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To:
Representative Ann Pugh
Chair, House Human Services Committee
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Re: Open Caption Movie Bill, H.312

I have had a moderately severe, sensorineural bilateral hearing loss since the age of five. When my family was finally gifted a new television, when I was about ten years old, I discovered closed captioning. Until then, I had been attempting to watch television and movies along with my family and friends without fully comprehending most of the audio.

What people routinely fail to understand about many hard of hearing folks is that we aren't living in an absence of sound. In fact, we're often feeling inundated with various sounds as the result of our hearing aids or other amplification devices which are often not as high quality as we'd prefer, given that they're extremely costly and not covered by insurance. We are presented with various audio stimuli and working very hard, constantly, to understand where it's coming from and to discriminate speech. As such, many hearing impaired people like myself become experts at "faking" comprehension, usually with a lot of help from facial expressions, gestures or lip-reading. We're so good at this that we often don't even realize how hard we're working to obtain such a proportionately small amount of understanding as compared to everyone else. The result is exhaustion and a chronic sense of social isolation.

When captions were introduced to my life back when we got our new television, it meant that I could more fully participate with my family and with the content that I enjoyed, no longer having to stop and ask them to fill in the blanks or to pretend that I got the joke. Unfortunately, that was in the 90's and it was only within the last couple of years that I was able to access captions at my local movie theater. These captions came in the form of caption goggles, which I was only allowed to use once I handed over my driver's license. Most of the time that I've used the goggles, they've been too tight for my head, resulting in discomfort. I spend most of the time at the theater fiddling with them to get the words to appear and most of the time, the signal cuts out and the goggles default to showing me famous movie quotes. All in all, it's frankly more comfortable to just rely on my old techniques of "reading" body language and turning my hearing aids up or to simply shut down and try to take a nap. It's a disheartening experience to try to go enjoy a movie with my husband during the few precious hours we get to go enjoy ourselves alone, only to feel physically uncomfortable and emotionally defeated—and, now, stuck watching a movie that I won't get because I can't tell what anyone is saying.

60,000 Vermonters have a hearing loss and, like me, avoid or give up on social outings like going to the movies because it's simply too difficult to understand. Offering a small number of open caption screenings would make movies accessible for them and be simpler and far less demoralizing than the ordeal of requesting the non-functioning goggles.

Furthermore, captions are not only helpful for deaf or hard of hearing people like me—hearing people frequently report that they like having captions because even they don't always understand what's being said. Captions can help children or people learning English, or even people who struggle with receptive language.

Sincerely,

Elisabeth K. Keister