

State hub for deaf is being restored

BY PAUL HUGHES | REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

January 23, 2024

HARTFORD – House Democrats are restoring a “one-stop” hub for connecting the deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing to needed resources and services.

House Speaker Matt Ritter said Tuesday the dissolution of the former Commission on the Deaf and Hearing Impaired under a state agency consolidation plan 13 years ago was a mistake.

“We are going to rectify the wrong we did,” he said during a news conference at the Legislative Office Building in Hartford.

Ritter announced House Democrats will propose to establish a Bureau of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Services within the state Department of Aging and Disability Services in the upcoming 2024 legislative session.

“This is going to be one of our top five bills that we are going to roll out this year, and it is not one that costs a lot of money. It is not one that is unprecedented by any stretch of the imagination,” he said.

A task force for the State Advisory Board for Persons Who Are Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind recommended creating a dedicated bureau within the Department of Aging and Rehabilitation Services.

The state launched the Commission for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired in 1974. It was the first centralized source of information, services and resources of its kind in the country.

But the legislature and then-Gov. Dannel P. Malloy in 2011 transferred the commission’s duties and functions to a new Bureau of Rehabilitative Services within the state Department of Social Services, and the commission was converted to an advisory council. It was part of a consolidation of state agencies.

Representatives of the Connecticut Association for the Deaf said deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing people are not satisfied with level of services from the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services.

“Everything is just a mess,” Luisa Gasco-Sobelski, co-chair of State Advisory Board for Persons Who Are Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind, said, speaking through a sign language interpreter.

“Now, I’m getting calls every day from people unsure of what to do, where to go, who to contact, and I’m dealing with all of this on a voluntary basis, which I’m glad to do, just to say,” she continued. “But my concern is if something were to happen to me, who is going to take this on? We really need something in place that is a cohesive, centralized unit to service these needs.”

Another deaf advocate, Harvey Corson, co-chair of the advisory board’s task force, said the consolidation of the former Commission on the Deaf and Hearing Impaired was done with the best of intentions, but the unintended consequences have demonstrated the need for a state agency dedicated to primarily serving the deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing community.

Ritter said the proposed bureau would only cost an additional \$250,000 for hiring an executive director and one or two support positions because the Department of Aging and Disability Services funds and fulfills many of the service needs.

The legislature and Gov. Ned Lamont will be making revisions to the second year of the two-year, \$51.1 billion state budget in the 2024 session. Lamont said Monday that he had not heard of the proposal, and he will take a look at what House Democrats propose.

Sen. Lisa Seminara, R-Avon, the ranking Senate Republican on the Aging and Human Services committees, said she is also willing to have a discussion on the task force’s recommendation.

“Connecticut must do more to help the deaf and blind community,” she said.

“Centralizing services will make them more accessible, so it makes sense to have this discussion on how to improve the ways in which we serve state residents.”

Harvey Corson, a former president of the Connecticut Association of the Deaf, applauds House Democrats for proposing to create a Bureau of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Services within the Department of Aging and Disability Services during a news conference Monday at the Legislative Office Building in Hartford. Paul Hughes
Republican-American