



**STATE OF VERMONT
SENATE CHAMBER
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MEMO

TO: Secretary Rebecca Holcombe, AOE
Commissioner Harry Chen, DOH
Commissioner Susan Wehry, DAIL
Commissioner Ken Schatz, DCF

FROM: Senate Government Operations Committee

DATE: May 11, 2015

In response to the closing of Austine School and the Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Senate Government Operations Committee passed S.66 after much testimony. We all learned much about those who are deaf, DeafBlind, or hard of hearing (hereafter referred to as “the Deaf community”) some of which is perhaps familiar in some circles but maybe not widely known in the general population:

- the development of early language and communication skills in all children is essential to later success;
- there is an academic achievement gap between children of the Deaf community and their hearing peers;
- children of the Deaf community are unique - having various degrees of hearing loss identified either at birth or much later, use a variety of communication and language modes; and they are at risk of isolation in school and communities.

We learned that the Hearing Advisory Council was not the appropriate entity to address our concerns – it was more medically oriented, only addressed the needs of children ages 0-3, and did not have much representation from the Deaf community. We did learn, however, that the Council is prepared, and in fact anxious, for a remake. S.66 would have created a task force to address many issues confronting the Deaf community. Realizing S.66 will not pass this year, we have the following suggestions:

1) Name The name “Hearing” council seems contrary to recognizing and respecting the Deaf community. A name like Council on Persons who are Deaf, DeafBlind or Hard of Hearing is a mouthful. Some variation on this

is suggested. Working with the Deaf community should lead to a better name.

2) Membership. Agency members likely to be involved would be: Senior Counselor for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in DAIL's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation or designee; Secretary of Education or designee; Secretary of Human Services or designee; special education administrator selected by the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators; a superintendent selected by the Vermont Superintendent's Association; and a professional deaf education specialist who understands communication and language modes – to be appointed by the Governor.

In addition to these members we suggest the Governor appoint members from and /or representing the Deaf community: 4 members from the Deaf community and do not represent an organization; two members who are a parent or guardian of a child of the Deaf community; two members who serve the Deaf community in a professional capacity; and one member recommended by the Vermont Association for the Deaf.

3) Duties.

a) assess educational services, resources and opportunities for members of the Deaf community who are children to ensure: i) they receive the same educational rights as other children including their educational environment, qualified teachers, interpreters and paraprofessionals; ii) each child's unique need is recognized; and iii) adequate family support;

b) develop policy and programs for persons of the Deaf community by surveying them concerning needs and opportunities, reviewing appropriate rules and legislation, examining delivery models in other states, and encouraging and fostering local community involvement; and,

c) oversee and monitor qualifications of interpreters.

Given the pressures created by the closure of Austine School and the Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, we ask the Council to report to the General Assembly by January 15, 2016 the following:

- 1) an assessment of the education services and resources available to children of the Deaf community;
- 2) any losses or reductions in services or resources due to the closure;
- 3) any attempts to restore those services or resource, and the results of those attempts to restore lost services;
- 4) an assessment of the risks and benefits of mainstreaming children of the Deaf community;
- 5) the feasibility and desirability of establishing a centralized school for children of the Deaf community;

- 6) any recommendations for alternative methods of ensuring that children of the Deaf community are not socially isolated and have adequate opportunities for direct contact with language or communication mode peers; and,
- 7) a recommendation whether or not the General Assembly should adopt a Bill of Rights specific to the Deaf community.

The report may be filed electronically with notice to the General Assembly. We understand that the above items to be reported will not be completed by January. Our intention is that the report focus on progress made.

Our committee will invite the Council to a committee meeting in January to discuss the report, how the Council has been reconstituted, along with problems, successes, failures and other concerns.

We are making these recommendations to encourage the Council and the Deaf community to work collaboratively to address the needs of children and adults who are deaf, Deaf/Blind or hard of hearing.

Thank you for your attention to these issues.

Senator Jacob White, chair
Senator Brian Collamore
Senator Andy Pollock
Senator Joe Benning
Austin Christy Gray