

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
Third Reader - Revised

Senate Bill 645

(Senator King)

Education, Energy, and the Environment

Government, Labor, and Elections

State Board of Sign Language Interpreters - Membership and Licensing

This bill alters the membership of the State Board of Sign Language Interpreters as well as related board provisions. The bill delays the requirement for the board to establish and publish licensing requirements for sign language interpreting in all settings from July 1, 2024, to July 1, 2027. The bill also delays the date, from January 1, 2025, to January 1, 2028, by which (1) an individual, with limited exception for educational settings, must be licensed by the board before providing sign language interpretation services in the State and (2) the members of the board required to be licensed may satisfy the license requirement. Beginning July 1, 2028, an individual who provides sign language interpretation services in an educational setting must meet licensure requirements. At least 60 days before promulgating regulations regarding specialist areas, the board must consult with specified stakeholders and submit a report to the Governor and specified committees of the General Assembly.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: Receipt of special fund revenues from license fees is delayed until FY 2028, as are any minimal general fund revenues that may have been collected due to existing penalty provisions. Special fund expenditures for the board are not affected.

Local Effect: None.

Small Business Effect: Meaningful.

Analysis

Bill Summary/Current Law: Chapters 269 and 270 of 2023 established a licensing and regulatory system for sign language interpreters in Maryland through the creation of the State Board of Sign Language Interpreters within the Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH). The board must (1) license qualified individuals to provide sign language interpretation services; (2) by July 1, 2024, establish and publish licensing requirements for sign language interpreting in all settings; (3) provide technical assistance to license applicants and other interested persons; (4) promote the profession of sign language interpreting; and (5) perform any duties assigned by the Director of ODHH. An individual must be licensed by the board before providing sign language interpretation services in the State beginning January 1, 2025.

The bill delays the requirement to establish and publish licensing requirements for sign language interpreting in all settings to July 1, 2027, and the date by which an individual must be licensed by the board before providing sign language interpretation services to January 1, 2028 (except for those in educational settings).

Alterations to the Board

Membership: Under current law, the board consists of seven members: one member of the Maryland Association of the Deaf; one deafblind individual; one member of the Potomac Chapter of the Registry of the Interpreters for the Deaf who holds a license from the board; and four determined by the board by regulation. Members must be appointed by the Governor from a list of names submitted by ODHH.

The bill removes the member of the Potomac Chapter of the Registry of the Interpreters for the Deaf who holds a license from the board and the four members determined by the board by regulation. Instead, the bill increases board membership to 11 members through the addition of:

- one deaf individual;
- three interpreters for the deaf who are licensed by the board;
- one interpreter for the deaf who is licensed by the board and owns or is affiliated with an interpreter agency;
- two individuals affiliated with an entity that operates and implements deaf services in an educational, legal, or medical setting;
- the Secretary of Disabilities (or their designee) as an *ex officio* nonvoting member; and
- the Secretary of Labor (or their designee) as an *ex officio* nonvoting member.

Member Qualifications: Chapters 269 and 270 specify that members of the board required to hold a license may satisfy the license requirement by holding a current nationally or regionally recognized certificate before January 1, 2025. The bill delays this date to January 1, 2028.

Under current law, each member of the board must be proficient in American Sign Language (ASL). The bill specifies that the *ex-officio* nonvoting members and the members affiliated with an entity that operates and implements deaf services are exempt from this requirement.

Nominations: The bill requires the member nomination process to include outreach to underrepresented deaf, deafblind, and interpreter communities.

Removal: Under current law, the Governor may remove a member for incompetence, misconduct, neglect of duties, or other sufficient cause. The bill authorizes the Governor to also remove a member for two or more successive unexcused absences.

Quorum: Under current law, a majority of the members then serving on the board constitutes a quorum. The bill specifies that a majority of the voting members is a quorum.

Licensure

Under current law, an applicant for licensure must submit to the board (1) a completed application; (2) an application fee; (3) proof of a valid nationally or regionally recognized certification; and (4) documentation of satisfactory completion of any other qualifications established by the board.

The bill specifies that an applicant may submit proof of a valid nationally or regionally recognized certification *or* documentation of satisfactory completion of any other qualifications established by the board.

Waiver of Certification Requirements

Under current law, the board may waive any requirement for an applicant who is licensed to provide sign language interpretation services in another state. The board may grant a waiver only if the applicant (1) pays the application and license fees and (2) provides satisfactory evidence that, at the time the applicant was licensed in the other state, the qualifications for licensure were substantially equivalent to those in Maryland. The board may grant a waiver only if the other state waives the qualifications of licensees from Maryland to a similar extent as Maryland waives the qualification requirements for individuals licensed in that state.

The bill *requires* the board to grant a waiver only if the applicant (1) pays the application and license fees and (2) provides satisfactory evidence that, at the time the applicant was licensed in the other state, the qualifications for licensure were substantially equivalent to those in Maryland.

Required Regulations

Under current law, the board must adopt regulations to (1) govern sign language interpretation services provided in a video remote interpreting setting; (2) establish licensing and certification standards of interpreting agencies that do business in the State; (3) allow deaf and hard of hearing individuals to determine whether they prefer sign language interpretation services being provided in a video remote interpreting setting or through in-person interpreting; and (4) provide sign language interpretation services in a video remote interpreting setting.

The bill (1) specifies that regulations must allow deaf and hard of hearing individuals to *indicate* whether they prefer video remote or in-person interpreting and (2) requires the board to adopt regulations to require public entities to provide reasonable accommodations to support the preferences indicated by deaf and hard of hearing individuals, to the extent practicable and in compliance with specified federal law.

Specialist Area Regulations

Under current law, the board may establish criteria for the development of portfolios and requirements in the following specialist areas: (1) legal settings; (2) medical settings; (3) behavioral health settings; (4) language pairs other than ASL and spoken English; (5) conference interpreting; (6) tactile and low-vision sign language interpretation services; (7) intralinguistic translations and sign language interpretation; and (8) any other areas determined to be necessary by the board.

The bill adds educational settings as a specialist area. The bill requires that at least 60 days before the board promulgates regulations to establish criteria for the development of portfolios and requirements in specialist areas, the board must report to the Governor and specified committees of the General Assembly on (1) how national and regional certification standards define or limit specialist areas; (2) the number of interpreters in the State and neighboring states certified in specialist areas; (3) an evaluation of how separate requirements for specialist areas may impact access to interpreter services in each setting; and (4) recommendations on whether, and in what form, specialty licensure requirements should be implemented in the State.

In completing the report, the board must consult with the Maryland Department of Health (MDH), the Maryland Association of the Deaf, the Maryland Hospital Association,

interpreters and interpreter agencies, the Maryland Judiciary, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), the Maryland State Education Association, the Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland, the Maryland Association of Boards of Education, and the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD). ODHH must provide staff to assist the board in completion of the report.

Annual Report

Under current law, each year, the Director of ODHH must submit a report to the Governor and the General Assembly on (1) the activities of the office; (2) the status of programs and services facilitated by the office; (3) the activities of the State Board of Sign Language Interpreters; (4) statistics on compliance with State and federal laws related to deaf and hard of hearing individuals; and (5) recommendations for improved delivery of services for deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

The bill requires the report to include the number of licensed sign language interpreters in each county, determined by the licensee's home address or county or region of planned employment, if known.

Existing Penalties

Under current law, an individual who violates any provision of Title 9, Subtitle 24, Part III (Sign Language Interpreters) of the State Government Article is guilty of a misdemeanor. On conviction, a first-time offender is subject to a fine of up to \$500 and/or imprisonment for up to 90 days; a repeat offender is subject to a fine of at least \$500 and up to \$1,000 and/or imprisonment for up to 90 days.

State Revenues: The bill delays the date, from January 1, 2025, to January 1, 2028, by which an individual must be licensed by the board before providing sign language interpretation services in the State (except for those in educational settings, who must be licensed by July 1, 2028). Thus, special fund licensing revenues are not received by the board until fiscal 2028. And any minimal general fund revenues resulting from the imposition of existing penalties (noted above) on individuals providing sign language interpretation services in the State without a license are also delayed until fiscal 2028. Although licensure was to have been in place by fiscal 2025, as it has not yet been implemented, the earliest such revenues could be realized under current law is fiscal 2026.

State Expenditures: The bill requires the board, at least 60 days before promulgating specified regulations, to consult with specified stakeholders and submit a specified report. The bill also delays the requirement for (1) the board to establish and publish licensing requirements for sign language interpreting in all settings to July 1, 2027, and (2) an individual to be licensed by the board before providing sign language interpretation

services in the State to January 1, 2028 (those providing services in an educational setting have until July 1, 2028, to be licensed). ODHH advises that the board can implement the bill with existing budgeted resources. The board was authorized two new positions to support its operations, which have not yet been filled. The board advises that it anticipates that approximately 400 new licenses will be issued initially, in fiscal 2028 under the bill, with approximately 200 new licenses issued annually thereafter. This estimate reflects a smaller number of licensees than originally anticipated when the requirement for licensure was enacted.

The Secretaries of Disabilities and Labor (or their designees) can serve as *ex-officio* members of the board with existing budgeted resources.

MDH, the Judiciary, MSDE, and MDOD can consult with the board to complete the required report using existed budgeted resources.

Small Business Effect: To the extent that small businesses have employees that currently provide sign language interpretation services, those employees benefit from a reprieve in needing to become licensed. However, any additional delay in initial implementation of licensing by ODHH could disrupt the ability of these businesses to continue providing such services.

Additional Comments: In response to the *2025 Joint Chairmen's Report*, ODHH [reported](#) on challenges associated with the delay in publishing licensing regulations.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: HB 1192 (Delegate Bagnall) - Government, Labor, and Elections.

Information Source(s): Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Maryland State Department of Education; Maryland Department of Disabilities; Maryland Department of Health; Maryland Department of Labor; Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing; Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History:
jg/jc

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Analysis by: Amberly E. Holcomb

Direct Inquiries to:

(410) 946-5510

(301) 970-5510