



Submitted via email: AHussey@leg.state.vt.us

April 21, 2022

**The Honorable Sarah Copeland Hanzas
Chair
House Committee on Government Operations
Vermont General Assembly
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633
RE: Testimony in Support of VT H.577**

Dear Representative Copeland Hanzas and Members of the Committee:

My name is Sierra Downs. I am a medical Speech Language Pathologist and small business owner in Burlington. I run a private practice in Vermont which offers mobile diagnostic imaging and therapy for voice and swallowing disorders. I provide gender affirming voice training as well as treatment for various upper airway disorders. When not seeing private clients, I work at NVRH, a critical access hospital in the Northeast Kingdom, providing both inpatient and outpatient assessment and treatment; I also work with head and neck cancer patients at Dartmouth Cancer Center in St Johnsbury. I write to support H. 577, which adopts the Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Interstate Compact.

First, the demand for services from Speech Language Pathologists and Audiologists is on the rise. The estimated projections for SLP job growth is currently at 21% through 2024, with Audiology not far behind at 13% through 2029. To consider this demand through a more local lens, I offer a humbling quote taken from the most recent Vermont Speech and Hearing Association (VSHA) board meeting this past week, from our current VSHA President and Speech Language Pathologist, Danielle Kent:

“Early Intervention Services are in Crisis [here in Vermont].” Danielle went on to explain that *there are no available providers to refer to* for early intervention speech language therapy services (ie, children ages 0-3 years of age), and that although teletherapy is a possibility for older children, this modality is not appropriate for direct intervention for infants and toddlers. Supporting H.577 would remove this barrier to accessing quality care, preventing substantial developmental delays for our younger populations.

Second, barriers to accessing health care are especially common in rural areas. Per a recent survey from ASHA, the American Speech Language and Hearing Association, ***44% of SLPs in rural areas were more likely to report funded, yet unfilled positions*** when compared to SLPs elsewhere in the state. Although access to services is a known difficulty across our state, enacting H.577 would offer a solution by allowing more licensed providers to serve residents in a cost-effective, sustainable manner. In turn, this would reduce medical risks and socioemotional complications for our adult and geriatric patients.

Finally, I would like to highlight that among our professionals and the people we serve, there is *growing urgency to remove these arbitrary barriers as soon as we possibly can.*

Thank you again for your time and consideration,

Sierra C. Downs MA CCC-SLP
Speech Language Pathologist
Pronouns: She/Her; They/Them