

Sonny Wasilowski
Faribault, MN 55021

Monday, March 11, 2024

Dear Senate Human Services Committee,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Sonny Wasilowski, and I am deaf and colorblind. Coming from a multigenerational deaf family, I have been deeply immersed in deaf culture and advocacy from a young age.

Raised in southeastern Minnesota (Stewartville then Faribault), I have been actively involved with deaf clubs and organizations across the state, fostering connections and contributing to our vibrant community. My educational journey includes graduating from the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf after being mainstreamed in public schools in my younger years.

Continuing my pursuit of higher education, I had the privilege of attending Gallaudet University, the world's premier institution for the deaf in Washington, DC. My time at Gallaudet further fueled my passion for advocacy and empowered me to advocate for the rights and inclusion of deaf individuals on both local and national levels.

I am writing to you today to express my staunch opposition to the proposed modifications to the membership of the Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing. As someone deeply rooted in the deaf community and committed to its advancement, I am deeply concerned about the potential ramifications of these changes.

My opposition stems from the following reasons:

1. The bill lacks community input by a government entity: The proposal did not engage statewide stakeholders, including the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Advisory Committees and deaf clubs and organizations. As a member of the southeast committee and an officer of a deaf club, I can attest to the importance of engaging with the community at large to ensure inclusivity and representation.
2. Concerns about increased powers with the increased number of at-large appointments: There is a fear that the Commission may gain greater powers to screen its board members for gubernatorial appointment, potentially compromising the transparency and accountability of the selection process.
3. Lack of geographic representation: Historically, board members have predominantly come from the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan area, failing to fully represent the diverse demographics of 'One' Minnesota across 87 counties. The new language must ensure equitable representation from all regions of the state, especially including economic development zones.

4. Absence of assured geographic representation: It is troubling that the proposed modifications do not guarantee geographic representation on the board, further exacerbating the disparity between urban and rural voices.

5. Importance of advisory committee representation: Each deaf and hard of hearing advisory committee should have one or more representatives on the board, elected by their respective advisory committees rather than being arbitrarily chosen. I am vehemently opposed to capping the number of appointments from up to five advisory committees. I have personally applied for appointment a few years back, and a non-deaf person was appointed instead. I have reapplied, and this person has reapplied, and I fear this person will be reappointed again.

6. Addressing disparity in board composition: The current board composition struggles and is perceived to fail to meet the supposed requirement of 50% representation from the deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing community. I advocate for raising this percentage to 75% to ensure more accurate representation.

7. Term limits for Commission members: Commission members should be subject to term limits, with a maximum of two consecutive terms, in line with other commissions and gubernatorial appointees. Three full terms are excessively long and hinder the board's ability to accurately represent Minnesotans. There have been instances in the past where board members become protective of the Commission and do not appropriately address concerns of deaf individuals from across Minnesota.

8. Avoiding gatekeeping of legislative bills: The Commission should not act as a gatekeeper for legislative bills and policies affecting the deaf community, especially when these proposals originate from the community themselves.

9. Ensuring accountability of the Executive Director: There have been concerns about the board's failure to hold the Executive Director accountable. Steps must be taken to ensure that the Executive Director is held accountable, and that the board can initiate a search for a new Executive Director if necessary.

Thank you for considering my perspective on this matter. I look forward to the opportunity to discuss this further and work towards solutions that uphold the values of inclusivity and representation for all members of the deaf community in Minnesota.

Sincerely,

Sonny Wasilowski

P.S., I used the term "deaf" in an all-inclusive manner, to include people who may identify as deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired.