

DISABILITY AND COMMUNICATION ACCESS BOARD

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March 17, 2021

TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CULTURE, ARTS, & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Senate Bill 537 – Relating to American Sign Language

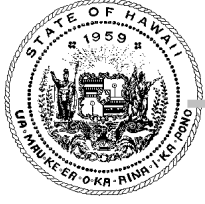
The Disability and Communication Access Board (DCAB) supports Senate Bill 537 relating to American Sign Language (ASL), which recognizes ASL as a fully developed, autonomous, natural language with its own grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and cultural heritage.

ASL is the primary language of many persons who are deaf or hard of hearing in the United States, including residents of Hawaii, and is often their preferred method of communicating effectively. Even though it has been in existence for over 200 years, recognition of ASL as a full-fledged language did not take place until 1960. Beforehand, ASL was erroneously viewed as a pantomime and a poor substitute for spoken speech. Today, over a dozen states have fully recognized ASL under state law. Despite this, stigmas and misperceptions associated with ASL persist. Recognizing ASL will go a long way in creating more equitable access, including in employment, public awareness, and civic participation. We strongly urge that you move this bill forward.

Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

KIRBY L. SHAW
Executive Director



HAWAI‘I CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION

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March 17, 2021

Videoconference, Room 329 , 10:00 a.m.

To: The Honorable Cedric Asuega Gates, Chair
The Honorable Matthew S. LoPresti, Vice Chair
Members of the House Committee on Culture, Arts and International Affairs

From: Liann Ebesugawa, Chair
and Commissioners of the Hawai‘i Civil Rights Commission

Re: S.B. No. 537

The Hawai‘i Civil Rights Commission (HCRC) has enforcement jurisdiction over Hawai‘i’s laws prohibiting discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and access to state and state funded services. The HCRC carries out the Hawai‘i constitutional mandate that no person shall be discriminated against in the exercise of their civil rights. Art. I, Sec. 5.

S.B. No. 537 would add a new section to Chapter 1 of the Hawai‘i Revised Statutes which would recognize American Sign Language (ASL) as a fully developed, autonomous, natural language with its own grammar, syntax, vocabulary and cultural heritage. Just as is the case with languages that are characteristic of ancestry or national origin, ASL is a language that is closely tied to culture and identity.

Over 40 US states recognize ASL to varying degrees, from a foreign language for school credits to the official language of that state's deaf population, with several enacting legislation similar to S.B. No. 537.

It is important to recognize that ASL is a distinct language and not just translated English, but a language with its own culture. **The HCRC supports S.B. No. 537.**

Testimony of Roderick J. Macdonald

Submitted to the Hawaii House of Representatives Committee on Culture, Arts & International Affairs (CAI) Honorable Cedric Gates, Chair Honorable Matthew S. LoPresti, Vice Chair

Wednesday, March 17, 2021, 10:00 am

Re: SB 537 - RELATING TO AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice-Chairman, Members:

My name is Rod Macdonald. As a Honolulu resident who happens to be both deaf and blind, I am submitting this testimony to urge your vigorous support of HB 840, Relating to American Sign Language.

American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual language. With signing, the brain processes linguistic information through the eyes. The shape, placement, and movement of the hands, as well as facial expressions and body movements, all play important parts in conveying information.

ASL is a complete, natural language that has the same linguistic properties as spoken languages, with grammar that differs from English. ASL is expressed by movements of the hands and face. It is the primary language of many North Americans who are deaf and hard of hearing, and is used by many hearing people as well.

While ASL is a visual language, it is possible to adapt one's comprehension of ASL to the use of touch. Thus, many individuals who are both Deaf and Blind learn to communicate effectively using ASL. Doing this is much more difficult; it is slower and subject to constant adjustment; but ASL is nonetheless the "first" language of many deaf-blind Americans, especially those who lost their sight after learning ASL.

Sign language is not a universal language. Each country has its own sign language, and regions have dialects, much like the many languages spoken all over the world. Like any spoken language, ASL is a language with its own unique rules of grammar and syntax. Like all languages, ASL is a living language that grows and changes over time.

ASL is used predominantly in the United States and in many parts of Canada. ASL is accepted by many high schools, colleges, and universities in fulfillment of modern and "foreign" language academic degree requirements across the United States.

ASL is a language completely separate and distinct from English. It contains all the fundamental features of language, with its own rules for pronunciation, word formation, and word order. While every language has ways of signaling different functions, such as asking a question rather than making a statement, languages differ in how this is done. For example, English speakers may ask a question by raising the pitch of their voices and by adjusting word order; ASL users ask a question by raising their eyebrows, widening their eyes, and tilting their bodies forward.

Just as with other languages, specific ways of expressing ideas in ASL vary as much as ASL users themselves. In addition to individual differences in expression, ASL has regional accents and dialects; just as certain English words are spoken differently in different parts of the country. ASL has regional variations in the rhythm of signing, pronunciation, slang, and signs used. Other sociological factors,

including age and gender, can affect ASL usage and contribute to its variety, just as with spoken languages.

Fingerspelling or the manual alphabet is part of ASL and is used to spell out English words. In the fingerspelled alphabet, each letter corresponds to a distinct handshape. Fingerspelling is often used for proper names or to indicate the English word for something.

I, myself, use tactile fingerspelling and braille for receptive communication, and spoken English for expressive communication.

Parents are often the source of a child's early acquisition of language, but for children who are deaf, additional people may be models for language acquisition. A deaf child born to parents who are deaf and who already use ASL will begin to acquire ASL as naturally as a hearing child picks up spoken language from hearing parents. However, for a deaf child with hearing parents who have no prior experience with ASL, language may be acquired differently. In fact, 9 out of 10 children who are born deaf are born to parents who hear. Some hearing parents choose to introduce sign language to their deaf children. Hearing parents who choose to have their child learn sign language often learn it along with their child. Children who are deaf and have hearing parents often learn sign language through deaf peers and become fluent.

Parents should expose a deaf or hard-of-hearing child to language as soon as possible. The earlier a child is exposed to and begins to acquire language, the better that child's language, cognitive, and social development will become. Research suggests that the first few years of life are the most crucial to a child's development of language skills, and even the early months of life can be important for establishing successful communication with caregivers. Thanks to screening programs in place at almost all hospitals in the United States and its territories, newborn babies are tested for hearing before they leave the hospital. If a baby has hearing loss, this screening gives parents an opportunity to learn about communication options. Parents can then start their child's language learning process during this important early stage of development.

Sign language interpreters provide a vital bridge to inclusion for Deaf and Hard of Hearing members of the community. ASL interpreters in the classroom open the door to mainstream educational opportunities otherwise denied to these consumers. ASL inserts on news programs provide a means for Deaf and Hard of Hearing consumers to keep up with community, country and the world news. ASL videos provide first-language comprehension to what would otherwise be second-language content.

Recognizing the importance, value and integrity of ASL is crucial to our efforts to become full-fledged, first-class citizens.

As our elected representatives, we ask that you give your full support to passage of this legislation.

Thank you - stay safe!

Sincerely,

Roderick J. Macdonald, MA, LHD

P.O. Box 4777
Kaneohe, HI 96744

March 17, 2021

The Honorable Cedric Asuega Gates
Chair
House Committee on Culture, Arts & International Affairs
Hawaii State Capitol
415 South Beretania Street, Room 329
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

Re: Support for Senate Bill 537 - Relating to American Sign Language (ASL)

Dear Chair Gates and members of the House Committee on Culture, Arts & International Affairs,

I support Senate Bill 537 - Relating to American Sign Language which recognizes American Sign Language as a fully developed, autonomous, natural language with its own grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and cultural heritage. Your committee heard the companion bill previously and referred it out with a HD1, however it did not get a hearing in the House Committee on Judiciary and Hawaiian Affairs and died before crossover.

As a member of the Deaf and Blind Task Force, person with a disability, credentialed ASL Interpreter, and disability advocate, who has worked with the Deaf, hard of hearing and deaf-blind population since 1979, I support this bill. Language is basically what we learn from our parents and environment around us and is how we communicate with others around us. Experts in linguistics define language as having its own syntax, grammar, vocabulary. Experts in anthropology also defines language as providing a cultural basis for a group of people.

In light of what these experts tell us, American Sign Language (ASL) meets all of these criteria and much more. It is similar to spoken languages in that it is not static, but changes with time, new ideas, and technology. For example, when I first learned ASL, there was no sign for COVID-19, because it had not been identified at that time. Now with the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a sign for COVID. Having lived in several different places around the Mainland, I have seen many variations of ASL. It was ASL, but with signs for concepts that matched specific things in that region. Here in Hawaii, there us also a Hawaiian Sign Language (used by older Deaf people), that is being taught by more experienced Deaf people who grew up in Hawaii. However, if we don't preserve that, it may vanish.

Please support American Sign Language (ASL) as a natural language with its own syntax, grammar, and cultural heritage in Hawaii by passing a state law recognizing that.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Respectfully,



Debra L. Jackson, M.S., C.S.C.
Member
Deaf and Blind Task Force