

Ann Owen Testimony – H. 312 Open Captions at Some Movie Screenings
Vermont House Human Services Committee
February 7, 2020

Thank you for scheduling this hearing on H. 312 regarding open captioning of movie screenings.

I am Ann Owen, a resident of South Burlington and constituent of Ann Pugh. I am here to speak about why open captioning is important to me and other Vermonters with my hidden disability.

I have a genetic hearing loss which has required me to wear hearing aids for the last 35 years. In the early years, I was able to attend movies and understand what was going on, but over the years, this has become more difficult for two reasons:

- the progression of my loss, which prevents me from understanding rapid or soft speech, and especially foreign accents, and
- the fact that movie producers have added more background noise with music and other techniques that mask the words.

As hearing loss increases, the eyes must fill in missing words through lip reading and captioning. Today I avoid movies shown in theaters unless they offer on-screen, open captioning like foreign films do. Instead I opt to rent captioned movies on DVDs to play on our home TV. I miss seeing films on the big screen, so I was pleased to discover Parasite is a Korean film with subtitles. But there are many American-made movies I would love to watch on the big screen, if only they were shown with captions.

The Americans for Disabilities Act now requires theaters to offer captioning. So why don't I use the special devices the theaters are required to purchase? The captions-in-a-cup, as I call the current devices, require the patron to either look up at the screen or down at the words on the device at their seat, making it hard to follow the action when you are always looking down to read. This is not an optimal movie experience. What would help me most will cost the theaters nothing, since most movies come with captions and only require the technician to turn them on.

So, I am generally not patronizing movie theaters these days, and neither are many others who share my disability. I can't tell you the number of times I've said to myself enthusiastically, "That would be a good movie to see!" followed by "Forget about it unless it comes out on DVD." Multiply this small economic loss to movie theaters by the numerous decisions made by many of the estimated 60,000 Vermonters who share my condition at some level, and you are looking at a significant market that could be captured by open captioning.

I realize some theater owners fear that captions will cause people to NOT come, but H. 312 doesn't require any new investment or that every showing be captioned. What would work best is to caption one or two afternoon showings, which our growing senior population would

appreciate, along with an evening and a weekend time as well. Delegating open-captioned movies to Saturday mornings will not turn out many people. The captioning has to be offered at times people expect to go to the movies.

A further plus is that the number of people who are at the minimal level of hearing loss can also benefit by the captions, and thus could start attending big screen movies more frequently.

I leave you with this thought. Our book study group wanted to watch a video, and I asked it be shown at our house so we could turn on the captions. At the end of the video, I started to apologize for needing the captions, and everyone said, "Oh, don't apologize, that helped us too." I was surprised but pleased that the captions had also helped my normal hearing friends. This is the experience I suspect a number of "normal" hearing people would find if some movie showings were captioned.

Thank you for considering this bill, which could make a difference to the many Vermonters who would like to get out of the house and enjoy with others the big screen once again.