature in their recognizing the significant harms that our DHH children have endured through the decades when early intervention programs and school programs failed to meet their language development needs. This bipartisan recognition led to Kansas being the 2nd state in the nation to establish a *Language Assessment Program* in 2016. Since then, 17 states have followed suit in establishing similar programs, with many more to come, looking at Kansas as a model. Currently, the Kansas School for the Deaf (KSD) is the lead agency running the *Language Assessment Program*, doing important work that will finally pave stronger roads within our state-wide educational system to help DHH children gain full language skills in American Sign Language (ASL), English, or both. This program is just getting started, and we still have a way to go before we can really start to change the tide on the levels of language deprivations being endured by DHH children across the state.

As many of you may know, ASL is recognized as a complete language with linguistic properties that are comparable with other languages and contains its own rules on grammar and syntax structure. While ASL is the language of Deaf people in the United States, it is also considered to be the 3rd most popular language studies program of choice by students (who can hear) in many high schools and colleges. This thrills DHH people because we believe that the more people who can sign, the better off we all are. Finally, I would like to address a couple of items in this bill about terminology and offer our understandings on L1/L2 learners.

The use of “foundational ASL” as written in the bill is not a term that is commonly used which could possibly lead to several inaccurate interpretations. KCDHH believes that more research is needed to ensure we are using the correct terminology. Moreover, knowing the correct terminology involves a need to have a better understanding of how we can best serve students in building a primary language base which we call Language 1 Learners (L1) and learning a second language which we call Language 2 Learners (L2), of which, can only happen until a L1 base has been established. By understanding how L1/L2 works, we can help DHH children achieve strong bilingual skills in both ASL and English with the aim of their living successful or productive lives. However, the struggle for DHH students to acquire a L1 base exists for far too many due to language deprivation issues, further exacerbated by the failure of not meeting the critical window of opportunity where the human brain develops vital building blocks of language from **infancy to aged 5** which is what creates a base for the L1 structure. This is where hundreds of DHH children fall through the cracks due to their environments’ severe lack of, or barriers, in providing them with access to visual information to activate the language base of their brains. And, without L1, they cannot effectively learn L2 which has been a decades-old problematic issue which promoted the implementation of the *Language Assessment Program*. While we know that better understandings will be revealed as we continue to gather data in the next several years, we are still years away from turning DHH children’s unmet needs into meaningful success where we help them become kindergarten-ready to gain an education (and learn a second language) when a strong L1 structure has been established. Please recognize that for many DHH children who require access to information through visual means, KSD is oftentimes the only option available where those needs can be successfully met.

Thus, on behalf of KCDHH, I ask you to please continue your support in **building Deaf & Hard of Hearing children’s success for a lifetime** by ensuring that the limited resources that we have available are reserved for meeting those needs.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Chriz Dally, Chair
Kansas Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing