

Sign language licensing bill advances

Idaho House committee follows advice of deaf advocacy groups

BOISE — Legislation requiring professional sign language interpreters to be licensed by the state advanced to the Idaho House floor Monday, with the enthusiastic support of several deaf advocacy groups.

The measure, sponsored by Rep. Kelley Packer, R-McCammon, is similar to a bill that narrowly passed the Legislature and was subsequently vetoed by the governor in 2015.

Packer said the legislation is needed to ensure that Idaho's deaf community gets accurate information during their interactions with doctors, hospitals or law enforcement agencies and other critical services.

The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that certain entities provide services for the deaf. Packer's bill would not expand the scope of that act; however, it requires that sign language interpreters who are hired to communicate with the deaf meet certain standards.

The Idaho Speech, Hearing and Communications Board would be responsible for licensing interpreters. The process includes a written application, \$125 licensing fee and evidence of having passed a nationally recognized competency exam.

The legislation is primarily directed at hospitals and medical offices and law enforcement agencies; it wouldn't apply to church services or "inconsequential situations," such as retail settings, restaurants and motels.

The measure also doesn't apply to K-12 schools, which are subject to other statutes, or to the court system, which has its own set of administrative rules governing services for the deaf.

Concerns about duplicating the court rules prompted Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter to veto the 2015 bill, even though he agreed with the aim of the legislation.

The House Health and Welfare Committee recommended approval of the bill on a 9-3 vote Monday.

Rep. Mike Kingsley, R-Lewiston, voted against the measure, citing concerns that it would drive up prices. Other committee members wondered why the state would license sign language interpreters when it doesn't license other, spoken-language interpreters.

Speaking through an interpreter, Steve Snow, executive director of the Idaho Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, noted that the ADA requires services for the deaf, whereas other spoken languages aren't addressed in state or federal law, except in specific situations.

Snow said he hears horror stories about deaf people who suffer because the interpreter provided by a hospital or agency can't accurately convey what a doctor or prosecutor is saying.

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“Currently, there’s nothing that prevents unqualified interpreters from continuing to harm others,” he said. “There’s nothing to hold them accountable.”

Alan Wilding, president of the Idaho Association for the Deaf, said the association “gets calls every couple of days from people asking for help because their interpreter wasn’t qualified.”

“When we call hospitals or doctors offices and tell them what the ADA requires, they tell us they don’t have any way to vet an interpreter. They have no way to verify if they’re qualified. They need (a system) that lets them know who’s qualified.”

Toni Lawson of the Idaho Hospital Association said her members have some concerns about the legislation, given the current difficulty in finding qualified interpreters. She asked that whichever board ends up regulating interpreters coordinate with federal oversight boards so hospitals don’t end up with conflicting requirements.

The measure now goes to the full House for a vote.

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