

## Testimony before Senate Government Operations

February 25, 2015

My Name is Mary Essex and I am here today in support of the Senate Bill S.66, introduced by Senators Pollina, Balint, Cummings, McCormack, and White concerning the establishment of a bill of rights for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and to create a Commission for Persons Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

I grew up in South Strafford, VT and now live in Norwich. . I am BI-Lingual ASL/English. Today I am here to represent my role as the President of the Vermont Association of the Deaf (VTAD), a statewide organization supporting the mission in promoting the welfare of deaf Vermonters in all areas of life, to advance our educational, vocational, and economic status, and to enhance our intellectual, recreational, spiritual, and social standards. We accomplish this mission by ensuring that deaf individuals hold leadership positions within the VTAD, that parents of deaf children become aware of, and involved in, all facets of deaf life, that professionals, deaf or not, working in our field are of the highest caliber and competency, that employers at large are made aware of the abilities and capabilities of deaf employees, and that a comprehensive, coordinated system of services, public and private, is accessible to parents of deaf children and to us.

As a young girl, while attending a four room school house in South Strafford, coincidentally the home of Vermont US Senator Justin Morrill. Robert Frost said "Senator Morrill is the greatest name in Education". One day, a Mr. Lane came to my school, because he had heard that there were 3 deaf siblings in this town. He wanted to recruit the three of us to attend the Austine School, where he was the long time Headmaster. At first the teachers were like "No, no, the deaf children are fine". Upon visiting, Mr. Lane questioned the teachers, since he knew, as a Professional Educator of the Deaf the right questions to ask. He asked Mrs. Stone, my teacher, "Do you ever notice Mary peeking at other students' books to follow where the conversation is going"? Mrs. Stone, as well as my neighbors didn't see this important small detail until it was pointed out. After much discussion, my parents, school teachers, and Mr. Lane agreed to allow me to attend the Austine School. While at Austine my language acquisition blossomed 3 grade levels in one year! I finally was able to understand all my classmates and teachers without having to try to figure out what page we were on or what the side conversations were all about. I must thank both Mrs. Stone and Mr. Lane for changing my life by encouraging me to attend Austine School.

At Austine, I had the privilege of having Deaf adult role models; my first classroom teacher was a Deaf woman. She encouraged me to keep up with my English skills as I learned to become fluent in American Sign Language. Another great role Deaf role model I had at Austine School was Harold Tier, a graduate of Austine, he was a Vocational Teacher. He showed us many skills that allowed us to gain employment. My most memorable experience with Mr. Tier was learning all the "ins and outs of Maple Sugaring", a must know for all Vermonters. He taught us the sugaring vocabulary and the correct signs for sugaring activities. The unfortunate bankruptcy and demise of Austine School as well as the VT Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has led to this unexpected journey here in Montpelier to discuss the current and future quality restructuring of Deaf Education and Services for the Deaf Community in Vermont.

This bill, S.66 is allowing the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community to get equal rights from our State Government. The state has already established the Vermont Division of Blind and Vision Impaired, Disabilities Aging and Independent Living, Vermont Commission on Women, Woman Infant and Children, Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs, you get the point; ....the very same should be afforded to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community with a commission and bill of rights for children so that we do not have to go through what happened with the VT Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing without any state support or oversight.

Our roles are important, you as Senators from your districts, mine as the President of the Vermont Association of the Deaf. Like you, we all want to serve your home communities and share Vermont State resources with your home community.

Here are some examples of why there is a strong need for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing commission as I get daily calls and e-mails relating to:

- The City of Burlington wants to know how to work with refugees that are deaf having a different L1 and L2 Spoken and Sign Languages.
- In Rutland, a Nursing Care Facility wants to know how to help a Senior Deaf person get accessible social activities,
- In White River Junction, the Theater Program wants to know how to provide communication access for their shows.
- In Springfield, VT a deaf person wants to know how to work with an apartment manager via a Video Phone Telephone Operator and gain access to renting an apartment.
- In Colchester VT, a returning Vet has lost his hearing and wants to learn American Sign Language to communicate better.
- In Newport VT, a family wants to know how to work with the school district to help them with their deaf child to get preschool education.

Thank you for your support in moving S.66 forward. We look forward to keeping Vermont as a leader and respecting diversity in Vermont.