

Support updates to Commission board membership statutes

[SF4478](#) (Hoffman)/ [HF4528](#) (Hicks)

Update [MS 256C.28](#) to better align with qualifications needed to serve on the board for the Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing

The Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing, overseen by a governor-appointed board, develops and advocates for public policies for and with the 20% of Minnesotans who have hearing loss.

With this legislation, the Commission aims to:

- As required by statute, fill at least 50% of its voting seats with qualified candidates who have the lived experiences of the deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing Minnesotans we serve.
- More efficiently convey to state policymakers and administrators the information necessary to make decisions that will protect and promote quality of life for all Minnesotans.
- Maintain a balance of experienced and new members by bringing back experienced members as needed.

Key points

1. **Remove outdated requirements that work against the goal of 50% voting representation.**
 - a. **Parent.** At times, the governor's office has interpreted "a parent of a deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing child" as requiring one parent for each type of child, for a total of three seats. 90% of deaf and deafblind children, however, are born to hearing parents. The update would ensure at least one parent or guardian is represented but free up two more seats to contribute towards the 50% goal.
 - b. **Human services representatives.** Decades ago, deaf and hard of hearing people often pursued careers in human services due to discrimination in other fields. Today, with more career options being available, this requirement for representatives of county and regional human services presents yet another barrier to the 50% representation goal.
 - c. **Advisory Committee positions.** Eight seats are currently set aside for representatives of regional advisory committees managed by DHS's Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division (DHHS). Due to low participation, however, DHHS is exploring consolidating these committees. Capping the number of advisory committee seats at five frees up more at-large seats to ensure the 50% representation threshold is met.
2. **Add ex officio positions to strengthen connections with state agencies serving deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing Minnesotans.** This is in line with the practices of other state councils.
3. **Create flexibility in total time served to ensure a balance of experienced and new members.** While the limit on consecutive terms would remain in place (four-year terms, no more than three consecutive terms), removing the overall total of 12 years would enable the Commission to keep the 15 seats filled and provide new members with access to institutional knowledge and potential mentors.

From the office of:
Rebecca Thomas

March 15, 2024

My name is Rebecca Thomas, and I am writing to express my support for House File 4528 (HF4528) and to share my personal experiences and insights as a dedicated advocate for the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing community in Minnesota.

As a member of the Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing (MNCDHH) since 2017, representing the Twin Cities region, I have had the privilege of serving and engaging with our vibrant community for several years. My commitment to this cause extends beyond my tenure on the commission; I have been teaching American Sign Language (ASL) for 24 years, both at the collegiate level and within a local high school setting. Additionally, my extensive years of involvement with the Minnesota chapter of the American Sign Language Teachers Association (MNASLTA) and the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens (MADC) has provided me with invaluable opportunities to collaborate with fellow advocates and educators to address the diverse needs of our community.

Through my experiences on the MNCDHH board, I have gained a deep understanding of the challenges and concerns faced by individuals who are Deaf, DeafBlind, or Hard of Hearing. I have witnessed firsthand the importance of effective advocacy and the impact that legislative action can have on improving access to services and support for our community members.

One of the key lessons I have learned during my time with MNCDHH is the critical role that mentorship plays in ensuring the success and sustainability of our advocacy efforts. As a seasoned member of the commission, I have had the privilege of mentoring new members and guiding them through the complexities of our work. However, I have also seen the challenges that arise when there is a high turnover of members, leading to a lack of continuity and expertise within the board. HF4528 presents an opportunity to address this issue by providing MNCDHH with the flexibility to select members with specific expertise to meet the evolving needs of our community. By empowering the commission to recruit individuals who possess a deep understanding of the unique needs of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing population, we can ensure that MNCDHH remains effective in its mission to advocate for those who need it most.

I wholeheartedly support HF4528 and urge you to consider its passage. Thank you for your attention to this important issue, I look forward to seeing positive progress in support of HF4528.

Warm regards,

Rebecca M Thomas

Rebecca M. Thomas, M.Ed.

Brenda J. Ackerson
23907 330 Avenue NW
Warren MN 56762

V/T (218) 686-0505 | bren.ackerson@gmail.com

March 18, 2024

Testimony in Support of House File 4528

My name is Brenda Ackerson. I served on the MN Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing (MNCDHH) for 7 years. I represented the Upper Northwest Regional Advisory Committee. My position at the time was a Region 1&2 Low Incidence Administrator. This program specifically addresses equity and choices for families to have access to licensed personnel in their small rural school districts or advocate for other programs that meet their children's needs. Region 1&2 is the most sparsely populated region in the state with only 11 people per square mile, serving 46 schools and covering 16,721 square miles. It's with my vast experience (37 yrs.) that I'm writing in support of HF4528.

In my direct experience serving on the regional advisory committee as well as the MNCDHH, I can honestly support the change in reducing the number of advisory committee members and increasing the number of at-large appointees. The MNCDHH should have the latitude and flexibility to recruit people with specific expertise to address the current needs of this board to support and respond to their consumers. Too many times, the people who are asked to represent their advisory committee have their perspective based on their 'personal experience', their role representing a particular age group or they have a limited scope of knowledge to advocate by actively participating in the MNCDHH board.

In my position in the last 5 years as a director of special education for 11 school districts, I have observed the MN State Government transitioning towards collaboration between state agencies. A great example is the new Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF). Agencies have a lot of resources to learn from one another and I genuinely support adding an ex-officio position to strengthen connections with state agencies serving deaf, deaf/blind, and hard of hearing Minnesotans. Collaboration only enables better services and advocacy in all state agencies.

Lastly, in my 7 years of serving on the MNCDHH, I observed, the "deer in the headlights" look that new MNCDHH had when they started their term on the MNCDHH. The board has implemented onboarding and orientation to the board and yet it takes time to acclimate to the multiple initiatives of the board. It's with my experience that I also support requesting flexibility in total time served on the MNCDHH to ensure a balance of experienced and new members. If the MNCDHH doesn't have experienced members, then the natural mentoring that happens with new members will not happen and progress will be limited by the inexperienced members.

Thank you for considering the aforementioned points of direct experience and support of HF4528.

Respectfully,



Brenda J. Ackerson

